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# Year of the Oar

book two of her travail

by

**Clare Seven**

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**Year of the Oar**  
**Book 2 of her Travail**  
**by Clare Seven**

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## Chapter 1

*I was winning the race. I had been swimming in that damned freezing lake then got to the bike to complete the cycle part of the race. I had always loved the bike, perhaps something to do with the fact that it seemed to dry me off rapidly from the swim, even when the weather was cool. But the bike itself was always beautiful – sleek, built with a stylised and shaped carbon frame to make it aerodynamic. It mattered more to me than simply riding. It became a part of me as I watched the heart rate monitor device attached to the handlebars register my heart rate. By the time it came to the run portion of the triathlon, I was ready. I still had something left in the tank, still had something to give. I almost dropped the bike as I reached the stage – but had to park it properly by the rule. I was in the front five. I knew the other athletes, knew I could beat them. I slipped on the running shoes and deposited the cycling helmet beside the bike. I immediately got into my rhythm. Ten kilometres it would be, at a blistering pace. The running was going well. I could feel myself surging in front of some of my competitors, though with only a few kilometres to go, I felt myself flagging slightly. It was not fitness that bothered me, it was... something else, something indescribable. I thought for a moment as I ran smoothly, passing another shorter woman, wondering what the problem was. The pain was in my feet, in my soles. What was this. I looked down... and gasped in agony.*

*I felt myself sway once more, as my eyes opened. My head was spinning. I was hungry and horribly thirsty. My neck and hands were trapped somehow. I needed water. Surely the race was almost over now, surely...*

*My feet were horribly dirty, and splayed on top of, spikes of some sort, wooden and dulled but nevertheless, it explained where the agony in my soles was coming from. I was naked, and slowly realised that my arms and neck were fastened into a heavy wooden yoke, which was chained to the ceiling. Further up the deck, a woman screamed in agony as she sat astride the wooden horse. Her name was Maria, I remembered. My eyes adjusted to the relative gloom. Fear began to chill me again as I saw the women around me rowing, rowing in perfect unison. My eyes widened in fright as I heard a*

*whip fall somewhere behind me, followed by the yelp that I had become so used to in these past months. The women were naked, chained at the ankle, and rowing as galley slaves.*

*The race had been a dream, no more than that. It had not been some happy escape for me from the hell that I had actually volunteered for. Were it not for the pain I was in, the situation would be laughable. I had agreed to row as a galley slave for a year, in exchange for one million dollars. These women were mostly prisoners from some Mediterranean hellhole, though some had been insane enough to volunteer, like me. I had agreed, I reminded myself again and again. I had signed contracts, never realising the hell I had actually signed up for. I must have passed out in my agony, dehydrated as I was. My vision was blurry, though I could still make out poor Maria at the end of the deck struggling on the wooden horse, the horrid bucket of bricks tied to her toes stretching her sex against the apex. I needed water... but I dared not ask for any. I...*

\* \* \* \* \*

The man sitting at the dark oak desk was in his fifties. It was his hair that gave it away, since he had either hired a professional trainer or had an obsession with keeping himself fit. He kept the grey hair trimmed and short, giving him to all intents and purposes a bald pate, the only affectation that suggested he was fighting a losing battle with his years. His body, however, was lithe and strong beneath the dark suit he wore, sitting alone in an air conditioned office. The gnarled, disfigured half of his face quivered slightly as he licked drool from his lips.

The walls of the office were clean, white, clinical and undecorated, aside from the wall that he faced. That was filled with large video monitors he watched intently. He moved his powerful hand from his ruined half-face, where he had been slowly twirling the hairs of his short beard, to his thigh, and then to his crotch. He rubbed slightly as his erection started to build once more. The screens were filled with moving images from a galley ship, filled with naked, wretched women rowing hard to the beat of a drum. Nine large screens conveyed the 'action' from every angle, for his pleasure. At the

corners he could watch various angled shots of desperate women rowing hard, pulling and pushing, their nakedness and effort conveyed admirably, despite the apparently poor lighting of the deck. The central shots showed the walkways where the savage overseers marched along, delivering the business end of their whip to those charges who faltered, lost rhythm or even those whom they chose to dislike for that particular moment.

He smiled as one of the women cried out under the lash, the tag that had been pierced through her nipple to identify her, and her term of imprisonment, rattling as she twisted under the pain. His attention shifted to the monitors near the centre of his view, showing the long length of the galley deck from stern to bow and vice versa. The central camera showed the woman struggling in agony on the wooden horse. Emil Tarik stared, however, at another detail, one that, unbelievably, his people had missed when they had placed the hidden cameras on board the European galley.

Despite the rigorous attention to detail and vista that the installation company (which he owned) had used when positioning the cameras, he found now, to his dismay, that he could not get a good shot of the woman who stood on the spikes as punishment. He could easily make out her discomfort, reasoned that she had been there for several hours now, her weight pushing horribly onto her soles as they tried in vain to find some area that would not provide the distress, which now must be agony. Her torso and hips were tilted slightly, constrained by the confining nature of the heavy wooden yoke that surrounded her neck and wrists – which was in turn chained to the ceiling above her. It was a stressful, painful position Tarik knew only too well. He had seen many women, perhaps hundreds, suffer in that pose. No, he reasoned, the flaw in the positioning and thus the views offered by the cameras was in the fact that suffering upon the horse could be viewed and focused upon, while the spikes, and the relative view that he had of them, was not good. Perhaps, he thought, he should remind the Director of the company of his place. He considered for a moment. Perhaps his wife would enjoy a spell on one of his galleys. Yes, that should suffice. Perhaps when that Director next managed one of Tarik's pet projects, he would consider all angles.

He stared at the woman on the spikes again. She canted her body to

the other side, favouring the foot that she had spared for a few minutes. It must be agony for her, he reasoned, feeling his erection grow larger in his trousers. He would need relief soon. He would have a prisoner brought up from the pit.

Damn, the camera view was so poor. She was clearly an athlete. Tall, dark haired, clearly European, her pale skin, so many months removed from clear rays of sunlight, contrasting strongly with the filthy rowers moving in unison around her. She was being punished for something, as was the olive skinned woman on the horse. How interesting. The woman on the spikes was lithe, though she had large thighs and calves, probably accentuated through the months of rowing. It seemed to be months, he reasoned. Tarik had become quite expert at estimating the stage of a galley slave's tenure at the oar, based on the length of their hair and how much it had grown back. It had not been re-shaved, so he estimated that the woman had been at the oar, five, perhaps six months.

He found that he could not take his eyes off her. She was aboard Joshua's ship. Yes, she was only two weeks from the Galera. Oh, it would be interesting to meet her. She was obviously strong, her long body designed for rowing, her belly taut from the punishing efforts. Her athlete's legs and torso were superior. He must speak with Joshua about her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Joshua watched the waves lap against the side of the galley as the oars, moving in almost perfect unison, dipped and pulled against the resistance of the blue waves. Almost perfect, he thought, listening for – there it was – the slap of the lash and the familiar grunt as an overseer corrected the rhythm of an errant rowing prisoner. Prisoner? Slave was more like it. That was exactly what these women were – galley slaves, perhaps treated even more harshly than the men who had really rowed galleys had ever been treated. And, through his association with Emil Tarik, it had become his lot in life to 'manage' part of his enterprise; an enterprise that offered high prices to rogue governments for the best prisoners to serve out half their sentence on a hellship. Tarik's media and shipping empires did their best to ensure that

cover stories and route plans were secret, up to a point. Well placed donations to the right government did the rest, and ensured that the entire unbelievable plot remained secret.

Prisoners; he considered the term again. They were not all prisoners. He closed his eyes, remembering his interview with Justine. It did not seem so long ago. She had volunteered, as had a few others. But, had she really volunteered? Joshua had been employed so many years ago by Tarik because of his charisma. It was not often that a street urchin from New York was picked up by a rich millionaire and brought up as one of his own. And so, he owed everything to the man. He had convinced Justine that joining the galley for one million dollars would be a profitable, if uncomfortable, proposition and she had agreed to it. She had not been his first conquest, and, he reasoned, she would certainly not be his last. He tried to sniff the sea air through the stench from the rowing deck below, made worse as the straining chained feet of the women disturbed the foul contents of the bilge beneath them on the deck below.

His mind dwelt on Justine. Of course he had cajoled her into this hell, as he had done with her friend Jennifer many years before. His relationship with Jennifer had been brief, her utter devotion to him, almost pathetic, as she agreed to do anything, perform any task, that he might have her do in order to prove her love. He had laughed at her, pitied her, even as she had strained and ached in her slavery, as she had accepted his cock in her mouth, her body lashed and exhausted. She had rowed for a year. Indeed, she had recently been put back on the oar, at Justine's request. He was getting soft – that the suggestion of a mere rowing slave should even be listened to – though Justine had clearly felt aggrieved at her realisation that her former friend had known about the whole thing, and had introduced her to him without mentioning his position as a 'slave trader' of sorts.

He had wanted Justine as soon as he first set eyes upon her, that much was clear in his own mind. And yet, he had stopped her from being put on the savage wooden horse. He had not even forced her to offer her mouth to his hungry cock, yet he could have. He knew it. Something deep inside him had stopped it, something that he could not explain.

He remembered when she had stood in front of him and Jennifer on

board, a few weeks after her slavery had begun. He had wanted to wince as Pierre had beaten her thighs and ass with the cane, whenever she seemed defiant. Even now, as he closed his eyes, he could scarcely get the image of her in pain out of his head.

He began to walk the length of the deck, determined to remove his mind from the funk into which it had fallen. Was this because of Justine, a woman who now walked the spikes because she and another woman had pleased each other? He had seen it all before. Why should this athlete, strong as she was, be any different? He walked toward the large cabin at the stern. His cell phone was ringing clearly, the staccato drumming of a hard rock song sounding so out of place on the ancient looking deck of a galley.

“Hello?” he barked, shutting the cabin door against the wind.

“Joshua.”

“Mr Tarik. Hello sir.” What the hell did he want?

“Your rowers are performing well. The signal is clean.” Joshua could hear a rhythmic strain in Tarik’s voice. Christ, was he masturbating while speaking to him? Or had he had a prisoner brought up from the pit?

“Thank you sir. I have a fine crop of women from your prisons in...”

“What of the volunteers?” he interrupted.

“Ah yes. The Australian athletes are performing well, though the redhead has seen much of the whip. She will have an experience she will not forget. I had her horsed a few months ago for...”

“The woman on the spikes, who is she?” he asked, cutting him off again with his hissing, snakelike voice.

Joshua paused. “On the spikes, sir?”

“Yes, who is she?”

“Ah, I must find out for you, sir,” Joshua said slowly. Why the hell

did he want to know about Justine?

“Don’t you know what’s happening on your galley deck?”

It was as if he could sense that Joshua was lying, that he was aware he knew only too well the identity of the tall, strong woman who stood in agony in the yoke on the wooden spikes. Joshua heard him sigh.

“Find out who she is, and have a report ready for me when you reach the *Galera*, is that clear?”

“Yes sir. Of course, sir.”

Joshua heard the click as he rang off. So now Tarik wanted Justine. Well, if nothing else, that was interesting. Damn, he should have told him that she was a new volunteer, reminded him that she was not subject to the same routine and availability of these prisoners who had had little choice but to sell their souls to the oar. Damn, now he found himself defending her virtue? He sighed as he left the phone down, pulled up his shirtsleeves and walked across the open deck, the sea breeze cooling the sweat that had formed on his body as he had spoken with Tarik.

## Chapter 2

Justine had been semi conscious, almost sleeping as she had heard the words. She could not hear Sula's voice. Sula had been the overseer who had rated her as a good rower, who had moved her out of the stinking lower tier and who, at her own suggestion, had allowed her to tutor Maria the prisoner in the ways of rowing and utilising the best assets of a fit and lithe female body at the oar, and thus avoid the stinging lashes of the whip. It had been working, until Maria had wished to thank her for her efforts over the previous days and had tried to pleasure her with her hand. The resulting disturbance had alerted the overseers, put Maria in agony on the horse, and had Justine placed on the spikes, and so now, it seemed, she was being released. Release, however, was not really a term that could be wholly accurate, she considered as she slumped downward as she was released from the yoke, only to be caught by one of the men. She was subsequently dragged from the spikes, her soles free of the torment that had plagued them for many hours. She glanced up. Maria was still on the horse, a bucket of rocks and, she noted, some heavy chains still tied to her big toes, pulling her cunt against the sharp apex and making her cry and moan in agony.

“At least you avoided the horse woman,” a French accented voice whispered as she was dragged toward the bow, further away from the screaming Maria.

“Put her back in lower tier and reattach wrist chains,” someone said, as she gasped. She had just managed to convince them to remove her wrist chains, and even put her in the cleaner upper tier. Now her fettered heels would disturb the foul, muddy waters of the bilge again as she rode. Damn them. Damn them all. Her mind raged with thoughts of hate, yet her wracked body could do little to answer her needs. Surely she would be allowed to rest after her ordeal. Surely they would give her food and water before putting her back on the oar? Her feet and ankles ached. She had been unconsciously swapping weight on one foot or the other as she had stood on the spiked floor.

They dragged her to a filthy wet bench and threw her onto it as she gasped in agony. A rough, pockmarked, overweight overseer placed filthy hands into the bilge and lifted the rusted chain, beginning to thread it through the rings in the heavy steel ankle fetters, which she had borne since she boarded the vessel. She looked down, along her filthy, shivering legs toward the swollen feet that she placed against the board, under the buttocks of the woman in front of her. The lower tier was on a break, an opportunity that the overseers had taken to remove her from her predicament. She winced as the heavy chain was threaded through the fetter rings, making her one with the ship. The fat overseer locked the chain in place under the deck and wiped his hands on her thighs as she stared into space, knowing that to complain about this act would earn her only the slap of the lash across her back or breasts,

“Now, pretty. You’ve earned yerself some more chains,” he barked. He was Australian, she considered, perhaps.

“Please... I hate the wrist chains,” she heard herself croak.

He stopped. “Quiet now, or I’ll have to whip you. Just take yer punishment.” She watched as he walked away, a shadow forming over her as another large, dark overseer pushed the water container toward her face.

“Drink!”

She grasped the container, draining as much of the precious water as she could, until the overseer had to pull it away, slapping the side of her face with the furred whip in an effort to convince her that further resistance would earn her stripes.

“Enough!” He pulled it away, throwing a hard biscuit into her filthy lap, hard crumbs spilling onto her overgrown and sweat-encrusted pubic hairs. The professional athlete in her reminded her that it would serve as her main meal for the day, and that the concoction of the food had the dual effect of providing carbohydrates while preventing extreme waste from the bowels. There was precious little room left for much in the bilge, and the quality and quantity of the food was designed to provide for that. Despite this, the filthy bilge water was changed every week – or so – the timetable not always being strenuously kept to. Her thoughts were startled by the rattling of chains as the

overweight Australian returned with heavy wrist manacles.

“Hands. Let me see ’em.”

She slowly raised her wrists, her chipped nails and filthy blistered hands shaking in the pale light. She could feel the ache in her soles again, tears welling as he fixed her back in wrist chains. She had worn them for so long the last time. Weeks? Months? With each stroke of the oar, the chain had brushed against the tag on her breast, exacerbating the raw portion of it and, over time, causing perpetual discomfort. Her mind fixated on the wrist chains as the source of that discomfort, and now, as they were fitted to her once more, the tears fell uncontrollably.

“Come on, wench. Cut out those tears.”

She watched as he brought out a hammer and nail, secured the chains, and began to hammer the link to the wooden oar, her eyes closing with each loud bang.

“Galley slaves don’t cry, eh? No tears left.”

She knew what was coming next, could see his erection forming in the filthy shorts that he wore, his white skinned gut overhanging them like some obscene blob.

“You’re a volunteer, eh? From what I hear, that still means you get to suck my cock, ain’t that right? I guess you didn’t realise what you were volunteering for when you signed on?”

She stared at the whipped back of the woman in front of her. She had sucked so many cocks in her time here, so much so that she had felt sores around her chapped and raw lips. She had not seen herself in a mirror in so long, and she did not want to, she realised slowly.

For an overweight overseer, his hand movement as he unfurled the coiled whip and levelled it across her lower back was fast. She cried out in agony at the sting, the fiery lash of pain that she had felt so often at the oar. Her swollen feet disturbed the bilge water as she twisted on the bench.

“What’s that woman? I don’t hear you?”

“GNNNNNN... Y... Yes, overseer.”

“Better!” he grunted, dropping the whip and unfastening his shorts as his large erection was forced toward her face. She swallowed the bile in her throat and opened her mouth, easing her lips around the thick member and moving her head down the shaft.

\* \* \* \* \*

Joshua could see the coast now. The wind had picked up and the crew were already making ready for the landing at the *Galera* in a few days. He could refit, and remove those prisoners who were no longer of use, either through exhaustion or simply because their term had ended. They would not speak of the horrors of the galley, he knew that. They would not want to find themselves back at the oar, something that the powerful and influential Tarik could quite conveniently and rapidly arrange.

He tried to forget about Tarik’s interest in Justine. She was a volunteer; what could he do? She was, in essence, still a free woman, and thus not subject to all the depredations that the prisoners would undergo if required.

He had called him back to say that she had volunteered some months ago. Tarik had been interested in her, had asked about her background. It was as if he could sense that Joshua was hiding something. He had been as open as he could. Justine had been a professional triathlete but had injured her knee. He had met her at one of Jennifer’s parties. She was an old friend of Jennifer’s. He had been open when he suggested that she would serve on the galley, had told her about the whip and most of the conditions. There were two clear aspects that made her like most volunteers, he suggested. She had done it for the money – one year amongst the misery of a galley ship, and yet she had also been completely unprepared for the toil, the humiliation and the real world of being a galley slave – albeit (though perhaps exacerbated by) the fact that the ship was a modern reconstruction.

He had tried to keep some facts from Tarik, though he found it was difficult to keep secrets from the man who had pulled him from a slum and a drug and crime-filled future, and given him a rich man's life. He had told him therefore that Justine was an excellent volunteer because of her fitness and training, because of her multi-disciplined sports background, and even the fact that she appeared to know not only how to pace herself, but how to recover and how best to give her maximum effort when it was called for. He stopped short of stating that she might have the potential to become the strongest female galley slave that he had seen thus far. Part of him hoped that Tarik did not sense that from his words.

He could see the cliffs of the coastline now. They would sail southwest and make a landing at the *Galera*. He could remember vividly when Tarik had found and bought the place. It had a heritage, even if it were not a noble one. He reasoned that it had been a place of many horrors in its time, and realised that Tarik would ultimately want Justine taken there.

\* \* \* \* \*

Maria had screeched horribly as she was taken off the wooden horse. She was unable to walk, and they placed her in the lower tier, yet far enough to the stern that Justine could barely make out where she was. Her location was soon made clear enough during the break, as overseer after overseer demanded that their lusts be sated in her mouth. As the rowing began again, the whipping commenced, with special amounts and degrees of it directed toward what appeared to be Maria's position. Damn them, Justine thought. Were they trying to kill her? Justine had her own concerns, but she knew she was far stronger than Maria, and yet her position as a volunteer meant that although her treatment was as that of a slave, she would never be treated as badly as one of those prisoners.

She also realised that the area of the deck in which she toiled was that of Pierre, the French man who had taken her to the interview with Joshua, and who had thrashed the backs of her legs and buttocks when she refused to answer questions adequately. Clearly, he remembered her, and had singled her out for his whip on a few occasions, despite the fact that she had been

growing in strength since her ordeal on the spikes. Her feet still ached, though she had grown used to the pain. Even the whip did not always tear a shriek from her as it once had. She prayed that her back had not become hard and leather-like after so many months at sea. She kept trying to dismiss the idea of what she might look like in a mirror now, hoping that it would be a long time until she might see one. She reasoned that it would be a long time, of course. She had signed on to this hell ship for a year, a full year. She had lost track of time completely, knowing only that her release date was stamped on the steel tag that had been pierced through her nipple.

\* \* \* \* \*

She pushed the oar forward, letting air at the sweating body that sat astride the rough, thin bench. She tried not to think about the chains on her hands that would rub against her breasts as she pulled. She had not expected the whiplash, which came hard across her back.

“GNNNNN...” She did not cry out, taking the slap and sting, understanding its fire now, understanding how to control the pain, even though the lash struck across other fresh aches. Pierre looked down as he walked past her. She remained stoic, pushing her feet hard against the board in front of her, toes wrapped around it as she pulled. She expected this mad Frenchman to whip her belly, or worse, as he stood staring at her wretched nakedness, her taut muscle, as she grunted and pulled. Moans from around the deck stood testimony to the efforts of the pull, yet Justine merely kept rhythm, and began to push forward again, staring, ever staring, at the back of the woman in front of her.

Pierre simply nodded, and walked on. She had sucked his cock twice in the last few days. He had done it merely to emphasise her place in the order of things, or so she believed. The presence of a new volunteer further up the deck, had kept most of the overseers busy during the breaks. She wondered why a woman might volunteer, and then reminded herself of her own plight.

They were entering cooler waters. Certainly the weather had turned

colder at night. Some of the prisoners in the upper tier had huddled together for warmth during rest periods, though they were keen to make sure that they did not become intimate, the suffering of the two women who had last tried something of that nature only too recent in their memories. The reduced temperature helped, however, allowing the rowing to be more fluid, without overheating. In order to distract her mind from her ordeal, Justine had found herself focusing on the oar labour as training, noting which days she could reach her best efforts, and on which she should try to get whatever recovery she could.

She winced again as the chain chinked against her breast tag during the pull. If only they had not put her back in wrist chains, she would row and row without any fear of her movement. Damn them all, she thought, grunting as the anger helped her with the pull and the inevitable chink of rusted chain on tag.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tarik watched as the galley powered toward the simple wooden dock. Joshua knew to change the slaves quickly, and also to bring the athlete, Justine, to his chambers. He would have to keep her here for a while, to establish if she was good enough of course. It was his right. These women clearly did not know their usefulness. This Justine woman only knew a little of her potential. But, he would meet her, assess her, and then he would decide what should be done.

\* \* \* \* \*

The prisoners, or, more correctly, galley slaves, fell across their oars as the galley came to rest. Justine's heart was pounding, though she eased and used her breathing, leaning forward to pull the oar in as the command was given. Sweat from the stretched legs of the rowers above her dripped on her back, stinging fresh lashes, though she ignored it. The collective sigh of the women filled the stinking deck, punctuated by pants and exhausted

exhalations of breath and the creaking of wooden boards as the overseers walked the deck, some even starting to walk up the oily, wet steps to the deck above. Justine noted an air of happiness amongst them, as if some had indeed come home. She wondered what place this was, and what new horrors might await the poor prisoners.

“Unchain her,” she heard the words behind her, yet was afraid to turn around, in case her attention would attract the whip. The voice was familiar. Joshua?

“Yes, remove the chain from ankle fetters and unlock her from those wrist chains.”

Justine still had not turned around, yet she wanted to smile. Those damned chains. Her wrists would be free, at least for a short time. Her joy was short lived, however, as fear and paranoia rapidly gripped her. Why was Joshua having her released? Did he intend to have his way with her now that they had arrived at some sort of port?

The same fat Australian in shorts who had put her in chains so many days ago, now stooped, grunting with discomfort, to place his hands in the vile bilge water at her feet, unlocking the rusting chain and beginning to thread it back through the rings, gripping her calves as she winced, to pull them away. She wanted to scream ‘don’t touch me’ to him, wanted to kick him as he freed her, though a few days before she had been sucking his long, hard cock in order to avoid him whipping her back.

She limped up the deck as she was freed, her blistered soles taking the weight of her pain wracked body as she tried to keep pace with the strong arm that was pulling her along the filthy wet timbers. The last time she had been on her feet was when she was led to the spikes. She stepped over them now, eager to avoid the feeling of helpless oblivion that she had felt when last she had been forced to stand upon them for hours. Her legs and body were tired. Beyond training, this type of abuse no doubt built strong rowers, though there was no real recovery as there had been during her triathlon training in the past, no periods when the body could adapt.

One of her arms was being gripped tightly, pulled by the overseer as

her feet slapped against the timbers. They were taking her toward the wooden steps. It had been months, or it seemed like months, since she had been brought down those very creaky wooden steps, clean, her hair freshly shaved, her ankles hobbled by her newly acquired steel fetters; so long since she had walked that deck with clean feet. And now, were they going to take up onto the deck, take her outside, into daylight. Dear God, was it true? Were they going to release her early? She wanted to ask them, determine exactly why she was being taken from her rusting chains, though she did not want to feel the whip.

She could smell the sea air as she emerged from below. She closed her eyes and turned away, yelping as the sunlight and the day stung her eyes – eyes that had been so unused to the normal day, a brightness that had become but a memory – then she hit the air.

It was air without stink, air without heavy humidity and the stench of sweat, urine and worse. She breathed in heavy gasps of the clean sea air, as if her lungs had for so long breathed nothing but fetid poison.

Her eyes eventually began to adjust to the light, as she stared at the surroundings of the deck through narrow slits. She was still getting used to the air, coughing and spluttering as she filled her lungs.

She could see a figure in front of her, in the blurry hazy light. She thought she could recognise the stance, even as she instinctively held up her arms to shield her vision from the light.

Was it Joshua? She was forced to look away as an overseer pulled her arm down.

“Justine, how perfectly filthy looking you are. Has it been a while since the slaves were hosed?”

She could sense the Australian man behind her fumbling for his words.

“It’s been a while, sir.... ahhh... sorry, sir. Pierre hadn’t mentioned...”

She saw Joshua brush the lack of slave cleanliness away with a movement of his arm, as if dismissing the entire act that each galley slave had slowly began to see as her sole comfort. Her eyes were indeed adjusting now, and she could plainly see Joshua's arrogance as he looked her up and down. She could sense the overseer's relief in turn as he realised that he had not made a mistake. Perhaps, because he was new and wanted to impress, or perhaps he realised that on a ship where women could be naked, chained and put to the lash or worse, punishments for unruly or careless overseers might be equally harsh.

"How are you faring with your ordeal, Justine?" Joshua asked, almost politely, his voice reminding her of how he had been at the party, so long ago, when he had told her about the galley and the slavery, though she considered that no amount of words laced with any amount of red wine could soften the impact or hope to reflect the reality of what a year in chains might hold for a woman.

She looked up, stared into his eyes, cold eyes. No matter how much he tried to make himself seem appealing or even affectionate, he was simply cold.

"Oh," he added ruefully. "Of course, you have my permission to speak."

Her eyes narrowed at his vindictive ruthlessness. When last they had spoken, Pierre stood behind her, thick cane in hand, and struck the backs of her legs and buttocks whenever she had paused or given the wrong answer. She could feel the fiery welts, even as she thought back on the interview, as it had been called.

"I... am well, though..." she rasped, instinctively dropping her gaze from Joshua. Damn it, she thought to herself, she had wanted to maintain eye contact. Was she becoming some chained animal who bowed in deference to her master? With effort, she raised her head again.

"Though... I have been put back in wrist chains," she replied.

He smiled slightly, a practiced movement perhaps, since the 'smile'

entailed curling the ends of his lips in a fashion that looked markedly evil rather than simply happy.

“Of course, my dear slave. You were made to stand on spikes then put back in chains, as you were caught being pleased by another slave. Had you been in her position you would be riding the horse.” He reached forward to touch her sex lips, hidden amongst the mop of sweaty and matted pubic hair that had remained overgrown for weeks now, and he teased her as she gasped.

“These lips would be played and stretched under your weight, and pulled harshly by the bucket below. I think you came off lightly in the whole affair, don’t you agree?”

In response, the Australian overseer sniggered, an act that was rewarded with a stare full of malice from Joshua. Justine stiffened, seeing the face full of malevolence now as the overseer quietened rapidly.

She stared at Joshua, as if to ask why she was here more than anything else. As if in answer he raised his hand to the vista behind him. Both her sight and body had now begun to accustom themselves to the outside world, or at least the environment outside the stinking hell within which she had toiled for so many long months.

“Welcome to the Galera, Justine.”

### Chapter 3

She had been given permission to speak as she was gently guided with the overseer's hands, or the prods of the whip handle, along the wooden pier-like structure. The coastline was dominated by a sheer cliff-face. Even from her vantage point and despite the fading light, she could see barred sections on the cliff itself, as if the rock face hid secrets – an entire underground complex, or something similar. She tried to count the barred openings... twenty, thirty? Some of them were in line, suggesting levels. Others seemed to be irregularly formed or scattered without reason, while still others were close, very close, to the waterline, their rusted bars indicating that the enclosures or sanctuaries behind must be subjected to regular tidal flooding.

“What is this place?” was all that she could say, as she huddled her filthy arms around her naked, shivering body. A wind cut across the waves. Behind her, as she looked quickly without wanting to risk a lash of the overseer's whip, she could see now that other slaves were being unchained and taken off the ship. She thought she could discern the red haired Australian woman who had befriended her at an early stage of her ordeal and earned her her first interview. She was sure that the welts from that ‘discussion’, where her former friend had been present, were still evident as marks on the backs of her thighs and buttocks. She despaired once more at how she might find her body when she was released from bondage, at how permanent or otherwise marks from the savage whip and the cruel cane might be. She seemed to remember having asked Joshua something about it before, but her memories were increasingly lost in the nightmares and regrets of her time at the oar thus far.

“As I said,” he replied slowly, “This is the Galera.” He gripped her arm as if to pull her faster. She heard the tag at her nipple rattle as she almost stumbled, her feet, still wet from the bilge, almost slipping on the wooden boards which were slick with seawater.

“Yes, but what is it for? Why are you taking me inside – at least, I

assume that is what you are doing. And the others? Are we being released?”

His laugh sounded terrible, a grating sound. As if it was infectious, and because he perhaps thought that he needed to, the Australian overseer also began to laugh. Justine wished she could cover her ears as the sound was exacerbated by the crashing of a wave somewhere nearby. Even the sea was laughing at her. She wanted to scream at them to stop, though she knew that such an act would only earn her more stripes from the nearby whip.

“No, Justine. You forget, I think. You are only part way through your contract with us. You do remember agreeing to a year at the oar, surely? Yes, of course you do, my dear.”

He walked on, still smiling at her naiveté.

“As I mentioned, this is the Galera.” He painted the cliff face with a sweep of his arm.

“A spectacle of majesty, I think you will agree, carved out from the very rock of the cliff by our ancestors – initially thousands of years ago, some think, but then more recently, relatively speaking, in the seventeenth century when the great empire of Spain and the burgeoning ambition of France forged a bond whereupon those women who were deemed ‘undesirable’ and yet could not be sent to prison or a convent, were sent here. In fact, women were unsuitable for the terrible labour of the galleys. So, they were sent to the Galera, where the labour, some would say, must have been just as terrible; a prison, a place of punishment, a form of hell. All of these are adequate descriptions. My patron, of course, purchased the place, after a fashion. Since then, his interest in whether the historical ‘fact’ of whether women might indeed have been found suitable for the galley, has been tested. As you know, it has not been found wanting. In fact, one could say that volunteers such as yourself, and the endless rabble of prisoners who wish to reduce their sentences, provide ample slaves for the oar and for his predilections with regard to the potential of women at the oar.”

He laughed again as he finished. He seemed happy to be ‘home’, if indeed this vile place could be called home.

“So... this patron of yours,” she rasped, shivering still in the coastal wind. “He’s just a pervert then?”

His gaze shifted as he walked. She almost did not discern his head bobbing slightly, thinking at first that it might be anger, but understanding finally as she heard, then felt, the rapid partial slash of the whip behind her. She yelped as it struck home across her back, reflexively bending back.

“No, Justine. In fact, he is the reason that you are being removed from your chains. He wants to meet you.”

“He... gnnnn... he what?” Her back stung from the lash. Somehow, having being removed from the depredations of the galley ship, the effect of the whip seemed heightened as it slashed across older marks.

“He wants to meet you,” Joshua repeated. “He must have taken an interest in you, watching you stand on those spikes. It’s not easy to hide your considerable charms, naked and helpless in the yoke.” That last statement had been a struggle, she sensed. Did Joshua not want her to meet this man, whoever the hell he was?

“And...” she began. She did not want to risk another lash. She stopped speaking and bowed her head.

“And? Well, be conscious of one thing. Mr Tarik is not as forgiving as I have been with regard to your, well, your lack of behaviour.”

Justine gasped. “Forgiving? I... I have been whipped constantly, put in damned chains.” She had to stay in control, she reminded herself. She did not want to be punished further – especially in this place, where who knew what horrors awaited in the chambers of this ancient seat of hell.

“Indeed. You have been mildly punished. Mr Tarik will not be as understanding. He knows that you are one of my volunteers, but tread carefully with your responses. He cannot force you to do anything... sexual. You are a volunteer, after all, though he can make things difficult for you in terms of the remainder of your contract.

“Difficult?” she spluttered, staring up at the majestic cliffs and the iron bound doors that she was being directed towards.

“Yes,” Joshua said quietly. “Do not piss him off,” he croaked quietly. “You will regret it. Remember, you have yet to ride the wooden horse. Imagine what Maria has gone through. Don’t become a victim.”

Justine shuddered. She had befriended Maria, and she, in her naiveté had wanted to return her kindness, though even touching between her legs on the filthy bench they had shared, had earned punishment. She might never see Maria again, she considered, as she had years still to do on the galley. She tried not to let her mind give in to the despair that she had felt in recent weeks.

\* \* \* \* \*

The entrance to the Galera had been locked with two sets of ornate iron gates. Justine was a triathlete more than a historian, though even she could see that the rusting metal, though it had been repaired and had parts refurbished, was clearly either the remnants of a three or four hundred year old structure, or had been remodelled in the image of the original. The rings on her fetters rattled amidst the quiet, the steel grating on her ankles, though they had been toughened by months of sitting at the oar. Her bare feet were cold as she walked gingerly on the rough cave floor, the threat of the whip behind her making her try to keep pace with Joshua. It was easy for them, in their tough shoes and heavy boots. Was this some other torture, making her walk barefoot and fettered on these rough rocks?

Eventually they reached a roughly hewn staircase. Each corridor or avenue that she could see, leading in various directions, was lit with a caged electric light. Clearly, though the nod to the history of this place had been tangible as she had entered, the advantages of modern power were not lost on its mysterious owner. She could hear the sea beneath them, the waves breaking outside and the drips of moisture from the dank surrounding corridors. As they began to climb the stairs, the stone still cold underfoot, she heard a cry, a woman’s cry, from a nearby corridor.

“What was that?” she said instinctively.

“The punishment cells,” Joshua said without breaking stride, starting up the stairs.

“What?”

“I told you. Keep on Tarik’s good side, or you’ll end up forced to stand in steel collar and chains as the tide comes in, for days. I believe that woman may be the wife of some employee of his. She suffers because of her husband’s error. You really want to piss off a man who does that?”

“No,” she finally gasped, realising that she had not been breathing as Joshua was speaking.

“The lower levels of this place make the galley look like a holiday. Remember that, Justine.”

She nodded, even though he could not see her.

“This... this wasn’t in the contract,” she finally said.

“Don’t worry. Unless you become a problem, you won’t be here very long.”

The staircase appeared to be spiral in nature and headed up through the complex. It had the double advantage of allowing rapid movement through the levels, while also obscuring the worst horrors that they might contain. At various times Justine heard whip lashes, moans and screams, sounds that reminded her of the galley deck, but which this horrible dungeon-like edifice made worse. At various levels throughout the climb, she could also discern heat coming from vents, accompanied in some instances by sooty smoke, which made her cough. As if hearing her questioning thoughts, Joshua spoke.

“The heat comes from the furnace. It’s on the lower level, above the punishment cells. Let’s hope he doesn’t send you there to keep your strength up. Even the wheel is more inviting than that place.”

It was as if he was talking to himself, though Justine felt that she had to heed these warnings that he might be giving her. The furnace? The wheel? How could they be any worse than the galley? Her feet were black now from the soot that had landed on the steps. Oh she was a mess. If only she could get washed soon. Though, she reasoned, the rest that she had not been getting while at the oar might finally be her reward here. She would recover from her ordeal and grow stronger. Perhaps, if they allowed her to rest for a week, maybe more, she would 'peak' in the parlance of her former training regime, and find new heights of strength. It was how she had trained for triathlons. If that were the case, and she recovered endurance and power, she would become formidable at the oar, become a great rower and, more importantly, avoid the damned whip.

She was tiring now though. She could hear the fat Australian behind her, hacking and gasping for air, clearly unfit and in need of some exercise. She would have laughed at him would the action not have been rewarded with a whiplash. Joshua too, was tiring. These damned men were so out of shape, she reasoned, while she could keep going, but then they had not been labouring at the oar. She reasoned that the limited food that she received must have been protein and carbohydrate based, giving her strength and increasing her endurance. She had become lithe and tautly muscled in comparison to her old self. Even her knee injury, which had forced her to retire from triathlons and had given her some trouble in the early weeks of her galley slavery, seemed to be performing well.

Near the top of the massive staircase, she could discern a pit off to the side of one of the corridor openings. The place was like a damned maze. She tried to look over the edge but could see little, bar the lights that played about the walls. She could clearly hear, however, sounds of exertion far below, chains, and the familiar sound of whips being used. She closed her eyes briefly and continued her climb.

It was cooler near the top of the structure and, as she was pushed through another barred door, well furnished. She was pushed onto the concrete floor of another corridor, though this one had a white painted floor and white walls. She could hear the sounds of an office in the distance, and a number of doors and even air conditioning was present. She looked down at

her filthy body, the tidemarks of dried sweat, the red welts of lashes from the whips, her broken nails and black feet, which had left footprints on the painted floor. Her humiliation was complete, she thought. A galley slave, about to walk into what passed for the closest thing to normal society that she had seen since having the rusting steel fetters locked onto her feet and having her nipple pierced with the tag containing her release date.

Joshua looked up and down the corridor, informing the still panting, almost exhausted overseer that he would 'take it from here'.

Justine wanted to laugh at the expression on the overseer's face, when he realised that he was expected to walk the whole way back down again.

"Yes sir," he grunted, before leaving.

"That wasn't very nice of you Josh... Master," she said quietly, suppressing a smile despite her circumstances, and risking that Joshua would not have her punished now that the man with the whip had gone to start leg two of his journey.

He smiled in return, staring at her briefly as their eyes locked. Justine found that she could not look away. He had, after all, seen her naked for months. Why should it be any different now? But, it was different somehow, perhaps in a way that neither of them could wholly discern. The environment was different, and it seemed that Joshua, not being surrounded by other naked, sweating women, could finally see her in isolation – alone and independent.

Joshua raised a hand to touch her, his movement adjusting slightly as he moved his arm, so that he would just avoid the painful area around the breast tag if, when, he touched her breast. Justine found herself not wanting to move back, as if wanting the touch of a man after these long months; the normal touch – not based on the stinging slap of a whip or the forced sucking of a cock. She gasped, wanting Joshua to touch her filthy body, and perhaps even to explore further.

"Mr Tarik will see you now, sir!" The voice was stern, authoritative, and most surprisingly of all, female. Joshua moved with a start, surprising

Justine, as she had yet to see him display weakness of any kind. The woman, however, unlike the poor slave that Justine had expected to find as she looked up, half naked and clad in all the chainlike refinements that would clearly denote her status amongst these men, was actually dressed in a business suit, Asian, her black hair clasped tightly behind her head. She looked Justine up and down with disgust.

“Ah...” Joshua stuttered, trying to find the words in one of the few situations that he had clearly not planned for. “Miss Sheng, how good to see you again.”

“Yes, Joshua,” she said, her attempt at a smile clipped and unnatural looking, her attempt at a bow even more so. Justine felt her eyes across her again, surveying her sweat and dirt mottled flesh.

“This is the prisoner that Mr Tarik wishes to see, is it?”

Sheng’s heels clicked loudly on the white stone floor as she took a blue rubber glove from her pocket and pulled it over her long thin fingers and painted red nails.

Justine’s eyes widened. What was this woman going to do? Instinctively she looked at Joshua, who did not return her gaze. She moved slightly, wanting to run.

“She is a volunteer, Miss Sheng,” Joshua said as the well dressed woman reached Justine.

“Yes, I can read her tag, Joshua,” she replied, still staring at Justine

She now moved her hand toward Justine’s arm, who in turn forced herself to swallow, and tried to avoid flinching as Sheng’s vice-like fingers, pinched her arms, testing the strength of the muscle.

“She is strong, Joshua, Where did you get this one?”

“I have recruited many athletes before,” he said, now using clipped tones, suggesting to Justine at least that he did not wish to give much away

regarding his latest 'find'.

“Hmmm, javelin? Strong arms and shoulders. Decathlete?”

Joshua moved closer, about to answer.

“Triathlete,” Justine barked, in a manner that suggested her pride in her sport and what it had done for her body.

Sheng reacted with disgust, and then genuinely smiled.

“It speaks too, Joshua. Clearly the whip has not taught her to keep her mouth shut. Yet, those sores around her mouth; she has sucked cock and yet it seems does not know her place? Well, that makes her immediate future a simple choice, does it not?”

Justine started defiantly. Joshua moved quickly, darting between Sheng and Justine.

“Her immediate future has yet to be decided, Miss Sheng. I think we can leave that up to Mr Tarik, don't you?”

Sheng sniggered, looking down at the dirt on the glove from where she had pawed and pulled at Justine's dirty skin, slowly removing it and dropping it onto the floor.

“This way.”

Joshua indicated to Justine to follow as they moved along the twisting corridors. She knew that she was leaving a trail of black footprints. She looked back as the fetters rubbed hard against her ankles. Wearing steel on the ankles may have been uncomfortable on the galley, but prolonged walking was becoming unbearable. As she glanced behind her, the black shapes made by her high arches and toes trailed behind the small party,

The sight of the highly polished, dark mahogany doors seemed alien as they reached their apparent destination. Sheng opened the doors effortlessly, stepping inside and moving forwards. Justine's first thought was for the floor. Part of her felt guilty about the filthy footprints, some

throwback to her past and her obsessive cleanliness before competition. If she had been obsessive compulsive in the past, months of rowing naked as a slave seemed to have taken care of most of the feeling. The floor was bare stone, unpainted as the corridors had been. She was relieved without really understanding why, reasoning that the part of her that was concerned about making a mess did not want to admit that she was a galley slave.

As she walked in, however, her initial thoughts that the bare stone floor had perhaps indicated a lack of opulence or extravagance were proven dramatically incorrect. The floor was cold on her soles, though she hardly felt it as she gasped in awe at the magnificent splendour of the place. Again, she felt some distant pang on her uncleanliness. She stank, needed to bathe, and she somehow should not be in this place at all, she reminded herself as she stared at the paintings and tapestries that lined the decorative brick walls that had been placed here. The shape of the room itself was hard to define. It was as if some *Feng Shui* expert had designed it so that it could not be easily replicated by the casual observer, who would in turn be left with only an awe-inspiring memory. The height of the ceiling also lent an air of luxury to an area which, had it been described simply as ‘a room’, might have insulted the architect. Opulent paintings and decorations from around the world seemed to vie for attention from the observer.

The centrepiece was a raised dais of sorts. White glossy flooring with the latest in fashionably luxuriant seating nestled neatly on top. On one of these divan-like seats sat a large, swarthy skinned man, busily involved in watching a number of large monitors, which Justine now noticed nestled neatly amongst the divine artwork. She could see that each monitor showed an image of... the galley? Was this man watching them as they laboured in hell?

“Mr Tarik,” Sheng interrupted, bowing slightly, even though Tarik could not see her. He raised a finger as if to silence her. She bowed again. He let the finger fall.

“Bring the slave in front of me,” he said slowly and deliberately.

The bastard won’t even lower himself to turn around, Justine thought to herself.

Sheng indicated that Justine should move forward quickly, rather than be forced to touch her once more. The look of disgust on the Asian woman's face was clearly evident, the thoughts of disgust involved with touching one of the galley slaves clearly anathema to her daily routine. She reminded herself that she had called her a slave. She could feel Joshua's concern at her side. Fear, she reasoned, that she might say or do something wrong. Yet she felt free of the oar in more ways than one. There were no whips here, no fat overseers who would force their sweating cocks toward her mouth so that she might suck them, and be forced to swallow the mouthful of cum that would remain in their throat when they had finished humiliating her. She reminded herself that the word humiliation had little meaning left for her now. She stepped forward, wincing as the fetters scraped against her anklebones. She rounded the platform and turned toward him. Then she saw his face, and bit down hard so as not to cry out.

It was as if half of Tarik's face was missing. She could not decide if the horribly scarred flesh and almost closed eye on his right side had been improved through surgery or not. If so, then clearly they had not had much to work with in the first place. His face cracked in a half smile.

“So Justine, in the flesh, so to speak.”

She instinctively backed away as he stood up. His accent was eastern, his voice powerful, like his body and frame as he rose. She held his gaze, though it was difficult. His skin was pockmarked and aged on the bad side, his hair patchy and rough. The good side of his face was rugged and handsome, the fine hair neatly combed, the image playing tricks with her mind as she tried to reconcile the two sides of what her eyes were seeing. He was muscular and clearly looked after himself to a degree, though she noted a slight paunch at his belly, perhaps through too much rich food.

“Yes, I am Justine,” she whispered, staring.

She saw Joshua wince at the periphery of her vision, while Sheng became incensed.

“You call him Master, slave, or I'll have the soles of your feet caned until they bleed!”

Sheng began to approach, as if the act might make her speak properly to the man who was clearly in charge. He, in turn, raised a finger again, his back to Sheng, as if to instruct her that she should stop, and that the terms of address had not been offensive. Justine wanted to smile as she obeyed. Tarik approached her slowly.

“You are a powerful rower Justine.” He indicated the monitors. “I have been watching.”

She glanced at the large, expensive computer monitors, taking in the image of slaves being unchained – the galley that she had served in, but there were other ships, some in horrible condition, all with naked, filthy, chained women labouring in the worst hell imaginable.

“You have many ships then? Is that what all of this is about? Prisoners and naïve volunteers rowing naked for your pleasure... Master Tarik?”

He could see that both Joshua and Sheng were incensed now. She could scarcely believe that she had said it herself.

“You have spirit,” Tarik said, reaching up a hand to tug at a lock of her black hair, which had started to grow back in filthy tufts.

“How did you find the galley, the lash, sucking cock?”

He moved a hand down her body and pulled gently on the nipple tag at her breast. She yelped in pain, gritting her teeth.

“Do you like the pain, Justine? Do you like the challenge? A failed athlete such as yourself being put through the worst labour imaginable?”

“Gnnn... for you to watch, Master Tarik... AAAAAAHHHH!”

She screamed as he pulled hard on the tag.

“I have plans for you, Justine. You are hard, able to take the hell of the galley. I have seen it.”

He backed away at last as she reached a hand for her stretched nipple. She was still filthy and sore, standing in front of this pervert, who she now realised must have been watching her all the long months of her labours. She rubbed at the red area around her breast.

“You have plans for me?” she grunted.

“Yes, my dear. I have been watching you for a little while. I can’t understand how Joshua managed to hide you so easily. You are clearly an athlete of note; well, you were, before you became a slave.”

He moved his other hand now, attempting to rub her thigh. As she flinched, he merely adjusted the movement so that he could run his palm along her dirt-streaked leg.

“Sir, she is filthy!” Sheng almost spat.

“If you want to remain clean yourself, Sheng, you should be quiet.”

Justine could sense Joshua’s smile at Tarik’s retort, even as Sheng physically backed away, bowing again, aware of the latent menace in his tone.

“Yes, you were a fine athlete, and now you are mine.”

Joshua cleared his throat.

“Do remember she is a volunteer, sir.”

Tarik closed his eye, sighing.

“I am aware of that, Joshua.”

Justine’s heart was pounding now, as he touched her, aware that he had been watching her on the spikes, perhaps at the oar. Had he got off on watching Maria on the wooden horse? It was more than she could stand. Reflexively as he rubbed her filthy leg she moved back and reached forward to grip his wrist. She could feel the strength behind it. Tarik’s face looked shocked and surprised.

“It would seem that the whip has taught you little, Justine. There is strength and defiance still in those eyes?”

Justine released him and stood still, her breathing clearly audible in the silence.

“Miss Sheng, have Justine put in the furnace room for a few days. Then have her brought back here, please, where we can continue our discussions. It seems that she is in no mood to talk.”

She gasped, even as she looked at Joshua, whose head had fallen in abject despair. Joshua had talked of the furnace. She realised that she had made an enormous mistake as the beaming Miss Sheng approached her, heels clicking on the stone floor as she put on another pair of gloves.

\* \* \* \* \*

Justine had wondered idly at the source of the heat that had been coming through the vents in the stairs as she ascended through the vast caverns. Now, she knew exactly their source. Tarik had clearly not appreciated her freedom of speech, her audacity despite the months of being whipped to work harder and forced to suck overseer’s sweating cocks. She had thought that somehow, if he had sought to idolise her and summon her to his presence, that perhaps he might even have found her attractive and that she might play on that fact, and thus he would find a grudging respect for her lack of playacting at being a slave. She realised now, that he had had little respect or devotion. In fact, he wanted her to suffer further.

The massive cave or hall that housed the furnace in the lower levels of the cavernous complex was covered with coal dust. Those who worked here for more than a number of hours were black from head to toe. Justine hoped that there would be a chance to wash, though having seen the state of some of the other women, she was not entirely sure if it would be at all possible. Thick chains had been attached between the fetters at her feet. Though they were not at all designed for walking, she found that was what she had to do, the sixteen inches of thick black chain making it even more difficult than the

grinding weight of the ankle fetters alone.

She gasped as she lifted the heavy shovel full of coal from the ground where it had been tipped from the carts by other slaves. The bright flames of the nearby furnace granted a hellish aspect to the naked chained women who laboured here. She moved gingerly, blistered raw feet now having to walk on sharp coals as she tried to move toward the flames with her shovel of fuel. She heard the whip swish through the air behind her as it landed with a thick slap across her back. She screeched, twisted her back and dropped the coals that had been balanced precariously on the end of her shovel.

“Come on bitch! You’re new. Surely you have more strength than that. Now move!”

She bent to shovel more of the plentiful coal, even as she yelped when the lash fell again, this time across her buttocks. This whip was different, as was the overseer, a small, obsequious man with what looked in the changing orange light to be a variation on an old cat o’ nine tails. Its sting was not lessened in comparison with any of the other whips that she had felt these last months. In fact, it was worse, used in closer proximity and on various parts of the body. The sound of the slap amidst the digging and moaning was horrible, the yelp of the victims even worse.

She lifted another shovel full, moving slowly on the sharp coals toward the flames once more, the pain in her soles, so soon after the spikes on board the ship, making progress slow and desperate. She grunted as she threw the heavy load into the flames, moving back to the piles of coal with the other women, all of whom were black with dust. The heavy steel collar she also had been made to wear reflected the orange light of the rising flames that consumed more and more fuel.

“That’s it. Keep it up. You’ll find the work here worse than the galley, eh? But we have our reminders of it, should you need it.”

He pointed to the far end of the hall, where, illuminated by the flickering flames, Justine could just make out a wooden horse. These people, no, Tarik and his damned minions, clearly loved their tortures. She was supposed to be a galley volunteer, not some damned Sade-esque slave forced

to labour at the furnace. What was the difference, she asked herself, realising now that the whole fiendish set-up was propagated by Tarik's perverted need to watch women at work while he, no doubt, masturbated to their moans.

She at pushed the heavy steel collar that had been fixed to her neck. A large padlock fixed in place at her throat. She wondered idly what she might be locked to later on, if such a padlock were needed now. She had not seen Sheng since she had been condemned to this vile place and work. She wondered too what her position in the whole affair actually was. Joshua also seemed to have disappeared rapidly as the guards had brought her down to her new hell. He had warned her, she reasoned, lifting another shovel full of coal and walking gingerly, toes reaching in vain for a spot where her own weight would not crush them against sharp pieces underfoot.

“YAHHHHH!”

The whip landed across the back of her legs, where once Joshua had had her caned, though she hung onto the coals balancing on the end of the shovel.

“Better,” the vile little man said. “You're learning.”

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Tarik watched the low light monitor as he sat, rubbing the erection beneath his canvas trousers gently.

“You told me that she had been broken, Joshua,” he said, a menacing timbre lending gravity to his voice.

“Yes sir, I did,” Joshua said quietly, without fear. He watched Justine on the low light enhancement of the monitor. She was strong, especially in comparison to these vile prisoners. The months at the oar, despite bad food and ill treatment, had made her used to the lash, ready for the loads she would carry. Even though she might not have immediately realised it, she was starting to make the furnace work look easy. In fact, despite the fact that the

overseer had concentrated on her during this first day, he was now having few excuses to whip her further and realising that his lack of attention with regard to his other charges was making them lazy. The sound of lashes falling on other backs resounded through the speakers. Tarik revelled in the sound, and smiled.

“I do not think I was wrong, sir,” Joshua said, after a pause.

“She was defiant with me, clearly defiant!” Tarik responded, his glance moving slightly to take in Joshua’s form, as if a look from his better eye would be enough to convince him of the error of his judgement.

“Yes sir, I understand, though that bite, that defiance, may be exactly what you need. I assume you are thinking of using her?”

“Of course, Joshua. She would be a valuable asset. You say that she still has six months?”

“Yes sir. The papers are all in place.”

“Good. Well, I think we can leave her in the furnace a while longer. Then we shall see.” Tarik rubbed his hands, before returning them to rubbing the straining member that was tightly pressing against his trousers.

“Yes sir. Though I would advise against keeping her with the shovel for too long. We have both seen prisoners wasted in that place – overworked and broken.”

“Yes, Joshua, perhaps you are right. See to it then that she works for two weeks in the furnace, then have her moved.”

“Moved, sir?”

“Yes... you’ll think of something, I’m sure.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Justine screeched again as the whip fell across her sweating, dust stained back. Her legs, restricted by the short length of chain, were forced to move gingerly, looking for the sleepers that crisscrossed the length of track that had been set up to help move the massive carts. She had shovelled the coal for two days. She had then been moved, walking with difficulty across the coals, toward one of the massive mine carts that served the area close to the furnace. The cart had to be pushed, inch by inch, along the track. The strain on her back was considerable, though Justine noticed that she had been made stronger through her months on the galley, straining at the oar. One similarity remained, however, despite the differences in stance, motion and muscle. She was still subjected to being whipped across her back, and now, by virtue of her new position, across the buttocks and legs too. She screeched and cried out as her heart felt ready to burst due to the weight of the load she was forced to push. Her chains restricted how far her legs could help, while the ever-present fire of the many-tailed lash urged her body to move, to push, to sustain the work.

Sweat drenched her, and the coal dust that seemed ever present in this place, seemed attracted to her wet body, meaning that she soon was grime and dust covered. The slaves were watered frequently, indicating to her that they had had problems in the past with dehydration. She wondered idly at exactly how long she might have to stay here, and the damage the place could potentially do to her lungs.

The shifts seemed to last twelve to sixteen hours, with breaks for a porridge-like mixture, doled out into wooden bowls. The work was terrible, with the end of the shift being marked by the movement of the women into a massive cell at the end of the hall and locked in place. It had been at this time that Justine had realised the relevance of the padlock at her collar. Before leaving their charges for the night, and with them too exhausted to resist, the overseers took the short length of ankle chain, pulling it up toward the collar and using the padlock to lock collar, ankle chain, and thus slave, in place. In turn, this meant that the legs of each woman were gathered up tight toward her body. The legs could not stretch at all. Justine's protest at this action, which would in some cases force tired legs to cramp, earned her seven hard strokes of the whip across her dusty body.

After the workers had been chained in this most uncomfortable fashion, they were locked into the vast cell and doused with hoses, though not for long enough that they all might become perfectly clean. Justine noticed that some poor wretched women crawled and limped toward the water, hoping to both drink and take advantage of the chance to at least get parts of their bodies clean.

Most prisoners tended at last to fall on their sides, legs drawn up painfully beside them. Justine was exhausted already, though she knew that her fitness would allow her to recover quickly, despite the appalling food and lack of significant amounts of water. She felt herself drawing off to sleep, in turn trying to stretch one leg at the expense of the chain that held it to the other via the collar. She would then try to stretch the other. Despite the number of slop buckets that appeared to be present, and full, many of the women were too exhausted to adequately use them, preferring to rely instead upon the drainage, in the guise of gully holes that were built into the moss covered stonework of the floor.

Drifting off, trying to ignore the stench that reminded her so much of the galley and the constant sound of low coughs and moans, Justine could discern a distinct movement in the light left by the dying flames of the furnace. It was difficult to move to view anything, and not just because of the poor light. The overseers' chaining of each of the prisoner's leg chains to their collar meant that movement was awkward, and Justine concentrated on not moving suddenly and inducing further cramp on already tired muscles.

She could see, however, the filthy blonde haired head of the figure moving toward her.

"J... Justine," it croaked, looking like some hellish figure with filthy feet and legs moving at the same time as its buttocks bounced off the floor.

"Jennifer?"

Justine could not believe it. When last she had saw Jennifer, it had been aboard the galley. She had been at her interview, and Justine had requested one small thing, one small favour in answer to the thrashing that she had received through Joshua's order; recompense for the manner in

which Jennifer, her former friend and the woman who was primarily responsible for her being here, had egged on Joshua to have her punished further. Joshua had listened, and Jennifer had been put to the oar, but only for a short time in comparison to the hell that she had undergone. But, she had also found out that Jennifer had served previously, perhaps had even received the one million dollars that Justine had also been promised as a volunteer. Could this awkward, demonic-like shape, filthy and lashed, really be Jennifer?

“Jennifer, is it really you?”

Rancid exclamations and curses in many languages came from tired women who were trying to sleep for the few hours they would be allowed between work shifts. The hobbling woman slumped to the floor, chains rattling, as she reached Justine.

“Yes... yes, Justine, it is me.”

Jennifer’s face was black with dust. Her hair seemed to be crawling with black particles of coal, her body too a mixture of dried sweat and impacted dust of many shades of black and grey. Justine wanted to pity the poor wretch in front of her, wanted to try and help her as she reached a hand forward as if to console her suffering, even though she suffered similarly. She wanted to tell her that everything would be okay, even though she knew that it would not – at least not until she had finished her year and she was released and paid. She was not entirely sure what Mr Tarik had in store for her, of course. Though, equally she considered as she stayed her hand, Jennifer had introduced her to Joshua at her party so many months ago, had treated her as a slave when she had come aboard the galley, had wanted to see her suffer – ride the wooden horse with a bucket of rocks tied to her toes to pull her down. Her voice was cold when she finally spoke to her former friend.

“Why exactly are you here, Jennifer? I thought you were one of the masters in this place, or should that be mistresses?”

Justine felt a pang of guilt as the tired, indolent face looked up at her.

“I... I’m sorry, Justine. I truly am. I admit that... I wanted to see you

suffer.”

Justine gasped.

“You bitch, how can you say that?” Her voice was raised now, as she ignored the protests and veiled threats of exhausted women who were trying to sleep, their chains rattling as they were forced to move cramping muscles to quiet this threat to their escape from the furnace. Justine’s heart was pumping wildly. Perhaps Jennifer deserved this, she reasoned, for all that she had done. She could feel the anger rising in her.

“I was jealous of you. Always was. I could never beat you of course. I... I tried so hard, but I could never do it. Ever since the day that you went professional, since you did the big competitions...”

Jennifer was weeping uncontrollably.

“And so you had Joshua talk me into being a galley slave? How do you even know these monsters?” Justine said, now in a hoarse whisper, her own voice betraying her emotion.

“It was a long time ago, Justine, when I was at my bitterest, when you were having such success and being picked for national squads, and I was nowhere in sight. I had trained so hard, yet I didn’t have the gifts that you had. I was at my lowest ebb, and got into... well, things I probably shouldn’t have. That’s when I met Joshua, when I made my first million at the oar.”

Instinctively, Justine stared at Jennifer’s lithe back. She had always remembered that she had had a weight problem when they had trained together. Well, that had certainly cleared up. She had lost weight and put on muscle, even since the last time she had seen her aboard the galley. She saw deeper lashes though, white marks across her back, and reasoned that these had been lashes from her original stint, during her own ‘year of the oar’. Clearly, they had not healed. Horribly, it seemed that they would never heal, as the scars on her mind would never heal after the ordeal.

“But why are you here? Why did you even remain in contact with these people?”

At this, Jennifer looked up, staring at her former friend, her eyes wet with tears and full of emotion.

“You don’t yet understand, do you?”

“Understand what, Jennifer? Are you saying that I won’t be released?”

“Oh no. You’ll be released, though you won’t be able to face society again,” Jennifer said slowly, deliberately.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Justine barked back at her. “If I’m free, I’ll run like hell and collect my cheque.” She was whispering now, lest some of the other women, who were actually prisoners, should take out their frustrations on the two ‘volunteers’ who were talking about the amount of money they might get after they had finished their year. Justine realised, as she spoke, that most of the poor wretches here would be toiling for years.

“You don’t understand. I’m sorry that you don’t. Truly I am. But you will come to understand, when the time is right.”

Justine realised that Jennifer was right about that. She had no idea what she was talking about. Had she known the ordeal that she would be facing, she would have never agreed to Joshua’s terms in the first place, never. It was too late now, of course. She had to finish the term. What the hell else was she going to do? Joshua had already explained, before her feet had even been chained, that she had no way out once she had signed up.

“Rest, Jennifer. Just rest,” was all that she could say, as her former friend, still weeping, laid her head down against Justine’s cramped leg.

“But why are you here?” she whispered. “I thought that you were Joshua’s friend now?”

“No. He punished me for what I said to you, for what I tried to do to you. He didn’t want you to ride the wooden horse.”

“He didn’t?” Justine exclaimed, almost too loudly.

“You two. Shut up, willya!” the shout came from the nearby wall. “I’m tryin’ to get some fuckin’ sleep and her crying and you whingin’ is fuckin’ me up. Now please, will you both shut up!”

Justine turned to stare at the source of the shout. The accent had been perhaps South African, though the intent of the words was not at all in doubt.

“Shut up yourself, bitch!” Justine retorted, hundreds of hours of pent up frustration, working as a cocksucking oar slave, finally let loose in her scream.

“Quiet in there!” Another shout came from outside – one of the overseers. As the relative silence of women in chains returned, only the muffled clank of chains under exhausted flesh reverberating about the dungeon could be heard.

A final whisper from the wall was all that Justine could hear. “You’ll get yours bitch...”

## Chapter 4

Days passed in the furnace hall, hard, exhausting days, amidst sharp coal and the constant lashes. Justine found, though, that her work paid off. She was still strong and fit, and despite the poor food and water, her body was lithe and muscled enough to work on. She avoided the lash for the most part. She could see Jennifer at a distance, working in another group. She could only speak to her at night, though they kept their voices quiet for fear of alerting the South African woman who had spoken to them. When Jennifer pushed the cart, it seemed that Justine was shovelling coal, and they could not work together. Strangely, Justine wanted to help her, as she could see that Jennifer was being urged on with the whip regularly due to being slow or tardy. Fresh lashes each day bore testament to this. It seemed, however, that fate would have them cruelly separated during the working hours. Despite this, Jennifer would stay near her at night, as if trying, through her meek efforts, to apologise for all that she had done. Justine began to believe her story with regard to Joshua's vengeance upon her for what she had attempted to do while she had been aboard the galley. But why would he not want to see her here horsed? Was it because she was a volunteer? She doubted it. Was it because of her athletic prowess? She did not know. She had, strangely, begun to adjust to the horrific pressures on her body from the oar, not least because she had been trained. The pain in her knee, which had so plagued her progress in the early days, had gone for the most part, though she feared that continued exposure to the work in the furnace, forced to labour on top of coals, could bring back the injury or make her fall. She was careful to avoid such an eventuality, even if it meant bringing the lash across her back.

She had been in the furnace for eight days when it happened. She had heard mutterings at night when she had spoken with Jennifer. Though she could not place the South African woman, she had her suspects. There were at least three burly women working at the furnace that it could have been, though she was not sure, until the morning that one of them swung a shovel at her.

Despite the rigors of working in the hall, the coughing and the dusty

atmosphere, it was clear that the woman in front of Justine meant to swing the shovel near her head as she walked in chains across the sharp coals. It was a surprise. In fact, had she not been attentive to the movement of the burly, naked, dark haired prisoner, she would have been sent sprawling and probably knocked out. As it was, she reached back, slipped, and fell on her ass on the coals yelping amidst the roused voices and rattle of chains.

“Hey!”

The woman turned slowly.

“You got a problem, bitch?”

It was her, all right. Justine recognised the voice immediately.

“You tried to hit me with the shovel, bitch!”

Anger overtook her again, despite the tiredness, despite the threats of the whips, despite the long months of horrific servitude. Part of her wanted to take her own shovel and strike back at the woman’s legs with it. Her heart pounded. After all the horrid conditions, one like her was starting a fight. Well, she would give her one.

“I said... you tried to hit me,” she repeated slowly as she got to her feet, standing awkwardly on the coals.

The woman in front of her squared up. It seemed that the overseers had not yet noticed that part of the line had stopped. She hefted her own shovel, and smiled a gap toothed grin.

“Well. Maybe it’ll make you shut up at night then, yah?” she whispered menacingly.

As she spoke, she hefted the shovel again and poked it toward Justine’s stomach, hoping to make her lose her footing as she moved back to avoid it. As she did so, Justine swayed nimbly and brought her own shovel around in a wide arc. The South African was much faster than her size belied, however, drawing up her own implement to block the strike, then, getting

close on the rough floor, bringing an elbow up beneath Justine's chin. As it connected, Justine felt her teeth rattle and saw red, falling into her opponent's body, and clanging the edge of the shovel against her foot. The woman's scream echoed through the chamber as they parted slightly in order to renew their battle.

"What is going on there?" an overseer screeched harshly.

The men were moving back toward the pair now. With a sense of finality, Justine realised the futility of her situation, as the South African smiled again, grunting in pain from the red contusion that flared across her foot.

Justine screeched wildly as the whips forced both her and the other woman to the ground; she yelped and cried out until the overseers had made sufficient example of both of them for fighting. Their hands were roughly bound behind them as they were dragged to a kneeling position, aching knees upon the rough coal surface.

"Another punishment for you, Kola," an overseer said to the South African.

"It... uhhh... is worth it, damn it," she replied, staring at Justine whose breasts rose and fell in time with her ragged breathing.

"Get the block and rod," an overseer barked. Justine's eyes widened. What was he talking about?

Her heart was racing as both women were pulled up. She could see the other prisoners being put to work at the opposite end of the hall, their heads bowed, most of them realising what was about to happen. Some of the women, including Jennifer who was nearby, began the gruelling push of the coal carts. She gave Justine a pitying look, before crying out as a multi tailed whip slapped her back. Justine stared at her. Damn, what had she done? She looked at Kola's foot, bruised and cut. Would she be blamed for the fight?

"Right, what happened here? Any of you see this?"

Before any of the overseers could answer, the South African woman Kola spoke up.

“Overseers, if I may speak? YAHHHH!”

She stood solid as a rock as the lash came across her legs for speaking. The small overseer who, Justine had come to realise in the preceding days, seemed to be in charge, answered her as she gritted her teeth in response to the whiplash.

“Go on, Kola. You’ve seen a lot of punishment since you got here. You might as well give us your latest excuse.”

Justine sighed a little. Perhaps the fact that this woman had been in so much trouble before would see her receive the worst of any punishment that would be meted out. Even as she watched, a muscled overseer dropped a heavy masonry block on the coals, producing dust under its weight. He planted a thick bamboo cane across it, and smiled at her as she shuddered. The cane was slightly curved, perhaps from the number of times it had struck, Justine reasoned, and was just over three and a half feet long.

“Go on, Kola,” the overseer said.

“Overseer,” she grunted. “This woman attacked me for no reason. Look what she did to my foot?”

“That’s a damned lie, you bitch,” Justine shouted, exploding again. “Wait. She’s lying. Ask any of the others that are shovelling up there.”

In her anger she moved forward toward Kola. There was little she could do, bound as she now was and without the shovel, even if the strong hands of the overseers had allowed her to get very far.

“It’s no lie, sir,” she continued gruffly. “She hasn’t got a mark on her, has she?”

Eyes fell on Justine’s lean, filthy body. Though she had received an elbow to the chin, the blow had not been hard enough to leave a mark.

“She hit me first,” was all that she could say. “I...” She realised quickly how desperate her situation was. Her head fell as she set her jaw.

“Kola. I know you. You were involved somehow. Give her twenty strokes!”

The men grabbed her and moved her to the block now. Justine watched in horror, trying not to think about how many strokes she might get, and where those strokes might land. They pushed the tall South African down onto her ass, before tying her ankles together and moving her bound feet up onto the block; an uncomfortable position as she still remained bound by the wrists, with her feet held uncomfortably up, about a foot off the floor.

An overseer grabbed the cane and began to swish it. He was going to beat the soles of her feet, Justine realised, her eyes widening in horror, even as another man casually brushed coal dust away from Kola’s soles; soles that already bore evidence of this particular punishment having been administered before. Kola watched her with a sense of grim satisfaction, a sense that twenty strokes was almost nothing to her, and in fact worth it, since she had the sure knowledge that Justine would be taking many more.

Kola set her position and took the first five strokes with barely a whimper, even as Justine winced at the swish and closed her eyes at the fleshy strike of the cane. The next few strokes drew a gnashing grunt from her as she held her teeth tightly closed. The last ten strokes, however, delivered in very quick succession, made Kola scream, though the sound seemed somehow liberating, as if Kola enjoyed the sensation. Justine wanted to cry, to get the hell out of this place.

“Twenty!” someone shouted, as Kola’s desperate cries resounded on and she shook her head in desperation, moving her feet desperately on the block as if the motion might dilute the stinging agony of welt on welt.

Almost casually, one of the men stood in front of her face now, dropping his trousers and pushing his erect cock into her apparently eager mouth, as, with tears welling in her eyes, Kola set to work moving her head rhythmically along the shaft. Was this part of the punishment? After the first man came, spilling his seed across her face and breasts, another took his

place, Kola eagerly pleasuring them. Justine watched in horror, noticing as she witnessed the spectacle, that Kola wore a breast tag very similar to her own, remarkably similar in fact. Was she a volunteer too? Why had she become so... she fought to find the words to describe it as a second man came on Kola's lips... so institutionalised?

A third man moved to repeat the process as the overseer barked.

“Wait, leave the rest for this one. She looks like she can suck four cocks after she gets eighty strokes to the feet.”

“What?” she screamed, even as she saw a sweating Kola smiling, cum dripping from her lips and between her rotten teeth.

“No! No, wait!”

Strong hands grabbed her arms and pushed her toward the block, as Kola's ankles were untied, the rope ready now for Justine. She struggled desperately, kicking and screaming as her ankle fetters were pushed up her leg slightly and the thick burning rope tied her ankles together.

“Damn you! No! NOOO!”

Her bound legs were placed on top of the block as she was positioned on the floor, rough coals biting at her naked buttocks.

“Please, wait!” She wanted to beg, wanted to pull her ankles from the block. They used cord to tie her ankle bonds to a ring on top of it, securing her as one of the men took up the rod. Kola spat on her chest as she walked past, as Justine yelped, the spittle still glistening with cum.

She gasped, trying to calm herself as the cane was swished horribly in the air, in the flickering orange light from the furnace. She wanted to beg, promise anything, if only they would not do this.

Unlike Kola, the first stroke drew a shriek from her. She had not meant to do it. In fact, the first stroke had not been as bad as she thought it would be. The worst thing about the bastinado torment that she was

receiving, however, was the build-up of the strokes, the rapid succession, where her flesh and her mind could not adapt to the pain of the shrill sting, the fire that reverberated through her foot. She tried to bite down on the agony, but the building fire, the growing strain on the nerves made her screech and shake her head even as she sensed that the horrible welting strokes that slapped her soles had gone past ten, twelve, fifteen. She could sense one of the men counting.

“Please, YAHHHH, AIAIIIII! DAMMIT!”

She prayed that she would be able to walk. Eighty strokes was too many! She had to stop this, promise them something, anything?”

“How many has she received, Alan?”

The voice came out of the darkness, as not only the small overseer but also the burly man who was beating her feet turned around.

“T... Twenty-five sir.”

Joshua’s face was stern, and he seemed to be holding back a modicum of anger as he appeared out of the semi darkness in the furnace hall. Justine whined, tears in her eyes as she looked up at him, her breathing loud and ragged as she sat in her bonds. She bit her lips. The soles of her feet were on fire with the sting.

“She gets thirty only, is that clear, Alan?”

“But, sir, she started a fight!”

“I said thirty, you idiot. Now see to the last five before you get the same!”

Justine’s eyes widened. She had never seen a man so angry, anger beyond compare. She did not doubt that he would have the threat carried out if his order was not obeyed. Clearly, the overseers had no modicum of doubt either, as they backed away, not meeting his gaze, and Alan bent to his task. She winced as the first swish whacked her soles, whining but biting down on

the sting across already raw soles. Joshua watched, slowly calming down, his eyes closing with each welt.

Justine screeched for the last three, finally sighing as it was over and she moved her aching feet.

“Now out her back to work. She won’t be sucking any cock today. Is that clear? I said is that clear!”

“Yes sir. Right away, sir,” Alan replied, sweating that he might incur the wrath of this clearly powerful man.

As Justine was untied Joshua closed with him.

“We wouldn’t want to see your girlfriend serving a year or two here, now would we? You know that eighty strokes would have left her unable to walk, unable to serve, unable to row. You are stupid!”

Alan simply nodded in fear.

“You are also no longer the lead overseer here. The position goes to Hank. Is that clear?”

Justine watched. Her ankles were being untied as she gasped, eyes tightly closed as her feet were lowered slowly to the ground. Despite the effort and pain, she could hear Alan’s frightened response. Even though she could sense that he wanted to protest, he did not dare.

“Yes... Yes sir.”

Joshua approached her as her hands were untied and helped her to her feet. She put her weight on the sides, not wanting to feel sharp coals against the area that had been savagely welted.

“Thank you,” she said. “You seem to be making a habit of saving me from the worst excesses of Mr Tarik’s punishment regime. Both here and at sea,” she said slowly, meeting his gaze. She could almost trace a note of concern in his eyes, in his face, which still had not calmed down from the visible signs of his earlier anger.

“Try to keep your weight off your feet. I know that is relatively impossible.” They both wanted to laugh at how ridiculous his statement was, at how ridiculous the whole situation was in fact. He held her arm as she tried to walk, chains rattling in response to her awkward motion.

“I’ll be fine. Just keep that bitch Kola away from me.”

“I’ll do what I can. You’ll be moved tomorrow, I hope, if I can persuade Mr Tarik.”

“Moved?” she responded, wincing as she placed her weight on shattered remnants of sharp coal.

“Yes. You’re going to the wheel. It’ll help keep your strength up, before...”

“Before what? What the hell am I being prepared for?”

“I’m not permitted to say,” as Justine realised that he seemed to have let too much slip already. “They are going to put you back to the shovel.” He bent to lift up the weapon with which she had injured Kola’s foot. “I’ll get them to keep Kola on the carts. Stay out of trouble,” he said, offering her the filthy shovel and patting his hands together to remove the dust.

“Your suit is dirty,” she said, innocently considering her surroundings and the fact that she had just had the soles of her feet beaten so harshly.

“Thanks for noticing. I have plenty.”

They smiled, as slowly Justine turned to march toward the overseers, like a cross between a hunchback and a chicken, awkward and slow. She turned back.

“Thanks again, even though that sounds insane.”

He nodded in response as she turned and walked away.

\* \* \* \* \*

The final day in the furnace hall was the hardest in Justine's entire ordeal so far. She found that in response to the welts she had suffered, her feet were swollen and sore. She needed rest, not to be shovelling coal on an uneven surface and walking to a furnace. She was slick with sweat, and her back and legs burned from the many whiplashes she had suffered. The black hair that had grown back on her head was laced with dust and curled and bedraggled, as were the thick hairs that had overgrown around her loins.

The overseers, who had lost considerable face during the entire affair, seemed determined to take it out on her aching body. She wondered why, unlike the galley, they simply could not force her to 'offer the mouth', yet none of them seemed brave enough to make an attempt. Instead, the language of the lash as it slapped across her and the others was all that was communicated to her. It occurred to her then, that like the galley the furnace hall was being closely monitored. Clearly, the rules were different here, and the overseers were threatened that their own women could be placed in the *Galera*? It did not surprise her, as she lifted another shovel full of coal and moved awkwardly toward the furnace, moving much slower than the others and watching where and how she placed weight upon her feet. Her speed earned her more lashes from the savage whips, but she was strong enough to endure, despite the fact that each slap made her give up another cry of pain and submission.

"You were lucky, wench, that's all. You'll get yours," Alan said, his narrow frame belying the fact that his strong arms could harshly wield the whip that slapped her back now. The hours that followed were terrible. The worst excesses of the overseer's rage at Joshua's intrusion seemed destined to be taken out on her. Justine did not get another opportunity to see Jennifer again, until they were both chained awkwardly in the mass cell. She had seen Kola as the crowd of dirty women were crowded into the place, but she had disappeared in the knot of tired bodies.

She and Jennifer had drifted to sleep when she heard a whine. Justine had been dreaming about the triathlon again. Somehow it was a dream she returned to almost every night. She was winning, but she could never finish

the race. Something would upset her chances. Some nights it was a fall, others a pothole in the road, sometimes a fault with the bike, even a jellyfish in the water during the swim. Each night it was the same, however, the euphoria of being in the lead deflated by the horrible disappointment of losing that lead, losing the race, being caught and passed by other less able competitors. Were she able to analyse the message that could be there, she thought that the answer might scare her. As it was, the waking reality was terrifying enough.

Her eyes slowly opened, as two overseers had entered through the rusting barred access door, caring not that they had to kick several women out of the way.

“Laing, Justine... where are you, woman?”

She could see the outline of Alan behind them now, with the long set of keys that were used to padlock the women in the uncomfortable sleeping positions each night.

“Here,” she croaked, moving her body, as Jennifer’s head slipped from the resting position it had found at her thigh. Justine moved a hand to let her weight down slowly onto the floor without waking her.

“I am here.”

They found her despite the poor light, and kicked their way through the tangle of grunting, moaning women.

“You’re to be moved to the pit,” one said, casually, almost brutally, as if the words should have enough meaning that her future would be sealed in her own mind and sensibilities.

Alan knelt beside her as he unlocked the padlock that held legs to the collar, and then surprised her as he began to remove the collar itself. She had not realised how used to its weight she had become. The feeling as it was loosened was wonderful. She raised her hands to rub her aching neck, even as they pulled at her wrists to raise her, and then began to guide her to the door, away from this particular level of hell.

## Chapter 5

Justine had enjoyed a brief respite from the heavy iron collar, and from hard labour, though she knew that the work would come again. She had walked, with difficulty, back up the spiral staircase that had been the first feature she had seen upon entering the *Galera* so many days ago. She had remembered just seeing the edge of the pit as she had passed it on that occasion. This time, however, she was moved to the path that led directly to it. Clearly, the original architects of this vile place had had little other purpose in mind for it, she realised, as she finally saw the construction of the ‘pit’.

As she came to the edge she saw its depth; almost two hundred feet down by the looks of it. A stone spiral staircase, without even an attempt at any sort of handrail, led around the outside walling that formed the massive ‘hole’ – in itself perhaps sixty feet in diameter. She could see rough barring of cell doors dotted around and down as the stairs wound their way to the bottom. The stench emanating from that bottom was awful, but she had almost got used to the vile smell of humanity, or at least women, suffering in labour. The pit, whether it had originally been natural or not, formed an elaborate winding prison, with cells built into the rock face such that some might offer light from outside while others would remain in almost total darkness, though she noted now, as the guards began to guide her down the rough stone steps, that lights illuminated the bottom of the structure.

The discomfort that still threatened to make her stumble with each step, her soles still being tender, was put from her mind temporarily as she began to discern the detail of what lay at the bottom of the pit. She could hear it now, a massive wooden wheel, its creaking and grinding punctuated by moans of the naked women in chains that were forced to push it, and the snap and whack of the long thick whips of the overseers who stood on a catwalk-like structure above the women. The catwalk was perfectly round, hugging the ancient yellow walls of the place, with a few rope ladders that allowed access to the working parts of the wheel – the giant radial spokes to which the women had been chained by their wrists. Vacant spaces, to which no woman

had been attached, were highlighted by the presence of dangling wrist manacles. Justine shuddered at the memory of having to wear such manacles when she had rowed aboard the galley.

There were eight spokes on the massive wheel, with positions for three women at each spoke. She could see that only twenty of the places had prisoners at them. Her still active mind began to think about efficiency and how the process could be used for training, when she realised that that had probably been an excuse Tarik and Joshua had used to get volunteers. She immediately dismissed the thoughts from her mind.

The guards stopped at a barred cell door, and the stench from inside made her gag.

“Here. Your new home,” one of them said gruffly, unlocking the barred door and pushing her toward it by the arm. He spoke again as he saw her take one last glance at the wheel.

“Oh don’t worry, prisoner. You’ll get a chance at the wheel soon enough.” He glanced at her back. “That hide of yours has taken a few welts, eh? Maybe you’ll behave when you get down there; nowhere to hide when you’re chained to the wheel. Move! Get inside now.”

Justine placed one bare, chained foot across the threshold of the dungeon and stepped inside, squelching her still tender sole onto the damp, somewhat moss covered stone of the cell.

“How long will I be in prison?” she asked as she moved further inside. There was, to her relief a barred window at some height, near the natural ceiling of what could only be described, as a cavern – though parts of it appeared to have been hewn out to make the small cell at least accessible.

“As long as we say so, bitch!”

She turned as the barred door was slammed and locked, her eyes adjusting to the darkness, not helped by the fact that although the window admitted a little light, dusk was starting to fall outside. Despite the access to the open air, that helped dilute the pungency of the smell all around her, the

light was poor. There was a hole near the centre of the room and it seemed that the floor had been designed to ‘fall’ toward it, allowing a modicum of escape for any urine. She imagined it also meant that hoses could be used to clean the cell, at least to a degree. Clearly, the seventeenth century engineers (or perhaps the design was even older, she reasoned) had designed it for long term habitation, no matter how horrific to polite sensibilities it might be.

She padded gingerly about the floor before finding a damp corner, the remnants of wet straw there, and sitting down she leaned against the rough wall. She turned, wide-eyed, as she heard the moan from her cellmate. She had not even seen anyone when she had entered, had not expected to see anyone.

“Oh! Sorry, I... I didn’t realise that you were there,” she gasped, staring as a pale, perhaps originally blonde haired woman, began to stir and sit up.

She may have been in her forties, Justine reasoned, though with the conditions and ordeal that anyone in the *Galera* or onboard a galley faced, it was always difficult to be accurate. She cleared her throat swallowing dryly. The face had once been beautiful, perhaps. Now, the bedraggled hair, the pallid stare and the dark pathetic rings under the eyes made her seem horrible. Justine thought to herself that she must look the same.

“Don’t apologise,” the woman said slowly, before slumping back onto the hard ground. As her eyes adjusted to the light, she could make out the myriad lash marks amidst the dirt on the woman.

“You’re new here?” she said, her tag bouncing lightly against the rocky ground as her breast sagged onto it.

“Yes. I was on a galley.”

“Which one?” she asked.

“They have names? Oh, I don’t know.”

“You’re a prisoner?”

“A volunteer,” Justine said. “I’m no prisoner.”

“Ha. Yeah. That figures,” she said, passing a wheezing sound, which Justine preferred to believe was a laugh.

“Why do you say that?”

“You still look remotely human, though you being a volunteer is damned strange.”

“Why? Why is that strange?” Justine stared at the woman. She could see now that like most of the prisoners – or slaves as they really were in this place – she was lithe and heavily muscled. Though the food was routinely bad, at least what they were fed appeared to build muscle and combine with the work to make their bodies fit, even if the existence for which they were made fit was the worst type of life.

“They don’t usually bring volunteers to the Galera, that’s why.”

“Well, you seem to know a lot about it, “ Justine replied gruffly.

“I guess I should. My lover used to work here.”

Justine gasped, remembering the threat that Joshua had used on one of the overseers.

“So, he made a mistake and you were sent here?” she said, realising how the poor woman had most likely done nothing wrong.

She raised herself up onto one elbow, her ankle chains clanking as she moved. Justine wanted to retch as she saw the state of her ankle that had been held in the rusting iron for so long. She thought she saw something moving there and looked away quickly.

“Yes, that’s right. How would you know that? You a spy?” she said, her American accent plain in her speech.

Justine moved to stretch her legs, wincing as her feet brushed the floor. She was filthy still, and covered with dried sweat.

“No, I’m no spy. Just heard them talking about how the overseers are kept in check through threats against wives and girlfriends, that’s all.” Justine regarded the poor chained wretch in front of her with new respect.

“What did he do?”

“Who?”

“Your boyfriend.”

“He spoke out against the... regime.”

“And what happened to him?” Justine asked.

“You don’t need to worry about what happened to him, Justine,” the voice said from the door.

Both women gasped as they turned to stare at Joshua, behind the bars and in the stairway outside the cell.

“Joshua,” Justine gasped.

“You know... him!” her cellmate said in disgust. “He’s the one who put me here two years ago,” she hissed.

Even as she watched, a guard was unlocking the door. Joshua moved his head slightly as he entered the small cell, lifting a kerchief up to his nose to hide the smell until he got used to it.

“I had almost forgotten how bad the pit could stink,” he said, his heavy shoes padding across the hard floor where Justine had walked with difficulty. She stared at him. Only days before he had saved her from having her soles caned and having to suck more cocks than she could ever have imagined servicing on the galley during a rest period. He was moving toward her now.

“Ah, Silvia,” he said, at last acknowledging the blond woman in chains. “Hope you’re adjusting to the wheel?”

Justine watched as she put her head on the ground in disgust, her gaze somewhere far away.

“You imprisoned her because her boyfriend gave you grief, Joshua?”

“Aren’t you supposed to call me simply Master, Justine?” he said ruefully.

Justine looked down, unsure if her behaviour in front of others would change the seemingly improving regard that Joshua had for her. Perhaps she was not supposed to display any familiarity in front of other prisoners. Perhaps, if she did, she would be treated as they were. Before she had finished thinking about the likely repercussions of her next statement, however, Joshua was quick to clarify her concerns over Silvia.

“Her boyfriend? Oh yes, that was rather a long time ago, wasn’t it, Silvia? Didn’t he try to kill me, and in his failure end up condemning you to ten years at the wheel? I believe that you still have eight to go. Good luck with that, eh?”

Justine shuddered. Ten years at the wheel? She gathered her legs up as Joshua entered the cell and hunkered down just beside her, removing the handkerchief from his nose. She wondered idly, since the door was open, why Silvia did not make a break for it, though she then saw the shadow of the burly guard and she reasoned, where could she go in this massive place anyway, without getting captured again?”

“So Justine, you need to listen to me ok?”

She nodded, despite herself, wondering what new horrors awaited her. He snatched a glance at Silvia as he drew breath to speak.

“Tarik wants you for... special projects. That means that he is testing you. Do you understand? He wants to keep you in peak condition while seeing how you react to pressure. It’s almost like a job interview.”

Silvia began to laugh evilly in the corner. He turned on her, his face full of malevolence in an instant.

“Quiet, Silvia. Perhaps you’d like to finish your years in the furnace hall?”

She looked away, grimacing but realising that he meant it.

“I see,” Justine replied. “Though I’m not sure I’d call this a job?”

“You’ve met Tarik, “ Joshua continued. “He doesn’t take no for an answer. You weren’t even supposed to go to the damned furnace hall. That’s for the worst prisoners, and very rarely do volunteers ever go there.”

“So why is Jennifer there?”

Joshua paused, staring at her. She was nervous, even talking to him like this. Would he decide to have her punished for being so informal, for not calling him Master?

“Is it because...?”

“Go on, Justine,” he replied, almost wanting her to go there and state the real reason out loud. “Please, go on.”

His eyes were not pleading as much as they were sombre, sad, aged with the sentiment of a hundred slave women, a hundred volunteers and what he had sanctioned. She did not want to pity him. Some small part of her wanted to hate him, but she could not let herself feel hate, despite the filth, despite the lashes of the whip, despite all of the cocks that she had satisfied.

“Is it because of what she wanted you to do to me on board the galley? She wanted you to have me placed on the wooden horse.”

She was not sure what she felt for Joshua, though she found that she could not take her eyes off his face. Her thoughts were racing. He slowly raised a hand toward her arm, running it up her cool, dirty flesh as she tensed. She heard Silvia sniggering, could feel her stare.

“Is this your new prize, Joshua? You like having women in chains, is that it?”

She gasped as he removed his hand from her. Justine stared as that face of malevolence returned.

“Harrison?” he said, signalling the guard outside. “Leave the keys here with me, please, and have Silvia taken to the furnace hall. Have her remain there for two months, Harrison. See to it.”

“Yes sir,” the wide-shouldered guard said, stepping into the cell as Silvia’s face exhibited a rising tide of fear as he approached.

“You can’t do that, Joshua. You can’t, you bastard,” she screamed as the guard gripped her arm, pulling her from the damp floor where she had lain. Yet she knew, just as Justine did, that there was no choice now. She looked away as Silvia limped toward the door, looking back once.

“Beware, Justine. Don’t listen to him.” Then she was gone, the door clanging back against the steel frame on its creaking hinges, Justine was once more left staring into Joshua’s dark and mysterious brown eyes, as she unconsciously moved closer to him, as he moved his hand once more to her arm. He moved his exploring fingers across her chest, as they heard the last grunts of Silvia being pulled up the stone steps, her pleas and warnings subsiding into a single distant whine.

Justine’s chains rattled as she moved closer to Joshua’s touch, gasping softly.

“She was right, Joshua,” she said quietly.

“What do you mean?” he said tenderly, uncharacteristically, leaning close to brush his lips lightly against hers as she shuddered.

“You like women chained and filthy?”

He smiled, laughed a little then bent his head to her neck, kissing it gently as she writhed.

“I stink, Joshua,” she said, chain links clanking as she twisted in his grasp now.

“You think I’m not used to it here?”

“Oh?” she almost pushed him away. “And how many women is this for you now?”

“You’re the first I’ve ever stopped from being punished and made to suck cock,” he said, pausing as the words sunk in.

It was enough. Justine had been chained, enslaved, stripped and lashed, yet she needed someone. She needed Joshua. Her head fell back as he moved a hand up her thigh. Clearly he was not concerned about how clean she was. She parted her legs slightly as if inviting his probing hands to sink deeper and deeper into the widening folds of her womanhood. She clamped her thighs about his hand, gasping as she twisted under his touch. She bit her lip and writhed, looking at him, goading him on.

“You like that Justine?”

“Yes...”

“Yes what?” he urged, probing further with his fingers as she twisted her legs on the dungeon floor, leaning against the cold stone of the wall.

“Yes Master,” she gasped, staring, biting hard on her lip, moving her hand toward his, urging him to further excite her. He did not disappoint her, plying her with his fingers, making her more excited, wetter and wider as she closed her eyes and started to melt.

Unconsciously, almost pleadingly, she reached for his jacket, pulling at it. She knew that she could not remove it. Her arms ached from her labours, though she hoped that Joshua would get the message.

“Are you sure that you want this, Justine?”

“Yes... yes I am,” she moaned. “Please.”

He slowly removed his hand, teasing her as he pulled away. She opened her eyes, staring at him as he started to undress. Had she been thinking of anything other than sexual fulfilment? This might have been a

chance to escape, but escape to where? As she had considered when Silvia had been dragged away, there was nowhere to go. She rubbed her thighs together as she watched him, her body alive now with need, her mind racing at the thought of having proper sex rather than simply having to satisfy an overseer's lusts with her lips and receive nothing in return. Even Maria had tried to pleasure her and they had both been punished for it. She wondered idly how Maria fared now, tethered to that awful galley deck for another ten years.

She watched as Joshua stripped, becoming more excited at his muscular chest and arms. He carried a little weight, too much for an athlete, but he was still a well built man, and, she noticed, quite well endowed.

His long cock, fully erect now as his breathing increased in pace, swayed delicately as he pulled off his expensive clothes and left them on the dirty stone floor. She moved toward him on her knees, chains rattling at her feet. She did not care that they were about to make love on the floor of a filthy, three or four hundred-year-old dungeon in some godforsaken place. She simply knew that she wanted him. The moment was only slightly disturbed by his donning of a condom, in a manner that seemed well practiced.

He leaned in close, replacing his hand in its former position, massaging and probing as she writhed and moaned with pleasure. He rubbed and teased her filthy sweat-stained body, as it too began to come alive in response to his touch.

He became excited at the sound of her moans, as he neared and kissed her mouth passionately, probing and questing with his long tongue. She wished she could have washed, been hosed more adequately than she was. She stank, though this did not seem to put this man, her 'master' after a fashion, off his intent.

He moved his lips to her breasts, sucking and teasing in unison with his deep probing of her sex. She could not control her movements now. Her hungry body bucked involuntarily at his touch, as he teased and tormented her clit, using his other fingers to stimulate her in ways that she had never before experienced. The men that she had had sex with in her life seemed

amateurish in comparison with what Joshua was able to do. She did not want to think that she was making more of his attempt by virtue of her body's needs. She was thinking too much, she realised. She needed to let it happen, that was all.

She moved her hands to his cock, unsure if the action would be accepted or would provoke some sort of masterly, obsessive rejection, concerned with her having to seek permission to perform such an act. She was happy with his deep moaned response, feeling his cock harden still further as he pushed his lower body toward her grip. She began to pull his penis, motioning it toward her thighs, closer and closer to its goal. They were both desperate for this, it seemed. Justine could feel Joshua's tension, his need for release, emotional as well as physical. She started to lie back now, cursing the heavy ankle chains for restricting how widely she could open her legs to him.

“The chains... can you open them?”

He shook his head and laid her down onto the floor, removing his teasing hand as she yelped in partial ecstasy, then began to clamber over her as he positioned his legs between hers, and then underneath the restricting chain. She writhed and moulded her body to his, as his erect cock brushed against her teased sex lips, lifting her buttocks and directing her body to his as he moved, as if wanting to merge and become one with the man who had ordered her whipped, worked like a slave, and yet had saved her from the worst excesses of the terrible overseers.

He wanted to control his movements, wanted to tease her further as he moved his hands over her, back to where he had begun, but Justine, perhaps desperate or subconsciously aware that she was either being watched or that an inquisitive overseer would step into the dungeon and stop their activity, pulled him toward her with grimy hands.

“Now,” she murmured in his ear.

He nodded, almost absently, his body shuddering with anticipation as she moved a hand to his quivering cock and guided it inside her, breathless and writhing as she did so. She pulled her legs behind his, forcing him to

enter her. He stared down at her on the dungeon floor, his eyes excited, yet in some way innocent. He pulled out again, before entering anew as she whined with pleasure.

After much teasing in this manner, it was all he could do not to finish too soon. He focused instead on entering her, surging with a steady rhythm while Justine's excitement rose to fever pitch. She could not help but moan loudly, not caring now whose attention was attracted by her sounds. Both her mind and body were excited. Joshua kept the rhythm steady, did not get overly excited even as Justine could feel herself growing closer to orgasm, filled by Joshua, and pulling him closer while her calves and heels pushed at his buttocks to urge him on.

She found herself crying out, head flung back on the dungeon floor, tousled filthy hair on the dirt, wanting him as she moaned and almost screeched. She was sure that her cries of ecstasy must be reverberating throughout the vast pit, though she did not care now. She did not care who heard her or, in fact, what the repercussions might be for either of them. She knew only that a desperate need that perhaps she had had since that first day she had been placed in heavy iron fetters was being fulfilled, and fulfilled well by a man who plainly knew what he was doing.

She felt his hand near her clit again as she yelped with the sensations roiling within her, then Joshua filled her once more, bringing her to climax.

She came as he did, feeling his spasms, the shaking of his body, his uncontrolled grunts, even as she writhed and ground her body into the floor as the climax filled her, gripping him, twisting, gripping him again, almost howling with pleasure as she was fulfilled.

As he withdrew, she curled in a ball on the floor, whimpering softly. She opened her eyes, sweating now she noted. She wondered what he might do next, hoping that he would not simply dress and walk away. She smiled as he lowered himself behind her. She could feel his heart pounding in his chest as he placed an arm around her. Justine had never felt like this before, secure almost, despite that fact that she wore chains in a filthy dungeon in the middle of nowhere.

“I’m glad I stopped the punishment in time. Eighty strokes would have made you unable to walk, and meant that you would have had to recover here for weeks before going back to the oar,” he whispered softly into her ear.

It was not the most romantic small talk that she had envisaged after lovemaking, but the circumstances were not exactly normal in this particular instance, she reminded herself.

“So I’ll be going back to the oar?” she replied.

“Yes, Justine. There’s nothing I can do to get you out of that. It is what you volunteered for, after all.”

She nestled into his arms, absorbing the heat from his warm body.

“Although...” he continued, “You will serve some time at the wheel here. Tarik will want to watch you. For goodness sake keep the peace. I don’t want any more fights. I might not be able to save you so easily next time.”

She nodded in response.

“Did you...?” she began, suddenly stopping.

“Did I what?”

“Did you always feel this way? I mean, did you always want me like this?”

He did not answer. Justine winced as she realised that she had said what she might have been thinking but they were not the words that she should have said. She could picture him wincing; imagine him wanting to run to get away from her.

“To be honest,” he finally replied. “Well, I originally saw a fine addition to Tarik’s project. The fact that you were an athlete made a big difference. You were strong. When Jennifer said that she knew you personally, I knew that Tarik would want to see you at some stage, though I guess I tried to hide you from him, in a way.”

“In a way?” She turned around now as the chains rattled at her feet.

“Yes. I... perhaps subconsciously wanted you for...”

He was interrupted by the powerful kiss that she delivered to his hard, thin lips, as Justine rubbed her blistered hands across his body.

## Chapter 6

Justine had fallen asleep after their lovemaking, despite the cold hard floor and the fact that the cell itself had cooled overnight. She awoke to a shout from the open doorway. As she slowly opened her eyes, she realised that Joshua had left her in the night. His clothes had gone too. In fact, all evidence that she had loved a man in this terrible dungeon cell seemed to have disappeared. She wondered idly if it had all been a dream, brought about by her need for fulfilment.

She was not dreaming now, she realised. She knew that she had been woken by the sound of women in chains. Outside her cell she could see them marching past the door, leg chains clanking as they tried to walk in fettered, tired legs, ankles raw from the constant rubbing of unnatural steel on bone. As the women marched past the barred opening to the cell, the dark shadow of an overseer, who had opened her cell, stood expectantly.

“Come on, wench. Get up. Time for work, or would you like to sleep in today?”

He coiled the long whip, hoping perhaps that her answer might be yes.

As she joined the line of women proceeding slowly down the stone steps, she realised how the shift patterns worked. One shift would be cleared, being led back to their cells while the wheel was idle, while the second would then leave their cells and be marched to the wheel. She wondered how the women might be relocated back to their cells again, and then she realised that it really did not matter which cell in the pit they were returned to. She was seized by a moment of panic. How would Joshua find her again? She might remain here, sleeping on stone and pushing this wheel for the rest of her life. She was a volunteer, not some prisoner. She pressed the panic down into herself. If Joshua wanted to find her, he would. He was certainly powerful enough to find any woman in this foul place.

She recognised details as she got closer to the wheel. It was being hosed down as the band of women approached, the detritus of the previous shift, mostly left on the floor, was being hosed away. The floor itself was composed of cast steel – a massive drain, of sorts, with slots cast into it to let matter be washed away into the body of the pit beneath. She wondered at the feat of engineering that must have taken place in order to put a steel drain – massive as it was, in place over the pit that she believed was beneath. On top of that sat the massive spoked wheel – the instrument of the slaves’ torment.

Despite the hosing down of the plate onto which the prisoners were led, Justine could still smell the stink of sweat, urine, seawater, and worse, as she was led to a spoke – indicating, to her at least, that the pit was not bottomless. In fact, she could hear the sound of the waves beneath her. Perhaps the pit was a cave leading to the ocean – an escape route for those who were still able to manage such thoughts. Though naked and chained and with nowhere to go, thoughts of escape were in vain except for those who still held some modicum of hope.

She raised her hands as the overseers began to chain them into place. Wind from below blew up through the steel grille at their feet, making her shudder.

“Cold, wench?” the overseer said, locking her wrists into place, tethering her to the massive iron spoke. “Don’t worry; you’ll be warming up soon.”

Without warning, he gripped the tag at her breast and pulled it as she whined horribly, her head reeling back in response.

“A volunteer, eh? A few months to go yet, I see. We’ll make it interesting for you.”

Justine bit her lower lip as he let go of the tag, her nipple burning with renewed agony. Hours ago, she had been making love. Now, once more, she was nothing more than a naked chained slave, at the mercy of these vile men.

The overseer stepped back, uncoiling the whip, raising it. She closed her eyes. The thick whip bit across her back.

“YAAHHHII!”

Her body bent as she started to push the wheel. Nothing, no movement, until other whips began to fall and the mechanism slowly began to creak, whining on its bearings, once more beginning to slowly turn as prisoners began to push it back into life. The sound of the lashes slapping across tired backs was horrible, as the wheel began to pick up some modicum of speed, whining and creaking but not enough to drown the grunts, wheezes and cries of lashed women. Justine felt the whip across her back again, lower this time as she writhed and cried out, placing her toes into the openings in the grille beneath her to gain leverage.

As movement started, the overseers changed their positions to the catwalk above the wheel pit, granting them access to the prisoners' backs from above. Judging by the increased volume of the yelps, Justine reasoned that the hard falling whip stroke was a stronger, more persuasive blow.

Her judgement was proved sound as a fierce slap across the middle of her back was delivered and she felt as if she were on fire. Months aboard the galley had quelled all thought of fighting back at such whip strokes. Chained as she was, there was nothing that she could do; there was nothing but punishment, even if she had thought about making a comment. She put her head down, flexed her muscles and pushed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tarik watched the monitor. The angle of the camera was such that he got a full view of each woman on the outside of each spoke as they walked or lurched slowly past. The sound was improved dramatically from what he had remembered in the pit in the old days. He could hear the leg chains rattle as they passed, hear them grunt and pant. He rubbed his hard cock beneath his trousers.

The woman Justine was coming around now. Her large breasts drooped beneath the level of the spoke as she approached the camera position. Her thick muscled thighs were starting to sweat now with her

efforts, and bulged as she placed her feet on the steel to gain leverage. He marvelled at her physique. The camera caught the angle perfectly, muscled thighs and calves linked to a taut abdomen, bathed in the light of gleaming sweat, her breasts drooping and swaying due to her angle as she passed the camera point. He pressed a key on the small keypad so that a photograph might be taken of the image.

“One for my records,” he murmured as Justine passed his point of view.

Sheng looked across at Joshua, hoping for a reaction. He had clearly fallen for this woman. She might be a volunteer, but Sheng was determined that Joshua would not get what he wanted from her.

“Mr Tarik,” she began. “I’m sure this woman is strong, though does she have the mental toughness to go further? I think not, sir, and would recommend that she is returned to one of the tramp galleys, so that she might finish her time. I see no reason to have her receive special treatment.”

Joshua opened his mouth to speak as Tarik interrupted him.

“On the contrary, Miss Sheng,” he began, tinkering with the keypad and calling up the photo he had taken on the massive monitor. He turned his head slightly, the ugly side of his face regarding her evilly. “Can you not see the muscle definition?”

“Yes sir, but...”

“Clearly,” Tarik went on, staring now at Justine’s long, powerful legs on the screen, “You have little appreciation of this athlete. She might almost be as powerful as a man, but she is certainly more powerful than you ever were at the oar. Eh, Miss Sheng?”

Sheng gritted her teeth, sensing Joshua’s snigger on the far side of Tarik’s chair.

“That is not my point, sir, I merely...”

“She will go where I decide to put her. Isn’t that right, Joshua?” Tarik said, more loudly this time.

“Of course, sir,” Joshua replied, glancing over at Sheng, though far from happy with the developing situation himself.

“Ensure that she does one more week at the wheel, Joshua, then bring her in front of me once more.”

He glanced back at Sheng, the damaged side of his face glinting with dripping saliva in the light.

“If she is still defiant at that time, she will be returned to the tramp galley.”

He then snapped his head back toward Joshua.

“I will also see her suffer on the wooden horse.” He paused. “If, that is, she still harbours thoughts of rebelliousness.”

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Pushing the wheel was no easy task, Justine soon realised. It required powerful rhythm, almost in a manner akin to the galley, forcing her to make sure that each step counted, her arms focused on pushing the spoke while each step had to be coordinated with a push from her thighs and calves. The worst part was the uneven floor. Sometimes, depending on where she was placed, she pushed off the steel surface with the ball of her foot. Because of the nature of the openings in the grille, however, she was sometimes forced to place her toes into the opening and force herself forward.

She had tried waiting for a solid patch of steel to push off, though she found that this disruption in movement easily attracted the attentions of the overseers. Though her feet and soles had recovered from the pain of the bastinado, she could still feel the stings from the hard welts that she had received by spending time trying to adjust her footing to allow her to push off

solid steel. In the end, she resolved herself to look down at the approaching ground in front of her, her breasts dangling as she did so. This allowed her to prepare for a solid piece of steel or whether she would have to place her toes inside the filthy grille opening and push off that way. She could see, after several hours at the wheel, that those women who had grown used to the work had already mastered this technique. The openings in the steel, however, were clogged with years of detritus that had not been adequately cleared by the hoses. She had got used to the feeling as she placed her toes in the sludge that remained, though it had taken some time.

Worse than that, however, was the realisation that, as with the galley, there were no strict controls over how the women could control natural functions. She realised quickly why the hoses were necessary after each shift, as she had to adjust her stance to miss pockets of material that she would rather not stand in.

They were fed and watered twice during the shift, the wheel continuing to turn as water was dribbled into their mouths by an overseer and lumps of carbohydrate biscuit, similar to those on the galley, were fed to them. The lashes fell continually, at times for no reason other than to please the whims of the overseers. As with the furnace hall, however, Justine remained pleased that there seemed to be no overt opportunities for her to have to offer her mouth. She wondered idly if this would form some part of standard punishment as it had at the furnace.

The shift seemed to last twelve hours. It had been constant, more exhausting even than galley work. Justine fell to her knees as her body sagged in exhaustion. She had stopped watching where she stood and her feet and ankles were filthy now. She had still concentrated on placing her feet in order to push, however. The combination of that and the fatigue on her body, being lashed despite her efforts, had made her want to throw up. Her mind and body were numbed from the experience, and it had only been her first day. She wanted to ask whether she could be placed back into the cell from which she had come. There seemed little chance of that, however, and the fact that a few women had been singled out for the lash put her off even asking.

She could hear the sound of the hoses being used below, to clean the

wheel for the next shift, as she slowly walked back up the steps in line with the other women. As a cell door was opened, the next four in line were pushed inside, as the line got shorter and shorter, the overseers looking for empty cells. She was the last of a group of four at the head of the line as she was pushed toward an open door. She slumped to the floor near a woman's belly. The smell of the hard worked women combined in the small space as the barred door was closed and locked. She could remember the sound of doors being opened further up and the next shift coming down as she fell asleep, exhausted.

As the days passed and the endless drudgery continued, Justine grew to accept that the hose would only be used on the women themselves once per week. The water was freezing and made most yelp with cold at the sensation of it (a fact that the overseers revelled in). She also noted with interest that despite the seemingly random positioning of the women on the wheel and spokes, she always managed to be placed on the outside rather than on the inside. She did not want to face punishment and so did not dare ask an overseer why this was happening. She realised now that she had been too cocky during her time in the furnace hall. She remembered Jennifer. Did she still labour amidst the coals of that place; poor air, hard lashes and backbreaking work? She put the thoughts from her mind.

\* \* \* \* \*

One morning (she thought it was morning, though time was relative in the darkness of the pit), she asked a Latino woman who shared a cell with her, why she was continually placed on the outside of the spoke. The woman looked ancient and haggard, though thin, her muscles threatening to burst from the bag of lashed flesh that covered them. Her English was not good either.

“They watch you,” she said. “They used to watch me.”

“Watch me? You mean a camera down there?” Justine pointed to the floor, trying her best to communicate with the woman.

“Used to watch me,” the woman cried in response.

“How long have you been here, at the wheel?” Justine asked, placing a hand on her shoulder to comfort her.

“Ten year, maybe more,” she said, crying further and leaning against Justine for support.

They had watched this woman until the wheel had turned her into a hag, Justine realised. Well, a hag at least to their perverted eyes, she reasoned. And so now they watched Justine instead? A camera on the outside, on the rockface of the pit wall, and someone was watching her. Justine’s first thought surprised her as she tried in vain to suppress it. She hoped that it was Joshua, watching her labour in chains, her breasts sagging as she leaned into the push of the wheel. She really hoped it was Joshua, and somewhere in the back of her mind she prayed that the view of terrible labours he saw turned him on. She looked back at the weeping woman at her side. She was concerned that they did not watch her any more? Was it because she had become old and haggard in this foul dungeon or on the galleys, or somehow did she want them to see her as beautiful, chained and sweating at the wheel? Did she want that for herself?

She had little time to comfort the Latino woman, as she heard the chains and moans of others being led from the pit. The next shift would start soon.

\* \* \* \* \*

She was able to remember the passing of each day. Justine was determined to record how many days she had been in the pit, determined that she would not become like the woman who had broken down in front of her. She wondered even how she had remembered that she had been there for ten years or more, with no accurate way of counting the days, bar the fact that twelve hours of hard labour marked the passage of each day. She had marked each night of labour on her right fetter, using loose stones or remnants of bricks in each cell that she had slept in to mark a line on the harsh steel.

She had six long marks now. Six days at the wheel. She had not slept well. Yes, she was exhausted, but thoughts that she would spend the rest of her 'contract' in this foul place of misery were beginning to tell. She was also concerned that she might not see Joshua again. That thought, though she did not want to admit it, scared her more than any other.

She returned to the wheel, reminding herself that she would mark off her seventh day when she was returned to the relative comfort of a cell. The hours passed as lashes fell and women screeched and moaned in response. It was after the second feed, close to the end of the shift that Justine could discern Joshua coming down the stairs towards the pit. She gasped, almost wanting to squeal with delight as she saw him, allowing herself a brief smile, and losing concentration on where her footing would be to adequately push off. She grunted and grimaced, resuming her position as the whip slapped hard across her back.

“Get back to work, bitch. Stop trying to rest!”

She could almost see Joshua wince as he approached, realising that his actions had earned her a hard welt, perhaps.

She redoubled her efforts, leaning into the wheel now, feet finding their space and pushing hard, her body drenched in sweat as her breasts sagged and swayed to the actions of her motion. She could sense Joshua now on the catwalk above her. Despite the sounds of chains, the whine of the wheel and the ever-present slap of the whip, she could also hear what he was saying.

“That one. How does she work?”

“She is very strong, sir. Has learned a good technique. Has a few good years left in her before she weakens. Much better than these other prisoners. She was born to be a slave, sir.”

Justine wanted to scream at them. A few good years? She was not going to be here for years, not at this wheel, not in this pit.

“Yes, she is strong,” she heard Joshua reply. As she rounded the pit,

she could see that they were both staring at her. She wanted to stare, but did not want to be whipped again.

“You like her, sir, don’t you?”

“Shut up, Bryant,” she heard Joshua reply. She wanted him inside her again, she could feel her loins yearning for him. She wanted him to watch her like this, naked and chained, knowing how it would turn him on.

“I want her released after the shift. Bring her to the upper level and I will meet you there. Is that clear?”

“Yes sir.”

She wanted to laugh, cry and hug him all at once. It was all she could do not to look up now, not to smile at him. She concentrated on pushing the wheel as he left.

Despite it all, Bryant’s whip slapped her hard across her filthy buttocks as she twisted and screamed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Justine had been hosed down before her trip to the top of the pit. She had not wanted to think about the poor women who toiled there, who might toil there for many years, and who might even die there. She had to put it from her mind, she reasoned. As a volunteer, there was nothing she could do about their predicament, or indeed hers. She wondered idly as she was guided up the stair, still in her ankle chains, what she might do or say to people after she was released. The old fear bit at her. Assuming, that was, that she was released.

She was brought back into the white corridor and office area that she had been in so many days before. She realised that it had been weeks.

She broke into a meek smile as she saw Joshua. He nodded his head

gruffly in response, aware of the presence of the overseers who had brought her up from the pit. They smirked at her as they left.

“Hello,” she said meekly.

He drew close, brushing his cheek against her, whispering as she moaned.

“Listen, Justine. Your remaining months at the oar will be dictated by what you say and how you react in the next few minutes. Do you understand?”

“Yes. Yes, I understand, Joshua,” she replied, surprised at his abrupt words.

“You’re a little familiar with Tarik’s favourite, Joshua, aren’t you?”

Justine jumped as Sheng’s shrill voice filled the corridor, her heels echoing off the floor as she rounded the corner from the direction of Tarik’s office. In response, Joshua jumped back. Justine looked away, not wanting to show Sheng at least, how much the rejection had affected her.

“Have it bound,” the Asian woman responded, handing Joshua a length of leather thong.

“Be quiet, Sheng. I know what has to be done.” Joshua pulled a length of the binding thong from the pocket of the suit jacket he wore, proceeding to pull Justine’s arms behind her as her breasts were thrust forward.

Sheng approached her now, fingering the tag at her nipple.

“So, prisoner.” She pulled the tag harshly as Justine screamed, Joshua still tying her wrists behind her.

“Easy, Sheng. And she is no prisoner. Remember that.”

“Ah yes,” she said, twisting the tag now, as Justine stared at her with hate. “Of course. She is but a volunteer.”

“I was a prisoner once, you know,” Sheng said now, leaning into Justine’s face. “I had a sentence of six years to serve. I agreed to make it three aboard one of the tramp galleys. Three years. Can you imagine rowing for three years instead of your one? Feet in chains, amidst the urine and sweat, whipped, forced to suck men’s cocks? Can you?”

“Y... Yes,” Justine replied finally. “I’ve done part of it, remember?”

“YAHHHHH,” she screeched as Sheng twisted the tag again,

“Bring her, Joshua,” Sheng said, releasing the tag at last.

“Remember what I said, Justine,” Joshua whispered again.

She nodded slowly, blinking tears from her eyes as he pulled her arm.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tarik’s chambers were just as she remembered. The difference this time was that she had been hosed down for her journey out of the pit, and so the black footprints that she had left on the way there were less pronounced than before. She was brought toward his large chair. She remembered what his face would look like. He had not yet turned round, however, his eyes glued to the large monitor in front of him, watching footage from the pit. She gasped as she realised who he was watching.

“You have fine muscle definition, Justine. You are indeed a true athlete. Those triathlon victories have granted you a fine body, a body that is strong and yet has massive endurance. Look, see for yourself. Compare your own body to the other women who shared the pit with you. See?”

Justine watched the screen as a pale woman limped past it, then the Latino woman. She wanted to cry at their plight. They had got the rhythm of the push, but all she could see were tired muscles and tired, dejected spirits. She could not recognise the woman who came past the camera next. She was pale, long legged, lean and strong. Her arms were positioned to gain

maximum leverage against the iron spoke, the chains swaying rhythmically. Her legs and feet, similarly tempered by the ankle chains, moved steadily, placing the soles for maximum push as she strode purposefully into the path of the wheel. Her face was determined yet haggard, short tendrils of black hair, matted with sweat and dirt, swaying slightly in the updraft of the breeze from the sea below the grille. Her eyes stared forward, black rings of exhaustion under them on a face that had pulled itself to the bones of her skull, her body trained to use all fat reserves that it could. Her loins were hairy, unshaven, her armpits too. She was strong and lithe, though age had seeped its way into her face and eyes, There seemed to be nothing sexy about the picture on the screen. Justine gasped, holding back tears as she realised that she was looking at herself. Joshua gripped her arm as if trying to reassure her.

“You see?” Tarik almost shouted, stopping the replay on the screen with a remote control. “You see how beautiful you look? Strong, passionate, fiery, and finding power from the innermost recesses of your being.”

He turned at last. She grimaced slightly at his face. It was not the damage that had been done to it. It was the intent in his eyes that made her want to be sick.

“I feared that the furnace and the wheel might break you in some way, when what I wanted was for the experience to remove your fire and create in you the woman that you can truly become. Though here I see a strong desperate woman, who will not be defeated and yet... knows her place. Am I correct?”

Justine blinked away the tears. She wanted to scream at this bastard and tell him to go to hell. She wanted to... and then she remembered Joshua's words. She still had months to go before her release, before her money, though that scarcely seemed to matter to her now.

“Yes, sir,” she croaked in response, her head falling.

“Bring her here,” he said slowly. “Let her prove her allegiance.”

Joshua began to pull Justine slowly, as she pulled at her bound hands.

She was brought in front of Tarik now, as he slowly began to loosen his trousers.

“Kneel,” he said blankly.

She paused, for an instant, then slowly bent a knee and took to the floor, her other leg following as she painfully placed her weight onto her knees on the stone floor, adjusting her position to accept the cock that she knew was coming. Then, in a manner akin to that which she had been forced to do aboard the galley for a myriad of lusting overseers, she opened her mouth wide, staring forward into his loins as the large, olive skinned cock emerged and was forced into her mouth.

She closed her eyes and began to move her mouth rhythmically along the shaft, opening a little as she moved forward, then gripping tightly and sucking as she pulled back, using her tongue to tease the end as she reached it, then beginning the process again. It tasted horrible, but, as she had done aboard the galley, she took her mind elsewhere, forcing her body to do what she had been taught to do as a galley slave, while taking her mind to another place. On this occasion, however, she could only think of Joshua, who stood quietly behind her. She realised too that Sheng must be watching. She too, if her story about being a galley slave for three years had been true, must have sucked cocks repeatedly. She hoped, sourly, that it reminded her of her horrible past.

“Ahhhh, Justine. You please men well. Your time at the oar was... gnnnn... clearly not wasted. I think she will meet our requirements admirably, Joshua... don't you?”

“Yes, Mr Tarik. I always said that she would be most suitable.”

“No, you did not, Joshua. I think you wanted to keep this prize... ohhhh... for yourself, did you not?”

Joshua remained silent, nodding slightly. Justine's heart was pounding. Just what the hell were they talking about? What was going to be done to her?

Tarik was writhing now, as she made sucking noises as she pulled away from his cock before re-engaging and pushing the tip to the back of her throat.

“Ensure that you swallow, Justine, and you will have proved your worth to me,” he said, gasping now. She felt a little of his cum on her tongue. It would not be long, she reminded herself, not long until it was over, but what new horror awaited her?

He held her head as he came, holding her still as his cock erupted and poured into her mouth. She swallowed the foul cum, wanting to please Joshua, wanting somehow to do everything that he had said to do, more than that – wanting to prove something, anything, to Sheng. She swallowed, licking her lips as she would with an ice cream, ensuring that none of his seed escaped her mouth, before swallowing again and opening her mouth so that he might see.

“Good. Excellent, Justine. You will make a more than adequate addition to the Raven.”

She wanted to scream. Just what the hell was the *Raven*? Unconsciously, she looked across at Joshua, hoping for an answer. She was not disappointed.

“The Raven is Master Tarik’s racing galley, Justine. You will be taken there for the remainder of your sentence... contract,” he corrected quickly. “The master’s real interest is in racing his... friends.”

Justine gasped. She had thought that the *Galera* and the horrible labours associated with its use were limited only to Tarik and his minions. What Joshua had said suggested that some sort of worldwide network of televised slavery existed. How many of these bastards could put up a galley for racing?

## Chapter 7

Justine had been glad to feel the cool air of the outside world on her face again. She had been marched back through the complex. She was glad, very glad that Joshua had accompanied her, despite the presence of the overseers who seemed determined to pull her by the arm as fast as they possibly could.

As she once more placed her feet on the warmer wood of the long dock, she could see that her galley, the ship that had brought her here chained to the deck and oar, had gone. In its place a longer, wider ship was moored. So this was the *Raven* – the ship that they had all talked about. Though it was larger, its design, at least to Justine’s eyes, seemed to benefit from sleeker lines, built she supposed to profit from reduced wind and sea resistance while at speed. As she came closer, she almost thought the vessel looked beautiful. It was a modern reconstruction of something from another time. She refused to kid herself, however, aware that once inside, the sound, smell and suffering of naked chained women, labouring at the oar and mercilessly whipped by sadistic men, would be the reality of the situation.

Another woman, clad only in steel fetters like her, waited at the massive gangplank to this new ship. She too had had the chains between her fetters removed. Justine had been glad finally to be rid of the awful constriction of the chains that made it difficult to walk and impossible to run. This brief respite of having only fetters to wear, however, would soon be ended as she was placed aboard the *Raven*, where once more she would have the chains that were bolted to the deck passed through the ring in her fetters, making her one with the ship.

She strained to see the other woman. She was being led up the gangplank now. She could see the rough strands of hair, however. She gasped as she recognised the musculature of her back, striped from the lash. It was Kola.

“Kola is being placed aboard the *Raven*?” she said, turning to Joshua.

“She’s nothing but a troublemaker, J... Master, how can a decision like that be made?”

She could sense the overseers smirking at her sense of familiarity with Joshua, sure in the knowledge that she was the butt of their jokes and stories, though the thought of the woman who had almost made her receive eighty strokes of the cane to her feet and had nearly forced her to take multiple cocks in her mouth being on the same ship, made her feel sick.

“She’s strong, Justine. She has proven herself in the furnace. She’s lasted longer and done more work in that place than any other prisoner. She has earned her way back to the oar.”

“She’s a volunteer too, isn’t she?”

“Yes, she is,” he replied. “Just like you, Justine, though her circumstances were most unlike yours.”

She found herself wanting to ask more, though she had now arrived at the gangplank where it met the dock and was being led onto this new ship. Familiar smells greeted her nostrils – sweat, urine, fear. They were all there, though somehow diluted, less than those she had experienced before. She was unsure if this was because she had started to become used to the foul stench, or because there was something different about the *Raven*.

Even as she was passed from one overseer to another, pulled across to a grille in the deck where she could see a steel ladder leading down below, she was handled differently. There were no jibes or insults. She was simply pulled by the arm like a piece of material, a cog in the machine that these men would use on this – what had Tarik called it? – a racing galley. She watched through the grille as Kola was led to an empty bench and was having her fetters secured at it.

“Down,” one of the men said, lifting the grille open, and she made ready to climb down herself, lowering her feet onto the thin rungs. She groaned as she lowered herself, her weight still making her soles smart, despite their partial recovery from the bastinado that she had received. She could still feel the effects of twenty strokes. She did not want to imagine what

eighty would have been like.

Another overseer grasped her arm as she reached the deck. She looked up at Joshua, framed against the blue sky above, staring down at her. He smiled and nodded reassuringly. Perhaps the last months of her ‘slavery’ would be different.

\* \* \* \* \*

The lash landed hard against Justine’s back as she screeched.

“Keep the rhythm, bitch. How long were you in the Galera? Come on!”

Justine blinked sweat from her eyes, keeping her chained feet evenly spread either side of Kola’s sizable buttocks on the bench in front of her. The configuration of this galley was the same as that of her previous ship in terms of the layout of the rowers, in that two women laboured above and behind her, their dirty legs and chained feet straining above her face as she leant back in the pull. In other respects, the galley was very different. The catwalk was wider, allowing more overseers to examine the actions of more women. There was no escape from the discipline of the whip, Justine quickly found. They had also placed Kola and her on benches one on front of the other, presumably so that these new untested charges could be closely monitored. In addition, the lighting was significantly better, not simply because of the wider oar ports (which also improved ventilation), but the addition of some electric lighting at strategic points along the deck meant that there was nowhere for a rower to hide.

Although the shifts were managed differently, Justine began to feel that she was either rowing hard or sleeping in chains on the rough bench – there was no time for anything else. The difference in pace was incredible. A standard rowing rhythm, which rather than being beaten out via a drum was piped through speakers somewhere so that there was no delay or misunderstanding with regard to the push dip and pull, left her deafened as much as the constant rhythm left her exhausted.

She cried out, wide eyed, as the single tailed whip landed across her lower back as she pushed, coughing and spluttering with the pull.

“Better. Keep it up, and do not let me see you out of rhythm again, clear?”

She nodded, muttering something that vaguely sounded like ‘yes overseer’.

Kola had also seen much of the whip, as her sweating back, moving in unison with Justine’s efforts, bore testament to, though her bulk and perhaps fitness from the work in the *Galera* had made her stronger than Justine in these initial few days aboard the new galley. Justine had gained endurance, been trained for it for many years, and had thus been able almost to thrive on board the ‘tramp’ galley, as Sheng had called it. Now, however, though her endurance was a key facet of the fitness required for this grinding slave labour, she did not have the inherent strength of the other women. In fact, as she looked at the other prisoners and rowers around her, she was surprised at the musculature that she saw in their shoulders and thighs. Some of them were large and strong, their sweating legs pumping and flexing as they pulled. At times, as she felt the whip lift another fiery welt across her raw back and she thought that she heard some of them laughing at her.

If there could be such a thing as a professional galley ship, an oar driven vessel with slaves who were professional athletes, she felt she was now a part of it. She had initially felt that Kola would suffer with the speed of the rowing, though having looked at the other women, Justine reminded herself that rather than being the focus of good training, sound sports science and an all-round good rower, she was now back at the beginning, amongst strong, powerful women who she secretly feared might prove better than she was. Ordinarily, in any field of sport, such issues would only mean that the player would lose. Here, the presence of yet another wooden horse at the far end of the deck meant that foul medieval punishments could be used to ‘improve’ performance. She had not seen anyone on the horse yet, and she did not want to be the first.

\* \* \* \* \*

Joshua felt the wind in his dark hair. The *Raven* was truly fast, powered along by her chained slaves. She would do well in the coming race. Part of him regretted the fact that Justine had been brought to the ship, however. She was strong, yes, clearly powerful, impressively fit, but he was concerned that she had been moved too soon. She had lost a little of her ‘galley fitness’, as he termed it, while she had been in the *Galera*, or perhaps the poor food on the tramp galley had not prepared her for this. Kola, on the other seemed to have gained strength, though he was uncertain whether she would have the endurance of Justine with this new pace. So far, she had performed well, while Justine appeared to be flagging. He looked down at her through the grille in the deck. She was unrecognisable, her body moving at a rhythm that she had never thought possible. Her hands and feet would perhaps blister anew, he considered, watching her breasts wobble with the pull and push of the oar, wincing as the heavy whip fell across her striped back. She had undergone much. He hoped that she would be able to cope with the increased pressure of the racing galley.

He made his way away from the grille, lest Justine should see him and have her concentration disturbed – thus earning her more lashes. The deckmaster, sweating from the heat below and having come up for air, approached him.

“How do the new women fare?” Joshua asked idly, hoping that his tone at least sounded uncaring.

“Kola fares well. Though, let’s face it, we always knew she had power.”

“And the other one?”

“She struggles to keep the pace, though I read that she was a triathlete before she volunteered?”

“Yes, that’s correct,” Joshua said, staring out to sea.

“Aye, well. She might face the wooden horse a few times before she

realises what the new requirements are.”

Joshua’s heart was pounding.

“I... don’t want you to horse her, Deckmaster,” he said, forcing his stare on the smaller man.

“What? But why, sir?”

“I don’t want her ruined, you see. There’s a tendency to leave them on too long on this vessel.”

“Oh, I see, sir,” he answered, still not really understanding. “You want that one for yourself, is that it?”

“No. Mr Tarik has expressed an interest, you see. And limit the use of their mouths until they are one with the other rowers, clear?”

The deckmaster gulped, nodded, then turned and began to walk back to the cabin.

\* \* \* \* \*

The pace was helped by the fact that food and water were given to the rowers frequently. In her exhaustion, Justine on one occasion seemed to hear the overseers discussing the limit and types of food that could be given and the mention of ‘tests’. She wondered at this, yet the pace and tiredness that was her life now, meant that she had little opportunity to speak with any of the other rowers. As the days passed, she was convinced that the diet had to be strictly regulated so that all galley crews in the races were fed the same thing. It came down to training, and the iron will of the rowers therefore. Clearly, the rigours and standards that were being applied to this ‘sport’ in order to make it a level playing field might have been set as an example to others where drugs were a problem.

The constant lashes across her back when concentration lapsed,

however, served to remind her of her role, her purpose. She became an animal, pushing, dipping, pulling and raising in time to the drumbeat, staring constantly at the sweating body of Kola in front of her. The facilities for keeping the slaves clean on this vessel were also far superior when compared with those that had been available on the tramp galley. Hosing and bilge cleaning was carried out once per day. Gone were the days when Justine had to sit in her own filth or stare at the disgusting buttocks above and in front of her. Even the requirement to offer the mouth seemed restricted to those overseers who really needed release. So far, in fact, she had not had to offer her mouth at all. In comparison, work aboard this ship could almost have been pleasurable, were it not for the pace. Slowly, she was losing track of time as the days passed.

\* \* \* \* \*

She was shuddering the night that Joshua visited the deck. Her arms shook from the pressure. Her hands had begun to blister a little, though they were hard after so many months of labour. Her feet too were hard, though the fetters had begun to rub at her ankles. Worst of all, she could feel the slight twinge of her knee injury starting to return. She prayed that it was temporary, that it would recover, though the relentless pace of this galley might not allow that, she considered as Joshua walked by her and Kola, turning slightly to look at them.

“You are both growing stronger, I see. How are you coping?” he said, though Justine could see the concern on his face when he looked at her. She hoped she did not look like a quivering wreck.

Kola was panting after the rowing efforts, though she was able to mutter under her breath.

“Come to see your girlfriend, sir?”

Justine heard it, though she was not sure if any of the other rowers had. She looked up at Joshua, her vision still blurry from her rowing efforts. Everything seemed to happen at once.

“Answer the question!” a voice shouted.

An overseer had been standing nearby and had heard Joshua’s question, and he brought the whip down hard across Justine’s back for not answering. As she arched her back and twisted, yelping in pain, Joshua pointed at Kola.

“Put this one on the horse,” he barked, gesturing at her as she stared at him in response.

“Because I speak true?” she shouted now, incensed with anger and frustrated by exhaustion. She threatened to become hysterical as the overseers started to unchain her and held her by the arms, tying her wrists behind her as she struggled, staring at Joshua.

““It was me you used to favour with your cock, Joshua. You haven’t forgotten how I could make you feel, have you?” she screamed as she was led toward the horse at the end of the deck.

Justine felt her jaw drop, felt her hands let go of the oar, as she stared at him, his face by now red, fuming with a combination of anger and frustration. Justine hoped that she did not see embarrassment too, as he stormed away, his footsteps echoing across the wooden deck.

\* \* \* \* \*

Justine rowed for the next few hours in a daze. Another rower had been chained in front of her. A strong, dark skinned woman with old lashmarks. Justine did not want to guess at how long she might have been a galley slave.

She watched Kola trying desperately not to move on the massive wooden horse that stood at the end of the deck, straddled as she was, legs wide across the triangular frame, feet dangling. As with the tramp galley punishments, they tied a bucket to her biggest toes, and slowly began to fill it with rocks and chains. She winced as Kola grimaced and clamped her teeth

shut, screaming in agony behind them as the horse began to bite. Kola never took her eyes off Justine, even when the order to stop rowing was given.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kola was made to ride the horse for two shifts – perhaps six hours. Justine was horrified by it. The fact that the punishment was so clinical made her afraid. On the tramp galley, the women who had been horsed were also teased by the overseers. That had not happened here. They had ignored Kola. By the fourth hour of her agonies, Kola had screamed for release, cried that she would do anything, perform any service, begged forgiveness from Joshua, even though he was not there to hear her. The overseers merely carried on with their jobs, lashing the rowers who failed to keep rhythm, watching for signs of inattention.

Kola was dragged back to her oar when it was over, not even given time to properly recover from her ordeal. Justine wanted to ask her if she was all right, though plainly the question appeared stupid, even to her. She had not expected that Kola would even be able to row, but she did. It was hard for Justine to see the detail, as her back and body were in the way, but she could see that Kola was able to keep the rhythm (after a number of lashes across her sweating back made her row to the required timing). She moaned and gasped with each pull, as her head came back almost to touch Justine's knees. As she was forced to make a coordinated movement herself, there was little opportunity to talk. She could see, however, that Kola had spread her legs and was using the heels of her feet to push back on. She did not want to see how swollen or sore her loins might be from the torment she had suffered.

\* \* \* \* \*

Justine did not see Joshua again as the months passed. Each day was concerned with training for what they were told was an important race, against two other galleys, with a chance to race against the fastest ship at sea – the *Serenity*. Justine had little idea who might own any of the ships

involved, and even less as to where the apparently innocuous ship name had stemmed from, but she was amazed that these rich perverts could create a sport from the suffering of prisoners and volunteer slaves.

She was more concerned by the fact that many of the rowing slaves – as that, she convinced herself, was what they had become, cheered when they heard who and how they would be racing. She marvelled that these women, prisoner or not, had become institutionalised to their lot – that of the galley slave. What isolated talk there was concerned itself with how they would not fail themselves or their fellow rowers during the races. There was even talk of how these two new slaves might fare – the hope being that they would not ‘let the team down’ in any manner. Justine feared to speculate what might happen if she did fail them in some way.

As the months passed, however, and she had no more chances to speak with Joshua, she did console herself with the fact she was getting stronger. It seemed that her excellent endurance had seen her through the worst excesses of the increased pace. The food and the opportunity to keep relatively clean each day, together with being able to sit astride a cleaner bench than that which had been offered aboard the tramp galley, appeared to have made her stronger. She could see it herself. Her thighs were bulging and thick, her stomach flat and muscled, her arms and shoulders wide and smooth. Combining these improvements with the growing body hair that she had little way of controlling, she began in essence to think of herself as less a woman and simply an oarslave.

She tried her best to dismiss these thoughts, however, convincing herself that that was where the madness these women had shown for their ‘team’ lay.

## Chapter 8

The eve of the race was a nervous time for all of them. The week leading to it had been a more restful time. The pace had been reduced and rest periods were increased, so that the rowers' bodies might 'peak' properly. Justine was well used to the process, having seen and felt it used during her triathlon days. They seemed so long ago, she reminded herself. She was, however, able to speak with the other women, who had been impressed with her ability to adapt to the training, and now listened intently when she spoke of her former training and techniques that she had used while rowing. Kola remained silent, not wishing to speak to Justine at all, though it seemed that she had recovered from her former ordeal.

The more relaxed atmosphere had meant that lashes had been fewer, bodies were able to heal, and offering of the mouth seemed to have stopped almost completely. She reminded herself that she had yet to suck cock aboard this vessel. Had that been something to do with Joshua? She had missed him, though she did not want to cause more punishment to another slave because of him. She had dreamed about him at night, touching herself in the way that he had touched her, then awaking in a sweat or to the noise made as the upper tier continued their labours. Always rowing, always improving. The old competitive streak that she had always had even began to re-ignite as she looked forward to the galley race herself, the still sane part of her mind reminding her that this would all be televised for rich perverts somewhere.

As the day came closer and the sting on the lash across her back seemed to lessen, she felt renewed. Her body had been reborn as that of a strong galley slave, and she looked forward to the competition. Even the overseers had begun to talk openly with their charges about the rigours of the race, telling them how they would only use the lash when they broke rhythm or needed just the right amount of encouragement. Justine found it all very different from her time on the tramp galley. No matter what they did, however, or how they seemed more human than before, she reminded herself that she, like the other women, was still naked, chained with heavy fetters by the ankles and bore the marks of the whip across her back and body.

\* \* \* \* \*

The peaking process meant reduced hours and drumbeat pace. It was, however, punctuated with short, sharp ‘shocks’ of speed and varying pace, with full encouragement of the whip. Though short, they exhausted Justine such that she was brought to the verge of her limits, held there, and then allowed to rest. Her back and legs, as with many of the others, suffered the depredations of the whip during this time. She had not seen Joshua now for months, and Kola, though she had spoken with a few of the overseers and other slaves, had remained silent as far as she was concerned.

“You feel strong, slave?” an overseer said to her one morning.

“Yes, Overseer,” she replied, staring forward at Kola’s back. She meant it too. She was fit, strong and the period of compensation that had been cruelly designed to maximise the efforts and rest the bodies of the slaves, had worked. A few slaves had collapsed from the efforts in the last weeks. They had not been horsed, whipped or otherwise mistreated. They had simply been replaced over time with other slaves. It was not immediately obvious where these slaves had come from, but Justine guessed that the few stops they seem to have made at remote ports held the answer to her question.

The overseer gripped her tag and stared at it as she winced horribly.

“You haven’t long to go, slave. In fact, you’ll be getting released soon after the race, when we get back to the Galera.”

Justine stared at him, her mouth agape.

“I’ll... I’m to be released... Overseer?” she gasped.

“Yes. You are a volunteer, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Yes, I am, Overseer.”

Was it true? Had it been so many months? Had time passed so

quickly, or was this some cruel final joke that they were trying to play on her, tempting her with freedom before yanking it away again?

\* \* \* \* \*

They were kept informed of the race conditions. They knew nothing of the route, though of course they did not need to know anything. Their role in the race was simply to row hard, keep rhythm, and win. She understood that now. The revelation of the fact that she was close to release, if it were true, made Justine consider that her slavery had been building to this point, this crescendo of pain. She wondered in fact if her entire career as an athlete had not in some way been building to this. She was cleaner than she had been on the tramp galley, yet her feet and hands were hardened and gnarled from the rowing. Her thighs, belly, breasts, and she knew her back of course, all bore lashes, old and new, which she somehow knew would never fully heal. She would never be able to go swimming in the local pool, never be able to wear clothes that revealed any part of her body that had been subject to the lash. She would never be this fit or powerful in her life again. Had it been worth it, she asked herself, to be treated like a galley slave in modern times. Part of her wanted the race to start. She hoped it was not to prove to some dark part of her mind that it had all been worth it.

Joshua's sudden appearance on deck made her want to cry with joy. She wanted to laugh as he strode up the deck. It had been so many months since she had seen him. She was shaking at anticipation. She wanted him so badly, wanted him inside her.

"Prisoners, volunteers..." He looked at Justine... no, he was looking at Kola?

"All galley slaves, all powerful slaves, all... fast rowing slaves."

The audience remained silent.

"You know what you have to do today. You know you can win. You know you are the fastest ship. In fact, for some of you, this is all you are, all

you can ever become. To win this race means everything to your masters, and so it must mean everything to you. I know you all understand this. I know you all appreciate your relative value. To you all – row well today – and live on, with the memory of this victory and the sound knowledge that you have made your masters happy.”

He began to walk back down the deck. Justine stared at him, hoping that he might acknowledge her, or even... oh how she wanted to suck his cock, have him touch her.

He stopped, near her, turned his head, and then began to undo the zip of his trousers. Justine began to open her mouth... as he bounced his erect cock gently off the back of Kola’s head.

“Offer the mouth, slave,” he said sullenly. “Now.”

Kola turned her head slowly. Justine’s mouth was still open, in surprise more than in any pretence of offering the services of her lips. Joshua did not even look at her. Had he forgotten her?

“Josh...” she whispered, as Kola slowly, lovingly, caressed his long white cock with her lips, lifting her eyes to him, moving her mouth slowly along the shaft, making slurping noises as she pulled her lips back along it, sucking the erect member. Joshua threw his head back. Justine wanted to cry. Should she shout at him, say something to make him acknowledge her presence? She did not want to be whipped, but ...

Kola began to move faster and faster along the shaft. Justine could hear Joshua moaning. When Kola had spoken out of turn, Joshua had made her ride the wooden horse. If Justine were to say something now, especially considering that he was ignoring her, would that mean she would be horsed? She dared not speak, dared not acknowledge even the fact that the slave in front of her was servicing a master. She let her head fall. Perhaps he was teasing her, that bastard. No, she would not give him the satisfaction of acknowledgement. Not today.

She stared down at her chained ankles, feet hard and gnarled. She would not even be able to wear sandals when she was freed either. If she

wanted to go to a doctor, what would she say? Justine had never considered any of these issues, any of the facts that she would have to hide in her new life. She began to realise, aside from the money and probable non-disclosure agreements, why volunteers never talked about their experience, why the *Galera* and the galleys had remained a secret. How could anyone explain why she volunteered for this? She could not quite understand how prisoners who had been released had not talked – assuming they were eventually released. She glanced up again, watching as Joshua gasped and heaved, his lower half fucking Kola's mouth now, as she responded by bucking her head back and forth to please, her filthy hand stroking his balls as he made ready to come. She looked away. How could he do this to her, after the perfect moment... she stopped herself. He had taken her in a filthy dungeon while she lay naked in chains. A year in bondage and slavery was beginning to play tricks on her mind. That was what he was doing, wasn't it? He would come back to her, surely he would.

Justine bit her lip and closed her eyes as she heard him moan and wheeze, his cock flapping against Kola's mouth as he shot his seed into her waiting mouth. She opened her eyes in time to see Joshua put his member away and pat Kola on the head, like an animal that had done what it was told. Why would he not even acknowledge her presence? Was he really going to ignore her like this? Her question was answered as he tidied himself up and began to walk up the deck. She opened her mouth to scream, to say something, even as she attracted the eye of an overseer with a thick whip, who stared at her now, as if daring her to make a scene as she listened to the echoing sound of Joshua's shoes against the deck as he began to leave her again. She held back the tears that were forming, as Kola spat into the deck in front of her, turning her head partially and smiling back at her.

\* \* \* \* \*

The hours that followed were contrasts of rest – which for Justine was agitated and offered little sleep despite her exhaustion, and frenetic activity as preparations were finished and slaves were made to row the ship into position. Being restricted to the deck meant that Justine had little view of

how the race would start, or indeed what the distance was, though she could see a small flotilla of accompanying motor yachts around them now, rich playboys and even bikini clad women on board, watching the galley. Could the women not smell the ships, realise that their sisters were onboard, serving as slaves? She did not want to think about it now. She tried to dismiss thoughts of Joshua from her mind, seeing the other galleys – two of them, far to port and near land in the bay in which they seemed to be sitting.

The overseers were readying them now, making sure that legs and arms and feet were positioned for the first pull – the powerful stroke that would set them off on the passage to victory. She heard a gunshot somewhere and the drumbeat started, the deafening reminder of where their oars should be. The women pulled in unison, moaning. The pace was fast, perhaps faster than she had ever rowed. Her body was used to this by now, she told herself, ignoring the sensation in her hard hands and soles that would ultimately become pain.

“UGNNNN!” as she pulled the oar against the waves.

“BOOM!” sounded the beat as the women, choreographed and powerful, pushed down on the oars.

“BOOM!” the beat resonated throughout the bowels of the ship as they pushed forward, naked backs bared to the merciless lash.

“BOOM!” as they let the oars fall – an action that would have been welcome were it not for the impending hell that warranted the pull.

“BOOM!” echoing as the pull of the oar made the women moan.

Successive pulls at this speed slowly became cries of pain and desperation as the women pushed their bodies to new heights of power.

Justine had no idea where they were in comparison with the other vessels, though the shouts and screams from the overseers and the loud cracks of their whips convinced her that they were lagging behind. Unbelievably, the pace increased.

At this, whips began to fall in earnest. Women screamed as the lash tore at them with its fiery tails, trying not to writhe and twist so that it would offset the power of their stroke and earn them further lashes. She could feel her heart pounding, knowing that she was building to her lactate threshold, the point after which she could only sustain her maximum power for a certain period of time.

“YAHHHHHH!” she screeched, wide eyed, as the whip slapped her hard across the lower back. She had to retain her position, not deflect from the rhythm.

“You’re thinking too much, bitch – keep that rhythm!” an overseer screamed.

She had to focus, breathe, pump her body like a machine. Many of the women remained strong, but some were faltering as the blistering pace continued, attracting the foul lashes and screams of the overseers. How long had they been rowing for now? Minutes? How long was the race? No one had even told them. In fact, there was no time to tell them where they were or...

“Increase speed!” the cry went up.

Some of the women moaned. Some cried out in anguish. How could this be? Were they not going fast enough?

Justine grimaced and screeched behind her teeth as the drumbeat increased and the lash fell across her thighs as she pulled. They could not keep up this speed. She had trained with these women for months, knew both theirs and her own limitations. They could not do it!

“Keep rowing. Keep going... almost there!” she heard.

But women were exhausted, some being horribly whipped due to their lack of rhythm.

In the minutes that followed there were shouts from the overseers, screamed communications... as the drumbeat increased again.

It was too much for some. Her body screamed in pain, though amazingly she could take it, cater for the increase in pace, her endurance kicking in. She avoided the lash. She saw at two women collapse, their positions and the oars around them clashing in confusion as the ship lurched. The lash welted Kola... two... three times as she lost rhythm completely, threatening to collapse. The ship lurched again as the confusion in the oars changed their course and overseers tried madly to pull oars in, others whipping women who, through no fault of their own, had lost rhythm by clashing oars with the women who had passed out. It was a mess, yet all Justine could do was row, row hard and row fast – the only facet of her life that she still remained in control of.

\* \* \* \* \*

They had lost. Justine gasped and panted madly, her heart pounding as though it might burst from her chest. All around the sound of gasps, wheezes and even crying could be heard, as overseers, themselves disgusted at the performance, took out their frustrations with the whip. Women who had passed out were dragged away, to a fate that Justine could not guess, as those women who were not being punished tried their best to recover from the ordeal.

She heard Joshua then, not even realising that he had come onto the deck.

“A poor performance. Very poor indeed,” he said with authority as he marched toward the wooden horse.

“Mr Tarik will not be happy. Do you hear me? I expected more from all of you. You should all be ashamed of your performance today, and there will be repercussions.”

He looked at them, selectively. Justine noted that his gaze avoided her completely. He nodded, as if finally understanding what needed to be done now.

“Four women will ride the horse during our return journey. If volunteers are not forthcoming, then I will select the women myself.”

He looked around them, walking toward one poor sweat drenched woman, in her forties it seemed, who looked like her heart might burst after the efforts of the savage race.

“How about you, hmm?”

“No... master, please... not me,” she grunted, an overseer crossing the deck toward her, intent upon using the lash and then unchaining her for the horse.

Part of Justine did not even realise that she had raised her hand to attract their attention. Part of her wanted to be seen, wanted Joshua at least to recognise her, so that she could prove to herself that their lovemaking in the *Galera* dungeon had not been a dream.

“Me. I volunteer for the horse,” she heard her hoarse voice shout.

\* \* \* \* \*

Justine cried out as her balance shifted.

“GNNNNNN!”

She moved her arms so that the triangular wooden apex that now split the lips of her pussy might not exert such pressure on her pubic bone due to her own bodyweight. Her arms had been tied behind her, then pulled upwards and bound to a ring, so that she could not use them at all to push her body away from the apex. In fact they threw her forward slightly, increasing the pressure on her pussy as her breasts sagged.

The wooden bucket felt as though it was half full, as the thick strings pulled her big toes to the verge of breaking, and worse, increased the weight that dragged her onto the horrible wooden peak that ran the length of the

horse.

“GNNN... DAMMIT!” she screamed, pulling again on her arms that were taut behind her, whining as a heavy rusted chain was dropped into the bucket at her feet.

Joshua had stared at her as she volunteered, even started to shake his head slightly. At last he had recognised her, she thought. She had not been dreaming in the *Galera*. He had made love to her. She only realised the full import of what she had done as they began to unchain her. They had to drag her up the deck then and force her onto the horse.

It was too late for Joshua to pick another, too late for him to change his mind and revoke what he had said, too late for him to have anyone but Justine ride the wooden horse. He had nodded then, shown concern on his face, winced as she was tied and mounted – but it was too late.

“YAHHHHH!” Justine screamed again, sweat dripping from her chin as rocks were dropped into the bucket and her legs pulled taut, toes, feet and legs pulled straight - bound by the V of the horse, the hard edge penetrating Justine and perpetuating her agony.

“Enough!” Joshua said sternly. “Enough weight.”

The overseers stared at him, as if in mock concern that he might be going soft.

“Leave her... as an example to the others.”

He backed away, staring at her, yet remaining close.

“Get the ship moving,” he barked.

The lurch of the ship made her cry out anew as it got underway and rocked her slightly. Joshua stayed close as she swayed and gasped.

“What were you thinking, Justine?” he hissed, as the noise of the oars dampened the sound of his voice still further.

“Y... You could not see me.”

“And so you volunteered for this? Are you mad?”

“If you... gnnnn... remember, I have volunteered for some mad things in my time.”

He nodded, swallowed nervously, reaching forward to fumble with her tag. The resulting involuntary movement made her sway, the momentum of the bucket causing new pain as she howled.

“Your date... you will be released soon.” His head fell as he spoke. “I didn’t want to make you feel like there was a future – for us, I mean.”

“You.... mean there... GNN... isn’t?” she responded, the agony worsening now.

“No. There isn’t.”

He turned and began to walk back up the deck as she screamed behind gritted teeth.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sweet agony of the horse was a terrible torture. The constant pressure on Justine’s womanhood meant that she felt as though she wanted to come after an hour, yet the pain from any movement would create new agony. During the second hour, her toes felt as though they would break, numbness competing with sheer agony in her loins. One cruel overseer added two new rocks to the weight, even as she begged him not to, crying through tearful eyes that she would do anything. He winked at her as he dropped the rocks. She begged for release during the third hour, staring wild eyed into space, alone in her agonies. In the end, she passed out, slumping over the contrivance that had delivered her into a world in which she had no experience – a world of frustration and aching fire.

\* \* \* \* \*

Justine awoke as she was being dragged back up the deck, as feeling returned to her body. She heard another woman screaming as she now was led to the horse. She gasped as she came to, blood flowing back into her loins and aching toes. She felt sick, and they were dragging her back to the oar. How could Kola row after she had suffered this hell? How could anyone? They hosed her down, pushed the oar back out, and lashed her until her exhausted body found some modicum of the rhythm, her position – legs wide, pushing off her heels – being dictated by the horrors that she had suffered on the horse.

The days that followed were the worst Justine had suffered at the oar. She recovered a little at night, and was thankful for the fact that the pace had reduced considerably in contrast to that which had been set during the race. She was battered, however, by renewed bouts of the lash and the screaming presence of the other women who had been subjected to the wooden horse. In the end, she had been the only volunteer – a decision that, in her current state, she wholly regretted having taken.

She did not see Joshua until the ship once more reached the *Galera*. She realised that it had been some months since she had left the isolated fortress. She was unchained and made to walk up to the main deck. Thankfully there seemed to be no permanent damage to her feet, though she had to limp. She was more concerned about her swollen lips between her legs, which still ached as she walked, though she was sure that the swelling would reduce.

Once more she was led into the cave complex, pushed along by the overseers who cared neither for her exhausted state or that she could not easily walk. At length, she was brought once more to the white floored and white walled office level where Tarik's office was situated.

Sheng was smiling as she saw her once more.

“Ah, the galley slave returns,” she announced, moving to bind her wrists behind her with a familiar length of leather fibre.

“A little the worse for wear, it seems.” She at least seemed happy at Justine’s condition.

Joshua stood to one side as Justine was led back into Tarik’s opulent chambers. She gasped in awe at the image on the large screen. A battered woman writhed in agony on the wooden horse. She was muscled and strong, a dominant force tied down in agony, yet the horse seemed to be breaking her, her face gnarled, her eyes heavy with exhaustion and framed by dark rings. She realised in horror that the horrid, pathetic looking figure was in fact her.

“You volunteered for the horse, yet you did not beat it, eh? No one does.” Tarik’s cracked ugly face said – the worst side of his profile facing her as he spoke.

“I... I suffered because I had to,” she said, slowly.

“Indeed – you volunteered so that you might show the slaves how they had faltered. Admirable. An admirable way to finish your term here,” he said, turning to face her.

“It seems we must say goodbye, Justine.”

He grasped her arm, sternly, with force, in the manner that so many overseers had grabbed her during the year, directing her to a desk with a plain wooden chair. Clearly, Tarik did not want his finer furniture dirtied by the ass of a galley slave.

“Sit. Read the papers and sign them, and you are free.”

She wanted to look back at Joshua, who had remained stoic, not even looking at her. Was this the way it had to be? She would never see him again.

She nodded as tears began to form.

“I... I was a strong slave,” she finally said.

“Yes, my dear. You were one of the finest. If you sign, your payment will be completed, and we will fly you anywhere in the world to spend your

money.”

She nodded, lifting the pen with gnarled, shaking hands – hands that had been shaped by the oar, blistered, almost broken by it. How could she go back to society like this? How could she ever fit in or even make people understand what she had volunteered to go through?

She turned, looking at Joshua, who had no option now but to look back at her. He nodded. She thought she could see a glint of a tear in his eye, as Sheng crossed to obscure him from her.

“Sign, slave,” she said now. “Quickly.”

“My name is Justine,” she said.

“It will be again, but not until you sign and we have the tag removed.”

“And if I don’t sign?” Justine said, creating a stern silence amongst the bystanders.

Tarik began to smile, sharing a glance with Sheng, even as Joshua slowly approached the table at which she sat.

“Are you saying that you wish to sign on for another year? Another year on the galley?”

Justine swallowed nervously and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, Joshua had moved into her field of view. He was actually smiling. Would she even be able to see him, if she decided to go on?

“Would... Would I serve aboard the racing galley?”

Tarik nodded. “Yes. You are a valuable slave.”

Sheng had moved to another part of the room, producing different papers and laying them on the table.

“Should you wish to continue your slavery, you would sign these papers, and you would receive another one million dollars at the end of your

term.”

She looked at her gnarled hand again, gripped the pen awkwardly, sharing one more look with Joshua before she signed herself into another year.

Tarik stepped back, unzipping his trousers.

“Excellent,” he said slowly. “You may service me now. Prove that you will make a good slave for one more year of the oar.”

Justine slid slowly off the chair onto her knees, closed her eyes, and opened her mouth wide.

**The End**