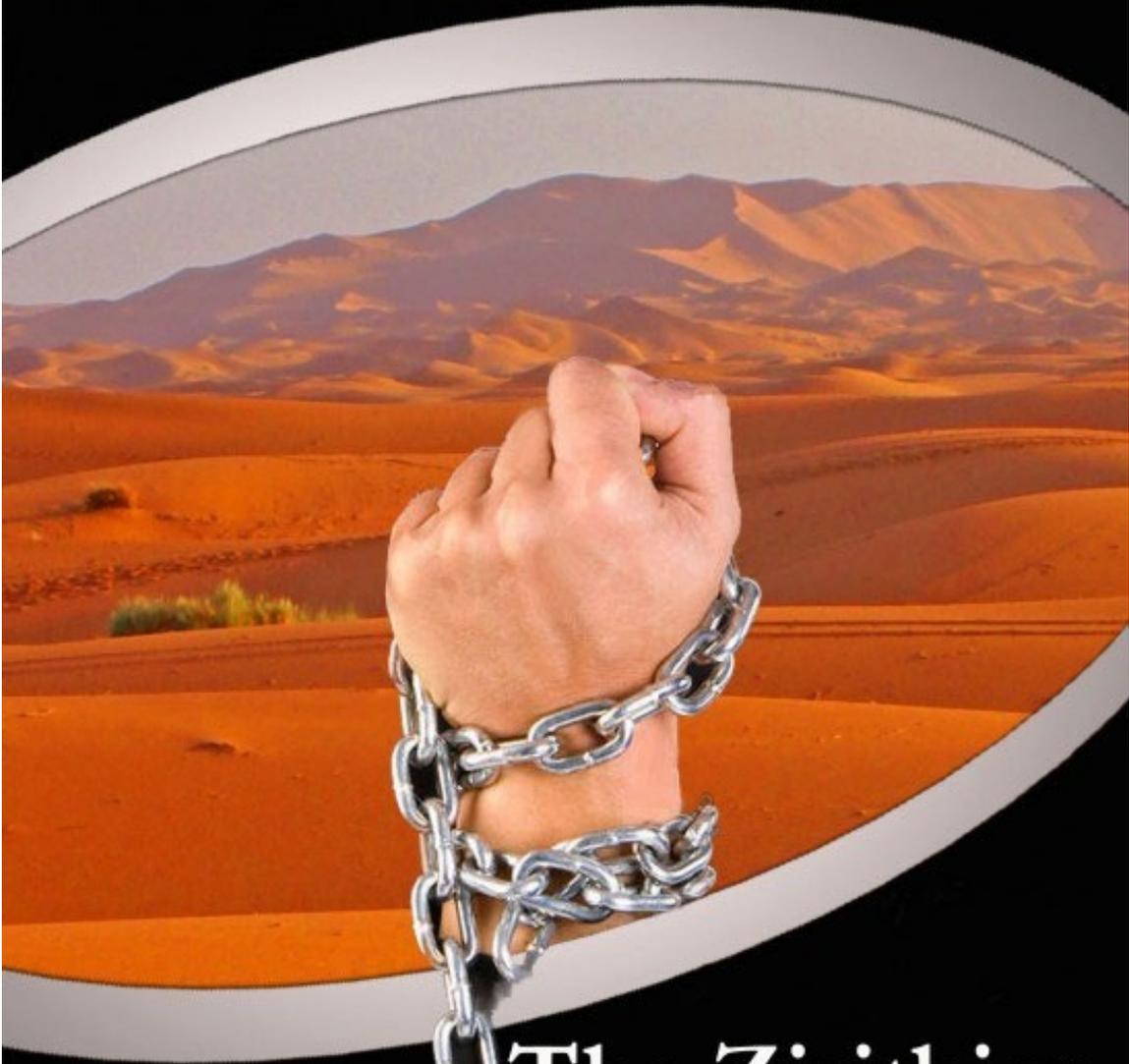


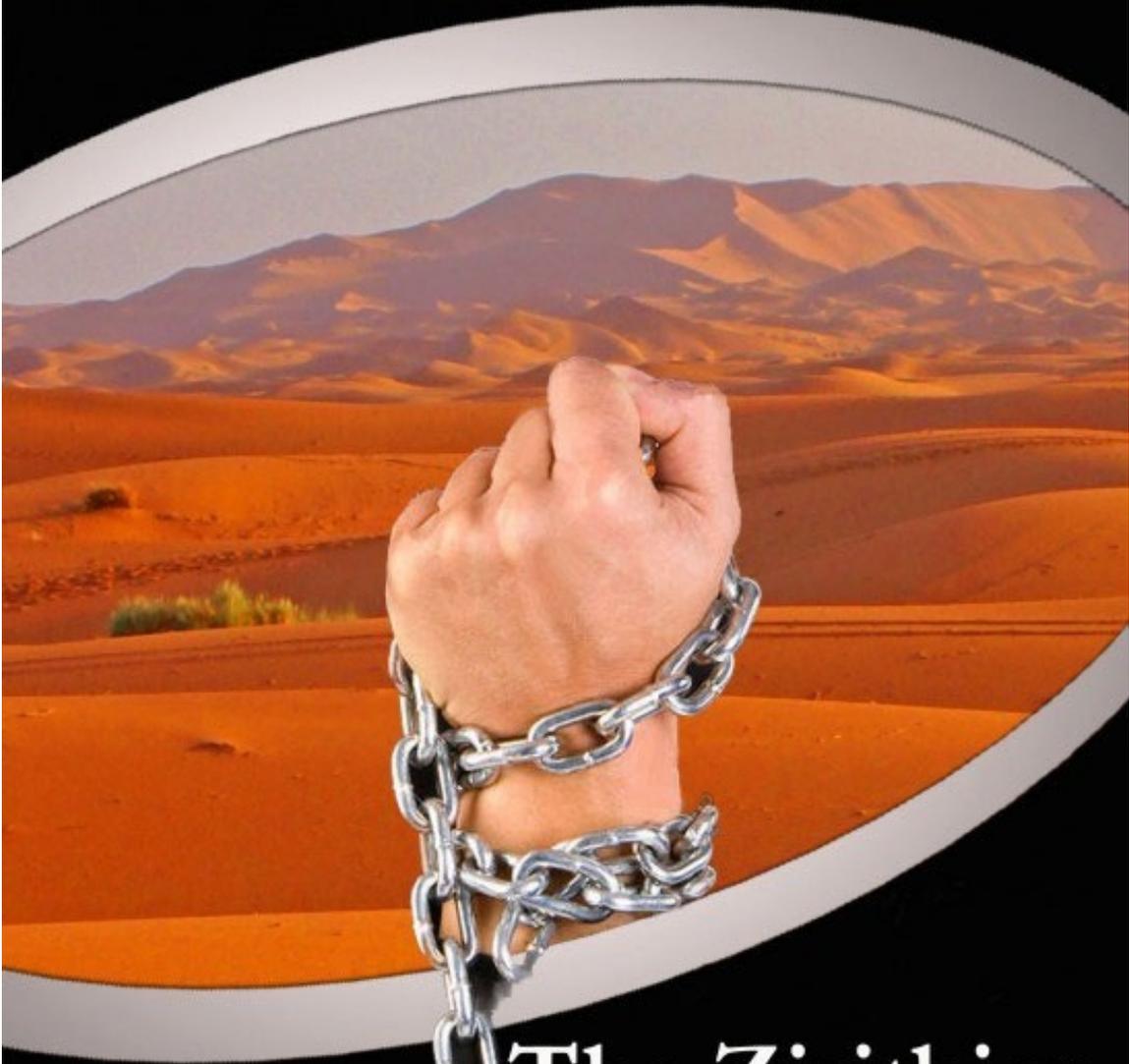
Slave To The Sands



**Clare
Seven**

**The Zirithian
Chronicles**
book one

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The Zirithian Chronicles – Book One

Slave To The Sands

by Clare Seven

Smashwords Edition

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Publisher's note to the Smashwords edition.

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

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

Chapter 1

Anya Larsen clicked her remote, hearing the familiar bleep of the car as it locked. It was a hot day. Damn, it was always hot in California. She regretted moving here from the east coast after she had left the marines, but hell, she would not be the first person that had been attracted out of the service by the salary hikes guaranteed by private contractors. It seemed that ‘peacekeeping’ was becoming big business around the world and experience was always sure to guarantee a high salary. Especially now that... she tried not to think about Carlos as she heard the audible click of her heels on the concrete walkway of the car park. She closed her eyes, hoping for a moment that the memories of her husband might fade, that the confirmation of his being killed in action might be proved wrong, that she could pretend he was coming home to her. But she knew it was not going to happen.

She saw herself in the reflection of the glass doors of the office building as she opened her eyes again. She had dressed formally for this meeting. It was a Saturday morning and the invitation from the head of the science division had seemed informal, but she had dressed anyway. She was a team leader – dressing down for some geek was not part of the contract, she surmised, as she watched herself get closer to the entrance. She was tall, stately almost, with shoulders back and marching with purpose as she had been trained.

She could sense the sterile air of the air conditioning as she entered the reception area, though it offered the considerable advantage that the stifling heat of the car park was gone now. The glass doors had been unlocked, yet no one was here. She glanced at herself in the long mirror mounted on the wall. She considered she was in good condition, thought that she still looked good at thirty-six years old. Her face was open and broad, dominated by her striking blue eyes. Her dark brown hair, cut in a bob beneath her ears, had a subtle wildness about it, which she had used to her advantage countless times, relying on the interest that it engendered amongst men who had found her attractive. She tried not to think about her husband, her dead husband.

She breathed deeply. She was tall, not exactly statuesque but she had inspired confidence in those who had served under her. Even now she had retained her

figure. She had large breasts, which men always seemed fascinated with, especially so now that she was exposed to an office environment, dealing with people who were not necessarily in the field all the time.

She pushed hair from her face. As she adjusted her eyes to the mirror, she could see that she looked tired. The last contract she had been involved with in the Middle East had been very stressful. She had even fired some shots there. It had been a while since she had done that, but as far as she knew she had done a good job – the protection details had been successfully carried out, her planning had worked and she had even got congratulations from Michelson, the CEO.

He had recruited her from her unit that still fought in a war zone to this day. She had not wanted to leave, but the fit and attractive Michelson was very persuasive, despite (or perhaps because of) the three divorces he had gone through.

“Hello?” she called out, wondering exactly why she had been summoned here to see Dennis Balham, the head of research or ‘Science Division’ as Michelson preferred to call it – some throwback to his weird obsession with science fiction, she recalled idly.

She called out again, turning on her heel and staring at a door that opened behind her; the bespectacled Balham who came through, complete with lab coat, was the archetypal geek. She had met many of them throughout her years in the military, though Balham seemed to sum up the term beautifully. He pushed his glasses up onto his nose, slicked back his dark hair and walked, with little confidence, toward her.

“Ms. Larsen... so... so good of you to come... erm... won’t you follow me please?”

“What’s this about, Balham?”

He smiled as he beckoned her toward the open door.

“Ah... yes, it’s Mr. Michelson’s request. He especially wanted you to see what we’ve been working on, Ms. Larsen.”

“I see, and what made him think that I would be interested in your latest geek project, Balham?” she said caustically.

Balham looked back at her. She smirked. Had he been a little stronger willed he might have said something. As it was, he wanted to give her a stern look, might even have wanted to stare with hate in those beady eyes of his. Instead, he sniffed and walked on, muttering something under his breath.

“What’s that, Balham?” she said sarcastically, her tone biting. She hoped that she was not wasting her time.

“Nothing, Larsen,” he said. “It’s just that you’ll certainly find this... interesting,” he said finally.

The steps to the lower levels were narrow and sparsely covered. Her low heels echoed loudly as she followed him. She did not speak any further. Firstly, there was little more to say before she found out exactly why she was here. Secondly, she seemed to have annoyed Balham, to the extent that now he was actually muttering to himself. ‘You’ll see...’ she heard him whisper.

* * * * *

The lab had been built in the basement of the office building, in fact, Anya was convinced after scanning the make up and architecture, that the lab had been designed first, and the upper floors had been drawn up as an afterthought to make the whole thing seem seamless within the industrial area in which it stood. Large generators, computer servers, machining centers and the general detritus of a working lab were nestled into alcoves, machining spaces and office areas. She could tell after a few minutes adjusting to her surroundings, which was bathed in the light of flickering fluorescent for moments after Balham had turned the bank of lights on, that ten, perhaps twenty ‘geeks’ would be working here, with technicians, when the place was operating at capacity.

“Nice place you have here, Balham. What exactly is it you want me to see?”

She watched as he rounded a corner, disappearing behind a concrete column. There was something large, mechanical, between two columns. She strode purposefully after him now. Whatever it was that she wanted her to see was large, but she could not get a clear view due to the angle of the room and the

columns. She slowed down as she got a better angle, as the large round ring like structure came into view.

The ring was approximately, ten feet in diameter. She recognized polished stainless steel, various power leads connected at intervals, a plinth like structure on which the whole thing seemed precariously fixed, even though it seemed stable as Balham connected new cables and made adjustments at a nearby laptop. The structure was lined with a black shiny substance that she did not immediately recognize, however. Power terminals and circuitry that she could not hope to identify also seemed to have been fixed haphazardly at intervals.

“Ok, so you make large steel structure down here, Balham. Amazing! Is this what Michelson really wanted me to see?”

“Wait please,” he said sternly. “There is more than this.”

She jumped with a start as something in the middle of the ring flickered into life. She stared... seeing through it as before, though something was different. A heat haze seemed to be stirring in the middle of the air within the ring. She could still see the wall behind it, of course, though it was starting to blur.

“What the hell is this thing, Balham?” she said slowly.

“Michelson must trust you intrinsically, Ms Larsen,” he said in response. “Especially so if he wanted you to see our developing technologies.”

“Right. You have a big ring that screws with the air inside it. I am impressed.”

He stared at her as if she had killed his favorite animal. No, it was more, she realized. It was with hatred.

“Ok, Balham. Look it was joke, ok? A bad joke.”

He ignored her, tapping at more keys on the keyboard as the light from the laptop’s screen intensified, reflected in his face.

“Watch,” he said loudly.

Anya turned her head again, taking a step back now as the bulbous mass of growing light in the ring started to hum with energy.

“What the hell?”

She moved further back as it seemed to expand, though it was starting to flatten out now, tendrils of solid light heading for the periphery of the ring. She noticed immediately that she could no longer see the wall behind the blur now. Instead, it was yellow, tan, and then red as it pooled and formed.

Not understanding why she was doing it, she pushed her hand out to touch the apparent field of energy, immediately snapping it back as she responded unconsciously to Balham’s screaming voice.

“Do not touch it. It is not ready.”

“Right,” she said, regaining her composure. “It’s a pretty light show, I’ll give you that, Balham.

He winced in response.

“It is much more than a light show, Ms Larsen. You will see.”

The bulbous mass extended, apparently of its own volition, as it inched toward the diameter of the ring, starting to fill out, like some living television screen. In fact, as she took a step forward to see the detail, Anya could see... a sky? Was that a sky with the sun in it? She raised her arm to shield her eyes from the ‘sun’ that was now filling her view.

“Is it a surveillance device of some nature?” she asked now, trying to hide her excitement. She had not seen anything like this before.

“Perhaps, yes. It could be called that.”

She gasped as finally, without warning, the mass snapped into space at the rim dictated by the black component of the steel ring. It was like looking through a looking glass. Aside from the sun that she had seen, there were now folds of desert, a clear heat haze, and amidst the haze, something appeared to be moving in the desert.

“So it is surveillance of some kind?” she said, staring at the image on the apparent screen, bending forward to try and scrutinize the details of what was moving in the middle distance.

“Not exactly, Ms Larsen,” Balham said, his voice cold in contrast to the heat that she was seeing on the screen, if that was what it was.

“What you are looking at is a parallel universe,” he said coolly.

Anya covered her mouth to prevent her laughing hard as she took in the clearly ludicrous statement.

“Ha. You are such a science fiction nerd, Balham. I’m sorry, but come on. You even managed to say that with a straight face. Get a grip, man!”

He stared placidly at her, his face implacable in its resolve.

“I really didn’t expect you to understand, Ms Larsen,” he said slowly. “Of course, you wouldn’t understand the science. You are, after all, just a grunt.” He slowly pushed back his thick rimmed glasses onto his nose. She waited for him to snort in true geek style, despite the fact that she was still laughing.

“And this is what Michelson wanted me to see?”

“Walk through,” Balham said now, his face unchanging.

“What?”

“I said walk through. You will believe it when you see what is on the other side.”

“Right, very funny. Is this supposed to be some kind of trick?”

“There is no trick, Ms. Larsen. If you will not accept what I am saying, then please, walk through and prove it to yourself at least.

She smiled, narrowing her eyes.

“Fine. I’ll dance to your tune, just to prove what a joke this all is.”

She moved slowly to the screen in front of her. She still could not see the wall behind it, or any of the features of the lab that should not have been blocked by the view in front of her.

“Mind you, there is a fortune to be made here in the future of television if you can do this without a unit of any kind. It is impressive in that respect, I’ll give

you that...”

She paused as her hand went through the screen. She had pushed it, expecting to feel something. Instead, the image in front of her rippled slightly. Astonishingly, she could feel heat on the other side, the heat of the sun on her hand. She pulled it away sharply.

“That’s impossible,” she gasped.

“What’s that, Ms. Larsen? Starting to believe?”

She stared at him, rubbing her hand. It tingled, but was warm still from the other side.

“The tingling sensation you feel is based on the reconstitution of your cells as they cross back from the other world – a parallel universe. If you understand quantum mechanics...” he started.

“I understand that this is bullshit, Balham,” she said sternly, flexing her hand gently as feeling returned to it.

“On the contrary, we have discovered, exploited and refined the link and the medium that thereby allows us to cross between parallel versions of our own reality...”

“Stop talking that crap,” she screamed now. “If this is a test, I’ve passed. You hear me Michelson. This is bullshit!”

“...our own reality and those worlds or, indeed, realities, which exist within our own space and time, though in alternate dimensions you might say,” he finished, illustrating his point by placing both hands parallel to each other and moving them close without touching.

“Even if that were true, Balham, why keep it such a secret? Surely Michelson could make millions of dollars with this sort of technology.”

“But why would he?” Balham replied. ““We have had the technology for a number of years. When we are in position to finally release it, it will have been tested, honed, perhaps even made safe.”

“I still don’t believe you, Balham,” she replied, her eyes moving from him to the screen then back again.

“Then go through,” he said.

Part of her wanted to walk away and spend the rest of her Saturday morning at home, and forget this garbage. Another part of her, however, was uniquely intrigued. She could not accept what Balham was saying. She had to prove him wrong.

“Fine. Is there anything I need to know? Any sci-fi gear that you want me to wear?”

“No,” he said definitively. “Michelson just wants you to be convinced.”

“Why?” Anya replied. “Why, now, does he want me to see this thing?”

“I don’t know, Ms. Larsen. I am merely doing what I was asked to do. Now please. See for yourself. I will leave the gate open so that you can come back.”

She started to move, eyes fixed on the desert-scape in front of her.

“Leave it open. You mean I could be stranded on the other side?”

“If I wished to. Though I can assure you that I won’t do that, Ms. Larsen.”

She stopped.

“So even if I did believe this crap, I still have to trust that you won’t leave me marooned on some parallel world, is that it?” she said, the toe of her shoe inches from the rippling image in the air.

“Let’s assume you do believe.” He corrected his glasses again. “We have rigorous procedures with which we can get you back. Please do not worry.”

She stared into the screen again, trying to make out those moving images that she had seen in the distance. They now appeared to be riding animals of some kind, and there were figures, human figures, walking, dragging something. She stepped through.

Chapter 2

The tingling feeling wrapped Anya's body in a delicious cocoon of warmth as she stepped through. The heel of her shoe sank in the sand, even as she brought her foot and the rest of her body through. Instinctively, her head snapped around, some terrifying fear that she was going to be marooned in this bad science fiction effects show, diluting her bravery.

The shimmering field was still there. She tried to hide her fears as there, clearly outlined in the lab, was Balham. She noted, however, the complete lack of ring or associated circuitry on this side of the portal. She was no scientist, though she reasoned that that meant the signal was being 'sent' via the instrument on Balham's side and so could be turned off or redirected to any other location on the world. What was she thinking, she reminded herself. This was not even real!

She waved back at Balham, shaking her head and smiling.

"Can you hear me?"

She could see him speaking now, but she could not hear him, though recognized him forming the words 'no' and 'sound'. So, she reasoned, sound did not travel between their worlds. What a load of hokum. Nevertheless, it was convincing, she reminded herself, as she felt the extreme heat on her body now. She had not really dressed for this, she suddenly considered, both her heels sinking into the soft sand. She reached down and slowly removed them, wincing as her stocking soles touched the hot sand and burned her feet slightly. She placed a hand, still holding a shoe, above her eyes in order to try and avoid the sun blinding her as she searched the distant horizon.

The shimmer was clear – perhaps half a mile distant, but there were clearly figures moving and something larger, maybe two larger masses, moving in the glare.

Anya checked behind her once more. Balham was saying something to her. He did not appear concerned, and she could still clearly see him.

"I'm going to have a hunt around in your little play act here," she mouthed at

him, knowing that he probably had absolutely no idea what she was saying.

He did seem a little more concerned now, beckoning her to come back. She held up four fingers and a thumb in response. ‘Five minutes,’ she mouthed. He nodded nervously in response. Why was he nervous, she asked herself. He was the one who wanted her to see this damned simulation – if that was indeed what it actually was, she reminded herself. She knew she was not actually in some other world, didn’t she?

Holding her shoes and taking rapid steps to avoid the heat of the sand on her stocking soles, she advanced slowly across the desert. The heat was terrible. She could already feel herself starting to sweat as she padded across the shifting sands. Removing her jacket, she could now discern that there were several figures, perhaps now less than eight hundred yards away, and the larger shapes. They were... elephants? No, they seemed to be more lizard-like. Oh yes, she guessed. A nerd like Balham must have added his own fantasy style elements to this simulation. She had to admit, again, how realistic the thing was. She was sweating, burning in the sun. She wanted to remove more of her clothing, but suspected that Balham, obviously watching everything that transpired, secretly desired that.

She stopped and knelt behind a dune, still watching the figure. They moved awkwardly, somehow, as if hunched slightly, but they were clearly dragging... a woman, a blonde woman. They were pulling her out toward a cleared area in the sun. Behind their position she could also clearly make out tents now, almost invisible before against the heat haze. She knelt down further, seeing now that the woman, who she also noted was completely naked, was being dragged against her will.

“Bastards,” she muttered instinctively under her breath. “What the hell are they doing?”

With no wind, she could actually hear the pleadings of the woman now, though the men dragging her spoke in a language that she did not recognize. Though, as she listened further, there seemed to be snatches of English.

As she watched, she realized that the blonde woman’s screams were warranted. Holding her in position, the figures were now intent upon staking her out in the hot sun. She could see that they tied her wrists and ankles to stakes, spreading

her wide as she screamed, then proceeded to hammer the stakes solidly into the sand, leaving her spread-eagled as they walked away.

Anya gasped. That damned pervert. Was he making her watch this for his own enjoyment? Damn Balham, she thought, slowly moving forward. She would release this woman and... Wait, it was just a simulation, right? Just a test? Perhaps Michelson was making sure that she performed here, making sure that she was worth investing in for the future.

Right, she told herself. In that case, she had to get back to the portal.

She backed away slowly. She had no intention of leaving the staked out woman alone to die, or suffer, in this sun, tied to the ground struggling as she was.

She moved, kneeling, using the dunes as cover. She realized as she began to back away that she had left her heels lying in the sand at the dune she had been at. There was not time now though, she considered. She hoped that she would gain marks for her rapid reaction to cover the points she might lose through leaving her shoes behind.

She ran across the sands, hitching her skirt to move faster, and glancing back at the figures on the horizon. She had been careful, and it appeared that no one had seen her. She looked for the portal now, covering the route that some of her tracks had laid on her initial foray from the gate. For a moment, fear struck her. Fear that the gate would not be there. Fear that the whole thing was impossibly real in some manner.

But there, near to where she had emerged onto the hot sands, was the portal. She could even see Balham now, beckoning her. She ran on, eager to prove to herself if this was, indeed, a test; part of her, again with some niggling doubt which she thought of as most uncharacteristic. She was yards from the portal now, Balham watching her run. She carried her jacket while trying to run in stocking soles and a skirt. It might have appeared inelegant. In fact, it was not even fast, though Anya cared little, knowing that she had to get back through the portal and prepare.

The change of temperature was the thing that struck her most as she dived through, so much so that it almost felt freezing compared to the sweltering heat from which she had just emerged. Balham stared at her.

“What happened? You are sweating like a pig, Larsen. And... where are your shoes. You’re not telling me you left them in there, are you? Damn it, Larsen!”

She stared at him, trying to adjust her breathing and calm down, ready for the next stage of this test.

“Show me the armory, Balham. I’m going back in there.

* * * * *

“I’ve already told you, Larsen,” Balham shouted. “You have already left pieces of our society in there. You can’t possible go in there armed like this. You have to blend in, become part of the culture, rather than steamroller in like a stormtrooper. You just can’t...”

He had been staring at her since she stormed toward the temporary changing rooms at the bottom of the lab, finding desert fatigues, a t-shirt and a small equipment belt with a dagger.

“So you’re telling me there are no guns in the offices at all?”

“I’ve already told you,” he said again, closing his eyes and pinching his nose as if to quell the stress that he was feeling now. As he opened his eyes, he stared at the topless woman in front of him, pulling off her stockings and dragging on desert fatigues and boots, her ample breasts swaying as he watched her.

“What’s wrong, Balham? You never seen a pair of titties? You should get out more instead of playing computer sims and trying to test Michelson’s professionals.” She looked up, laughing now. “Oh, what’s that face for? You concerned that I found out about your and Michelson’s little test for me?”

He started to shake his head, eyes narrowed. “You don’t understand...”

“Spare me,” she interrupted. “There’s a woman in trouble in there, and I’m going to get her out and bring her back. You got a problem with that, Balham?” she said sternly, standing up and pulling a desert camo colored t-shirt over her top

half, adjusting the knife at her side.

“Now, you’re sure you don’t have a gun here?”

He sighed.

“Look, there are a couple of pistols here – personal weapons. I’ll give you mine.”

She finished her preparations as he moved to a desk drawer and returned with a heavy caliber pistol, a box-like attachment on the underside of the barrel.

“What’s that?” she said taking the weapon and unsealing the magazine while checking for ammunition.

“On the underside? Oh it’s a new... laser sight we’ve been working on. Best to leave it switched off at the minute. Wait a moment.” He moved to her side and clasped the barrel, flicking a switch on the box.

“There. It’ll fire normally. But please,” he insisted. “Bring it back with you. We can’t have a weapon like that left in an alternate reality.”

“Right, Balham. Right. I realize how I’m going to be scored here. Fire up the screen again. I need to go through.”

Chapter 3

Anya ran through the sands, her thick boots more suited to traveling in this terrain. The t-shirt kept her cool, though she noted that the twilight of the early evening had come down while she had been away and it would soon be dark. Her route had been easy to find once more. In fact, the trail left by her previous march through the soft sand was still there. The dune where she had been able to spy upon the figures that had staked out the blonde was in front of her. She could not see the shoes that she had dropped, though she imagined that shifting sands might have covered them to some degree. She crawled to the top of the rise. The light was becoming particularly poor, though she did not want to risk being seen – not now.

The light was good enough, however, that she could see the enemy camp, and, struggling a little, the blonde who had been staked out. Luckily, there did not appear to be any movement but for the writhing form of the suffering woman, her skin bright against the darkening twilight.

It was time to move. Anya's training took over as she stealthily moved around the perimeter of the camp. She would have liked to have thoroughly scouted out the area, patrolled the surrounding area, formed a plan, and then acted upon it. With the fact that she felt she was being tested and that the only link to this simulation (she had to admit to herself, again, that whatever way this was being done, it appeared very realistic) was through the gate several hundred yards away. She wondered idly if Michelson were watching her now. No, there was not time. She watched the area through which she would strike for ten minutes, allowing whatever passed for dusk here to settle a little more as she waited.

All was quiet. Even the large reptilian creatures that she had spotted earlier seemed to be silent, unmoving, perhaps sleeping where they stood. The last thing she remembered as she rose slowly and started to move around the base of the crest was that she had forgotten about her shoes. She would have to find them later, she resolved.

Despite her reticence to do a proper perimeter reconnaissance, Anya still took her time to make sure that her approach would not be seen. These jokers did not even post guards, it seemed, she considered to herself. She could not see any of

the figures now, just the moaning white shape of the woman writhing in her bonds, tied to the desert floor. It would not be far – a quick dash, really. She could free her very quickly and then... Then what? She would have to bring this woman back through the gate. Well, Balham would just have to live with that.

She crawled along the side of the dune now, crawling closer toward the spread-eagled woman. She could hear her moans in the night. It appeared she was shivering now. She had been left naked, tied wide to posts in the hot sun all day, and now the coolness of the night in this place (or simulation – she still refused to believe that this was real in the modern sense). The poor woman must have lain there without water. Who were these bastards? Wait, she told herself. This was a test. Focus on it, Anya!

She rose slowly and began to pad across the harder sand inside the lower part of the dune, her boots leaving clear footprints as she came closer to the spread-eagled figure, who now seemed to have stopped writhing as much as she had been. Must be damned tired, Anya reasoned to herself.

She hardly made a sound. She had been trained for approaches like this, trained to blend in, move silently, kill if necessary, but, she reminded herself, this was simply a rescue mission. She knelt beside the woman, who opened her eyes and gasped at her. The staked out woman was naked, aside from a crudely made iron collar that had been fashioned around her neck. They had tied her to the stakes and then stretched her so that arms and legs were agonizingly taut.

“P... please... I don’t know who you are, but... you can’t free me,” she gasped painfully.

“What? Listen, just stay calm,” Anya replied, pulling the long dagger as its blade reflected a little in the moonlight and she winced at her poor battlefield management skills... someone might see...

“Y... You’re from Earth?” she said. Anya smiled. This sim, or whatever it was, was good; she had to give that to Michelson.

“Yes, I’m from Earth,” Anya replied, unsure what part of the test this was.

N... no, you d... don’t understand... you have to run...” The blonde stared up at her, pleading now. “Before they...”

As Anya sliced through the thick rope that held one of the woman's raw wrists to a rough wooden stake, she sensed something moving in the sands behind her, then a figure. Movement! All around her!

She turned around, the rattling of equipment that she had not thought to secure all the more audible. It did not matter now though. The moonlight gave her enough depth of vision to see that figures, broad shouldered shapes, were burrowing out of the soft sand around her position. Four, no six of them, cloaked – parts of them seemingly glistening in the moonlight.

“Damn!”

She glanced quickly at the blonde, her face a mixture of surprise and regret that she could not free her as she had promised. In one fluid movement she rose to her feet and leapt for a gap between the emerging figures, reaching to unsecure the pistol in the holster at her hip as she did so.

There was no time to free anyone now, whether they were staked out or not. She bounded across the soft sands, each tread leaving a deep impression on the otherwise perfect sand. They were chasing, she could feel them, hear them pacing rapidly across the sands behind her. Her blood pumped through her veins as she surged forward, hearing her own gasps as she ran, gripped with adrenalin-fuelled excitement that had not yet turned into abject terror. She had been in worse situations than this, she reminded herself, and besides, this was just some damned simulation.

Part of her wanted to slow down, though she knew that if she did, she would fail this part of the test. No, she had to keep running. She had pulled the pistol. It might be worth a shot, maybe two, might even scare off her pursuers as they had no conception of firearms in this place surely, unless Michelson had rewritten the rules, of course.

She pounded up the short rise. There. She could see the gate, could even see Balham's white coat on the other side of it. It was not far. Her heart was pounding now, the boots making it difficult to run, though she was sure that she was distancing her pursuers. She was within three hundred yards of the gate as she snatched a glance behind her. They had spread out in a line as she saw their black cloaked forms, faces a blur with the speed and the effort of running so fast, though she did seem to be distancing them.

She was almost there. She could see Balham reach forward to something. He stared at her, not even beckoning her to hurry. Could he now see that she was being chased by maniacs? One hundred yards, the distance was closing fast. She snatched another glance behind her. Had they stopped? What the hell? She did not have time to think about, she reasoned, just keep going, she told herself. The gate was so near now: fifty yards, forty, thirty. She made ready to jump through...

Balham stared at her, and then he slowly started to smile. She could see him, so close now. She smiled back. She had won, she thought.

She screeched loudly as the gate closed in the air.

“Balham! What the hell? No!”

She ran through the air where the gate had been, her arms flailing wildly in the vain hope that she might touch the gate and get back home.

“Balham! You bastard!” she screamed.

As she turned, she saw that her pursuers had formed a long line, and now walked, slowly yet deliberately across the sands toward her. She was panting hard as she brought up her sidearm and lined it up with the first of them, and slowly squeezed the trigger.

CLICK!

She pulled back the slide and squeezed again.

CLICK!

“Dammit,” she squealed, dropping the magazine and checking the ammunition load, pulling back the slider again as a round popped out and she raised and...

CLICK!

The eight cloaked figures that had been pursuing her raised their short spears as they came closer. She saw now that the spears had round ropes on them, ropes on the end of shafts that might be used to capture prey.

Chapter 4

The tall gray haired man was wide shouldered and distinguished. His hair had been neatly combed and his skin was beautifully sunburned. He adjusted the collar of his casual shirt as he stepped forward to the smaller man at the computer terminal.

“Do they have her, Balham?”

“I... I can check, Mr. Michelson, Sir,” Balham replied nervously. He moved a hand to his pocket, fidgeting as he removed it again.

“I’ll open the gate for viewing, at her last position.”

“Do it then,” Michelson boomed. It had been several minutes since Balham had closed the gate. Even Anya would have had trouble with eight men. Balham had seen fit to sabotage her sidearm. He might have to see it removed from whatever group had managed to capture her, but he could deal with those details later, much later.

He narrowed his eyes as the gate opened. In the middle distance, three figures lay prone while five others had surrounded a smaller figure who appeared to be lashing out indiscriminately at them with fists and booted feet. The woman had made a good account of herself if the prone attackers on the desert floor were anything to go by, but her attackers were now moving to place their catchers around her neck. She grasped one of the choking ropes as it seized her and tightened, and then they had her. Michelson nodded.

“Good. They have her. Who are they, Balham?”

“Szarja slavers Mr. Michelson. Wh... what will they do with her?”

“Most likely she’ll be enslaved, Balham. Anya is too valuable to kill.”

“So she’ll be stripped and put in chains... sir?” Balham bit his lower lip.

“Yes, and she’ll be sold at market, probably in... where is she now?”

“Near Urra, sir,” Balham replied, sweating now.

“Sir?”

“Yes, Balham? What is it?”

“May I be allowed to buy her, sir?”

Michelson stared.

“We’ll see, Balham.” His thin lips curled, in a crude approximation of a smile. “I may want to buy her myself.”

* * * * *

Anya was exhausted. Her captors had been unused to her fighting style, it seemed, but they were strong. She was fast, but her own strength had quickly been used up against these apparently unstoppable brutes. They were wide shouldered and lithe, and now that some of them had cast the black hoods back from their heads, she realized that they were not altogether human in appearance. They had ears, eyes, flat noses and all the features that would suggest that they were of the same species as she was. Their eyes, however, told a different story. They were green with large pupils, almost reptilian in appearance as they darted toward her then elsewhere, as if expecting trouble from her or some hidden accomplice. She pulled against their vice-like grip, though it was quickly reinforced each time she did so. Two of the stronger ‘men’ held her, her arms pinioned by her sides, their free hand gripping her by the shoulders. It seemed that she was not going anywhere of her own volition as she was forced along the soft sands, her boots sinking with each difficult step.

“Where are you taking me?” she grunted, resigned now to her fate and aware that she must have failed this part of Michelson’s test. Her captors did not answer, although they began to speak to one another in a sibilant chorus of sucks and hisses.

“Oh this is bullshit,” she grunted. “So you guys are not supposed to understand

me, is that it?”

She shook her head. So this was all some part of Balham’s grand design for the simulation? Still, she shuddered, it seemed real enough. She considered her self awareness. Unless she had been drugged at some stage, this definitely felt as real as it could be, and she had seen reality in all its horrible forms, including through the dreamlike split second horror of close combat. No, this was definitely real, in which case, how had Balham done it?

The sound of the stark welts, followed by horrible pleading cries was quite audible as she was marched toward the camp. In the heat haze she could make out the large reptilian creatures that she had seen before and she realized now that they clearly were not elephants. More of the figures who had taken her, cloaked and bent in some cases, were gathered around two posts that had been placed in the sands, and between them...

She gasped as she saw it, and pulled against her captors again, who she was sure could push harder against their arms with inhuman strength if they wanted to.

The blonde woman who she had come through the gate to rescue was still naked, her flesh burnt by the sun, though now her predicament had changed horribly. She had been released from the ground, though she still remained bound. Her arms had been drawn up and secured either side of her. Had she been left like this between the two posts, she would at least have been able to stand. As it was, her legs had also been drawn up and secured at a position near her hands on the posts, so that her body formed a V shape. The position would have been agony, Anya realized, and then saw that it was made doubly excruciating through the actions of the cloaked figure who was striking a multi tailed whip harshly between the victim’s legs. Her cries were awful now.

“Hey! HEY! Stop this!”

Anya finally got an arm free as she struggled to get away from the group of men who guarded her, making for the woman who suffered on the posts. But there was no escape.

They held her, despite her vigorous protests, as the woman suffered another ten strokes. As she was forced to watch the scene, Anya slowly became aware of a taller figure, clad as per the rest of the group, who had now started to move toward her, with two slave women in tow. They moved gracefully, though both

were naked aside from the large amount of jewelry that one of them wore around her waist. Both had long, dark hair, though their skin was heavily sunburned, and they too, she noticed as they got closer, bore the same reptilian eyes as the men had. Both of them wore heavy leather collars – slave collars, Anya now realized.

The man pushed back his cloak and spoke to her captors in the sibilant and increasingly grating language that she had heard the others speak. At first it had seemed like the sound of a snake moving through sand, but when the taller man spoke, his voice was deeper and seemed to echo inside his mouth somewhere. His face was old, pockmarked and wrinkled. His head was almost bald but a thin pate of gray hair was visible. Anya noted that he was thin and athletic like the others, but seemed somehow wiser. He turned to regard her.

“You have some objections to me disciplining a slave?” he hissed.

Anya stared at him, realizing that at least one of these ‘things’ could understand her words.

“You are whipping a defenseless woman! You don’t think that I would have an objection to that?”

He smiled at her, nodding his head.

“You have spirit. Where did you come from?” he said slowly, placing a long index finger beneath her chin and raising her head. As she pulled away and turned her head as much as she could, one of her captors forced it forward, allowing the leader’s finger to graze against her chin.

“Where are you from? I ask again,” he repeated, his words showing a trace of accent that Anya could not quite place,

“Go to hell.”

Without warning, he moved his hand swiftly and slapped her across the face. She did not cry out but surged forward, wanting to return the ‘gift’, though the strong arms still held her in check as she spat in his face.

He wiped the spittle from his wrinkles, looking at it, tasting it, as his sibilant language returned. Immediately, Anya watched as the blonde woman’s legs were untied, the ropes falling to the sand as she screamed. Then her arms followed as

she was released, slumping to the ground moaning before being dragged off, as Anya was pushed toward the two posts.

* * * * *

Anya cried out again, shrieking her anger and frustration at the humiliation of her position. Overpowered, the ‘men’ had mercilessly ripped her clothing and boots from her as she fought against them with her remaining strength. Naked, they had tied her hands to the hooks on the posts. She had kicked one of them hard, and watched as he fell to his knees. They had had to hold her legs in place as they tied her, then two men had gripped her hard by her now bare ankles and pulled her legs up. She had writhed horribly, her body bucking and twisting as she screamed against their actions, but it was not enough to stop their devilish intent, as her legs were secured to the front of the posts and she hung horribly exposed and sweating in the sunlight.

The leader approached with the whip. She gasped, closed her eyes and tried to regulate her breathing. She had faced interrogation training. She could even remember staying in a hole in the ground for five days during Special Forces training at Fort Able. She had been naked, but then she knew that she was going to get out, knew that it was preparing her – mind and body – for what could potentially happen were she ever captured, though of course, she had never considered that she might be taken. She had always thought of herself as too good for that.

The leader approached now, unfurling the cruel multi-tailed whip that had been used on the blonde. She reminded herself of how this was a sim, but then it felt real enough. She told herself of how she had been through worse in interrogation training, but, of course, she had never been truly captured before.

She could feel the strain on her arms and legs already. She refused to give in to the humiliation as she stared at the tall man with the lash, even as he raised it and brought it down hard.

“GNNNN!” she moaned, gritting her teeth as the bite became a burning sting. More strokes followed, in rapid succession, impacting upon her hanging body.

Her position rendered her completely powerless even to attempt to twist away from the horribly savage blows that slapped against her most tender flesh. She could resist no longer, and heard herself screech madly at the seventh hard stroke from the whip and the strong arm that wielded it.

“There, my brothers, you see? She is merely human, and screams just as any other slave would.”

Anya looked up, blinking sweat from her eyes as the ‘brothers’ murmured in agreement. She was about to speak when the lashes began again.

* * * * *

Anya moaned softly. With darkness, the temperature had dropped incredibly. She was so thirsty and her arms and legs were numb. She must have passed out again. When last she had opened her eyes, it had been daylight. Her shoulders burned as she tried to move, and an involuntary moan came from her dry throat. She ached where the whip had struck her, though it was dull and throbbing now. It had been stinging fire mere hours before. She had counted forty lashes in the end. Then they had left her to suffer.

She looked up at her ankles. She could not feel her feet – numbed by the vagaries of her position. Her head fell, as if the energy required to keep it up was more than her battered and strained body could bear. She could hear someone approaching now across the sands, could hear his breath.

“You are strong,” he said. It was the leader, the man who had whipped her. “You will fetch a fine price when we reach Urra, if you are properly broken.”

Anya tried to speak, found that her throat twitched with dryness, and she coughed horribly, sending stabbing pain through her racked body. She tried again.

“M... maybe... you’ll... f... find it difficult to break me, scum.” It took all her strength to raise her head in continued defiance. She tried not to wince as he raised the same foul whip that he had used earlier. She could hear the leather

thongs as he pulled his rough hand across them.

“There are many ways to break a slave...”

He moved the long, slightly curved handle in his large hands, gently massaging the seemingly wooden bulbous end, which gleamed in the moonlight of the desert. She tensed visibly, sensing in the darkest part of her mind just exactly what he intended to do to her. She shuddered, her body in agony from the cramp that was setting in by virtue of her agonizing position between the posts. He turned the handle around in his hands and began to move the bulbous wooden end towards her.

“Damn you. Damn you to hell,” she managed to croak dryly through cracked lips as her eyes widened in fear, and some anticipation, of the gamut of feelings that she was about to experience. She gasped as the worn bulbous end of the whip handle brushed lightly against her.

She stared at him, even as she gasped and writhed – the involuntary movement causing further agony and stiffness in her pain-wracked body. She felt the handle push, gently at first, then harder, as her body reacted to the touch. She yelped as she threw her head back – a mixture of humiliation and somewhere, somewhere deep, a pleasure of sorts, even though she tried to deny it.

“You bastard,” she heard herself whisper in a hoarse, animal like, grunt, twisting her head in her frustration at being unable to do anything to stop him.

“My name is Elias, but soon, slave, you will learn to call me Master,” he said softly, his mouth close to her ear as she writhed in her bonds, strung up as she was like some sort of helpless animal.

She wanted to scream at him for his assuming that she would go along with this and for calling her a slave. She was no slave, she kept telling herself, even as she gasped and tried desperately to suppress her body’s reaction to what he was doing to her, afraid... no, knowing that she would lose all control as, even now, her hips and thighs began to writhe and she bit her lip and closed her eyes.

“Ah yes. A reaction,” Elias hissed at last.

“Go to hell, you freak, UUAHHH!” Anya gasped, as her body writhed and twisted. She could not let him do this to her. She would not!

But it was too late. She could not now control her own body. Her body was telling her to push back against him and she cried out in frustration and humiliation.

“Damn you to hell!” she screamed at him, her head shaking with the effort to resist, knowing it was hopeless.

She also realized quickly that this was no simulation. She could feel the combined stabs of pleasure and pain in a manner that any technology, however advanced, could not possibly reproduce. No, she was here, in this place, now. That much was undeniable, and this was no test – this was real.

* * * * *

Anya burned in the hot sun. Her head lay awkwardly against her shaking shoulder. She could not feel her legs now. She had passed out a few times in the last few hours. Her shuddering body had slumped in exhaustion after, she remembered, screaming a raw, dry throated gasp, her body tensing and creating further agonies as she hung there, helpless between the posts.

Her head slumped again. She had got over what he had done to her, as much as her body and training would allow, at any rate. The problem now, as her survival instinct told her, as the calmness in her brain through years of training reinforced, was that she needed water. The heat of the day and the shock that her body had undergone meant that she would soon be in serious trouble without it. She had spent enough years in desert climates, being told the top three requirements for survival in the desert – ‘hydrate, hydrate and hydrate’. As it stood, it looked as if they were not going to allow her even that luxury. She found her mind trying to play down the distinct possibility that they were tying her here to die when, as if her very thoughts were being read, she heard the padding of footsteps coming toward her across the sand.

She tried to open her eyes, yet found that she had been half blinded by the sun and could see only piercing light, a dark figure drawing closer in front of it. The fact that it carried a large skin of something was evident, however. She heard Elias speak before she could clearly see him.

“You are strong, very strong. Few slaves could resist for so long without breaking. It is clear that you are a warrior of sorts, though clearly not as strong as your masters,” he said slowly, laughing mockingly as he finished.

She wanted to speak, to scream back at him, to tell him that she was no slave, to let him know that she was more than just a warrior. She could do little but pant, however, as he poured water over her. The shock of the cool liquid made her writhe, the writhing caused further pain, yet her exasperation at his wasting the water on her when she needed so desperately to drink made her scream in frustration.

“W... water,” she croaked, unsure whether she was begging or questioning his motives.

“Yes. Clear and pure,” he retorted contemptuously. “And yet I waste it on you. You must be very thirsty by now, yet you do not beg.”

As if in answer, she raised her shaking head from where it had rested on her shoulder. Her defiance was clear, even if she was starting to weaken. The soldier that still made Anya function as a person was never far away.

In response, Elias nodded, smiling as he watched her head shake with the effort of returning his stare, her lips cracked and swollen, eyes like slits against the ravages of the harsh light, her skin burned red by exposure to the hot sun.

“I will call you Sereth. In our tongue it means defiant fighter.”

He moved forward, pushing her thigh as she moved back and forth in her bonds. The ropes creaked, her wrists and ankles were abraded by them, though Anya could only hear her own hideous moans as her body was wracked once more with agony.

“Gnnn, my name... is Anya...” she whispered back, determined not to show defeat, despite the desperate nature of her situation.

“You are defiant for a slave,” he said, pausing to watch her struggle, like an animal that had been hung out to die in the hot sun. His words made her struggle more, ignoring the hot pain in her limbs and body.

“N... Not a slave... damn you!”

“Oh but you are,” Elias retorted contemptuously. “I intend to break you, and have you sold at market.” As if to emphasize his words he ran a rough hand down her belly, across the welts that he had delivered as she gasped and tensed in her bonds.

“If you are lucky...” he said, massaging her gently as she threw her head back helplessly, desperately wanting him to stop although a part of her, even now, secretly wished that he would continue. “If you are lucky, you will be sold as a house slave to a noble family. Oh you’ll suffer the lash, but only so that you know your place.”

As if to emphasize his point, he slowly began to increase the pressure as he massaged her.

“No...” she moaned softly, writhing again, feeling her own body betray her.

“An alternative, of course, might be that you are sold as a pleasure slave. Though...” he pushed harder inside her, controlling her reactions as a master would control a puppet, as she whined softly.

“I would think you too rebellious for such a role and, of course, too much of a warrior.”

His thumb teased her as she gasped.

“No, perhaps I am wrong. I think you will most likely be sold as a work slave Sereth. Had you been more proficient in our ways of fighting, you might have been put into the arena, but that would be a waste. Better, I think, that the captain of a wheel-ship gets to watch your strong body from the upper deck, as you labor and toil on his ship in the hot sun under the harsh whips of his overseers, of course.”

Anya had little idea of what he was talking about, but was sure that she did not want to find out. She did not want to enjoy his touch, but found that she was having very little choice in the matter. She found that she wanted him to continue; even that it seemed to make her enjoy what he was doing. She swallowed, dry throated, and began to writhe again.

Elias’s withdrawal of his hand was unexpected and, as Anya’s tormented mind reeled, unwelcome. Her body lurched in response, so wanting his touch to

continue. He brushed his hand across her shuddering shoulders and turned to walk away. She wanted to call after him, but she had no energy and her head fell to one side. She heard his last command, however, to one of his dark cloaked guards.

“Cut her down. Have her staked out on the sands.”

* * * * *

Anya had passed out as she was cut down. The pain and the agony of blood flowing to her extremities once more overcame her resistance as shock set in. She realized that she must have come to, at least to a certain extent, as they stretched her naked body spread-eagled on the hot sand. She was not sure if the burning sands on her back and on the backs of her legs were what had revived her, but she remembered having her arms and legs tied at wrist and ankle, and gasping in agony as she was pulled taut, tied to posts in the sand, exposed and helpless. At least in her previous predicament, she reasoned, she had been able to move, albeit slightly. As it was, stretched out and bound as she now was, she could not move at all, could not find a position from which the blinding sunlight that filled the sky could be escaped. She noted, however, that the sun had reached its zenith as she had hung on the posts, and it was starting to go down. She writhed in the bonds, wrists and ankles numb from having hung for so long. She could feel how they had abraded her and she tried to avoid too much movement. She badly needed water, and she knew that she would not last long without it. She had been delirious as the guards had left her, and now someone approached. He knelt down with a wooden cup. Water?

“Please... please... need water.”

“And you shall have it,” Elias replied slowly, tilting the cup to her swollen, dry lips. She coughed and spluttered, almost choking as the cool liquid hit the back of her throat. Controlling herself, she lifted her head to drink more, almost gasping and clawing at the bowl with her tongue as Elias pulled the empty bowl away.

“That’s enough for now,” he whispered. “Just enough to keep you alive, slave.

You might be worth quite a bit. I hear there are many wheel-ships in Urra this season, and they will be looking for strong slaves. I wouldn't want you to get damaged now, would I?"

Anya growled in response at him. "I... I told you, I am a free woman, not a slave!" It was all she could do to keep her head raised as she said it, and she let it fall back once more into the sand.

"I told you, Sereth. You are free no longer. You are lucky that I gave you a slave name. Most new flesh is simply collared and sold. You have a sense of identity, at least, Sereth."

He said the name again, as if to accentuate her plight and the fact that there was little that she could do about her predicament. She wanted to spit at him, but did not have the moisture in her mouth to reach him. She groaned, her tangled hair awash with hot sand.

"If you persist in this belief, then you must be convinced."

She struggled to look up as he reached behind him for a large, circular container. Even as she watched, straining to raise her head, flies buzzed around the opening. Without warning he began to pour the contents over her body.

"What? What are you doing?" she croaked, writhing in response to the feel of the liquid, which was hot from sitting in the sun but also viscous and sticky.

"This is Sularn. It is a delicacy amongst my people. We can rarely eat it in the desert, as it rots the teeth and attracts flies... and the insects of the sands.

Anya gasped as the thick brown liquid slid across her legs, across the lashes that he had given her, and then up towards belly as he moved the container toward her face.

"Wait. What are you doing? GAHH!"

She moved her head as the liquid fell across her mouth nose and eyes.

"Night will fall soon," he said. "The small creatures of the night will come and feed upon the Sularn. They might even find you a tender morsel. When you tell me that you are a slave, I will have you removed and cleaned." He spoke

mockingly, with the familiar tone of a master speaking to the flesh that he intended to sell at market. Anya screamed.

Chapter 5

Anya was alive with fear. The flies had been buzzing around her for perhaps an hour now. Each time she shook her head to scare them off, she grew weaker. She was dizzy from the motions of moving, tied as she was. Already she could feel the burning itching, the maddening touch of insects, or something, across her body. Oh God, she thought. They're coming, more and more of them. She screamed a dry throated gasp; one of many that she had issued in the last hour. It was almost dark, but she could readily discern black mounds of moving insects, gathered in groups in the sands around her, moving as hungry bands toward her writhing, sweetness soaked body.

"Please!" she shrieked once more. "I... I am a slave!"

Her voice did not carry. She had strained her throat and vocal chords with screaming and the fact that she had received so little water in the hours before now. No, she thought. He can't leave me like this.

"Please!" she tried to shriek again. Her head fell back into the sand from her most recent effort. She was sure she felt an army of insects under her head as it fell. She tried to swallow, heaving in the effort to clear her dry throat and make herself heard. She could almost hear them now, all around her, gathering for the feast.

"I am a slave!" she rasped, her head falling back again as she coughed and spluttered.

"Yes, you are," Elias said quietly, his voice a short distance behind her as he signaled nearby guards to release her from her bondage.

* * * * *

They cleaned her slowly as she was pulled from the ground, her hands weakly

trying to brush away the insects that had gathered about her. The guards helped, to a degree, but she was still shaking with panic as she was dragged toward the tent structures that formed the home of these desert nomads. She was exhausted, her body and limbs in pain and the feeling around her thighs reminding her that she had been callously whipped.

She was in no condition to fight these men, if men they were, as they brought her inside a tent and pushed her to her knees. She moaned as they began to bind her naked form to the thick wooden post that formed the central support of the tent structure, pulling her numb arms behind it as she cried out in pain. After binding her wrists in position and spreading her knees wide so as to open her to inspection, they pulled her ankles toward the post and bound them so that she could not pull away – a short length of thin rope tethering her ankles together, albeit allowing a limited degree of movement but ensuring that they were firmly held behind the post – all such movement punctuated with her strangled yelps and gasps as her wracked body was forced through further contortion.

Eventually, after she had been secured, they left her to her thoughts.

“Water,” she croaked once more as they left her. They paid little heed to her. Anya slumped and moaned as feeling began to return to her, then flinched as she spotted some of the smaller insects that still infested her. She could feel a few of them in her hair, climbing around her scalp. She suppressed a shudder, knowing that there was little she could do, hoping that they would leave her as they realized that their feed had been washed from her body. They had wasted water in cleaning her, yet kept her thirsty. She noted now that a brazier of coals illuminated the tent, casting evil shadows as she moved in her bondage. A bed had been laid out behind it. She noted now that iron pokers, with wooden handles, nestled amongst the coals, slowly heating. She stared at them. Did these people mean to use the irons on her? Had she not been tortured enough?

Realization struck her once more as to what she had said, screamed, as she had been tormented by the insects. She had told them that she was a slave, admitted that she should be sold at market as Elias had said. Was this how these people worked? They broke their charges through foul torture and made them admit to whatever terrible requirement they needed. She doubted that any slaves had been broken this way, realizing that Elias had wanted to see her broken because she had been strong. Had he not named her after a warrior or something, the evil, twisted bastard. She breathed deeply, trying to ease life back into her tormented

limbs, despite the cruel positions into which they had been tied.

She swallowed dryly, still so thirsty. She moved her legs, wincing as the ropes behind the column pulled at her abraded ankles. Thick welts decorated her thighs. She shuddered again at the memory of the cruel whipping she had received, and put thoughts aside of how she had believed that this was some sort of test or 'simulation'. No, she admitted to herself, finally and irrefutably, her experience was all too real. She could not explain how she had got here, or indeed why Balham had closed the gate, or even how this strange new-fangled technology might work, though it was clear that she had to survive this and find out why and how Michelson was involved in this hellish place.

She moved her legs again. A feeling returned to her as her mind began to flood with feelings that she remembered from her time tied helpless between the posts. She closed her eyes in a vain attempt to erase the memory of what Elias had done to her, and yet part of her remembered the raw, physical pleasure that had come with the pain and the humiliation. Her body moved slowly, almost involuntarily, as she remembered it. She had pulled against the ropes then, fighting what he was doing and her body's reaction to it. She set her jaw, gritting her teeth. No, she could not allow herself to feel that way, could not succumb to some sort of savage pleasure in this horrible place. She had to survive now, pure and simple.

She licked her chapped, bloated lips and looked up slowly as the tent flap opened, the darkness outside framing Elias and the two naked women who followed him. She stared at them, hoping that their condition did not in some measure give an indication of her own future status.

The women had little choice but to follow Elias, as both wore thin leather collars around their necks. Thin chains had been attached to these – these enabling Elias to pull his slaves behind him. It took a moment for Anya to register the fact that one of the women was the blonde that she had tried to rescue. She gasped as realization hit her – the blonde staring at her now, eyes swollen with crying from the whipping she had received, and looking at her with feelings of guilt that she too, her would-be rescuer, had been taken by these slavers and whipped. The other woman, however, although human-looking in most aspects, bore the same reptilian eyes and sunburned skin that the men who had captured her had borne. As Anya looked from one slave to another, she noted the fresh lashes across the blonde's back too. Had they whipped her further after taking her down from the

frame? Bastards, she thought silently. Her gaze shifted to Elias as he led the two slaves slowly to the bed and motioned them to kneel. They obeyed without question, the blonde earth-woman wincing as her whipping still appeared to be fresh, and the motion of falling to her knees was difficult.

The snake woman, swarthy skinned and bearing a more ornate slave collar, stared at Anya and licked her lips, her lips curling up slowly in a smile. She had seen her before, at the posts when she had been taken to be whipped.

Elias shuffled with the trouser component of the black robes he wore, and Anya's eyes widened. The blonde knelt before him, while the other slave, as if wanting to take part in what was about to happen but not being permitted, hovered expectantly near them. Elias merely closed his eyes and smiled.

Anya wanted to look away, to deny that this humiliating situation was even happening, and that she was being forced to watch it. She found, however, that she needed to watch, and had to concentrate to force down the desire that she, too, wanted to take part.

Had these slaves been trained to do this? Had they been whipped until they had learned to do it properly? What kind of hell had she fallen into, Anya asked herself as she stared silently, wondering how she would perform if it were demanded of her. Would she refuse? Of course she would, and yet... Her resistance had already started to crumble, she knew. It had started when she admitted that she was a slave, and now...

The snake-woman watched Anya intently as she stared at the scene, taking in her reaction and watching her eyes. Anya stared back at her, holding her gaze for long moments, her eyes widening as the snake-woman smiled in what was obvious enjoyment of what was happening and, perhaps, Anya's reaction to it.

Anya could do little in the position in which she was tied, though she could not help writhing slightly and moving her thighs, even though the burning lash marks from her ordeal stung as she did so. The blonde was sweating now, her movements animated, the fatigue that she still felt from her recent punishment making her tire. Elias, however, did not seem satisfied with her efforts.

“You fail so soon, slave. Perhaps you require to feel more of the lash?”

The blonde made a muffled yelp in response, her eyes widening as she renewed

her efforts. Elias, however, could see that this weak human slave was not up to the task, and he moved away from her.

“You had your chance, human. Let Zila show you how to please a master,” he hissed, turning toward the snake woman who looked up at him once, smiled, and then pounced eagerly, almost as a cat might pounce upon its prey.

Anya watched as the blonde slunk away on her knees and Zila continued the task that she had started.

Anya licked her lips. Damn it, what were these people turning her into? She could not help the way she was feeling as she watched Zila and Elias. Was this something she would be doing, whether she wanted to do it or not? Could she do it? Would she dare do it? Would she be forced to do it? And then her thoughts wandered... Would she be as good as Zila, she asked herself. Zila had natural advantages, it seemed. She was tall, lithe, and her hands moved beautifully.

Eventually, it was over and Anya felt disgusted, both at what she had watched and at the feelings it gave her.

“So, Sereth, you see what a pleasure slave has to do? If only such tasks were to be part of your future.”

Zila laughed quietly.

“And what makes you think I could not do it?” Anya demanded.

Elias laughed first, great deep bellows as he convulsed, shaking with the efforts. Zila, sensing that her master would have no objection, also began to laugh.

“Perhaps you could, Sereth, perhaps you could. The torments of the whip and desert have made you accept your name, at least, though I sense a rebellious streak that only the whip and chain could eventually quell. For it is the whip and chain and strenuous effort that lies in your future, rather than the satisfaction of your master.”

He stared at her as he stepped forward, tethering up his treads and adjusting the folds of clothing.

Anya shuddered as he leaned down in front of her, cradling her face with his

hand, the same hand that had held the whip when he used it on her at the posts. She stared back at him.

“There, you see: the eyes of a headstrong slave. Don’t you agree, Zila?”

The snakelike woman, still on her knees, came closer. Anya turned her head away, grinding it against the post behind her as she did so.

“Yes, Master. If she is not thrown from the side of a sand-ship, or nailed to the mast, she will grow old in chains, her leather-like back and muscled ass mapped by the patterns of the lash, her swollen ankle and wrists raw and bloody from the rubbing of the chain.”

Elias patted her head. “You paint a vivid picture for her, my slave.”

Anya continued to stare, wide eyed now, at the prospect of being some work slave, as he had put it, and as Zila had so eloquently described.

“So that’s my fate, is it?” she said hoarsely in response. “To be some sort of slave, worked to death?”

“Yes, Sereth. You are far too recalcitrant to be a pleasure slave such as these two. I see the warrior in you, and the warrior mentality will never leave you, and so... you cannot put aside your hatred and thus enable yourself to give pleasure to others.”

He approached her, and she instinctively turned her face away.

“There. You see. You have no wish to please men. You do not yet realize that you are simply a slave now.” He backed off.

Anya gritted her teeth in anger. She was being manipulated into... what? Admitting that she wanted to be a pleasure slave? She could see where this was all leading, but if this was her one chance to get out of harsh hard labor? She had already been whipped, and she did not want to feel it again.

“Wait,” she said slowly.

She could not see Elias smile as his back was turned to her, but she guessed that he grinned as he sensed that he was gaining the upper hand with this unruly

slave, whom he had had whipped and tormented half to death with wild insects of the sands.

“If I... show you what I can do? I might avoid the lash?”

Elias laughed in response, as did the snake woman beside him, who curled and fawned over her master. The blonde Earth woman simply let her head fall.

“You, slave, will never avoid the whip. You will learn to respect and even love its touch across your back and legs.” He gripped her chin as he moved back toward her. “But to never feel the lash across your slave flesh? A concept that you should not even dream about.”

Anya tried to pull her chin away, but he held her fast.

“But perhaps, you might show me what you can do,” he said slowly.

* * * * *

Anya was growing tired now, as she tried to emulate what she has seen the snake woman do. She might not have had the experience, but she knew that Elias was just a man, and she knew that men cared little as long as a woman was pleasing them. She could not have realized just how much she had underestimated Elias.

“You serve like an animal,” he grunted, pulling away from her as he looked down, and his slave chuckled quietly.

“What?” she grunted, looking up at him from her forced kneeling position.

“I should have you whipped as the dog slave that you are.”

Clearly she had displeased him, though she could not work out how. She sat back in the tight bonds.

“What... what did I do wrong?”

“You do not even know how to please a master. I would suggest that your future

as a work slave is even more certain.”

Anya heard herself say the words, though she could scarcely believe that she was saying them: “I can do better... wait... I can improve...”

She narrowed her eyes, amazed at what she had become in this vile alien landscape after the cruel punishments that she had been subjected to. She had been trained to resist torture, and yet now, in this form of slavery that she found herself suffering, she was backing down, giving in, and seeking to please these vile people. She wondered somehow if it had something to do with a deep seated wish to serve.

“Too late. You will be branded and left overnight. As we travel, with you in chains, I may allow you to try again, to show me what you are capable of. Perhaps I might not send you to the work pit or the sand-ship straight away.”

He turned and left abruptly with his slaves behind him, as Anya, seethed with rage, gritted her teeth at her helplessness.

* * * * *

They came soon after Elias had left, just as Anya had begun to drift off to sleep. The entry of the two cloaked guards, who stoked and reheated the steel brazier filled with hot coals, had not only startled her from her fitful sleep but had also reminded her of something that Elias said before he left. She was to be branded. Despite her struggles and cries, they had been both mechanical and methodical in their task, clearly being used to the operation in hand. Despite the limited movement that her bonds permitted her, one of them had held her arms tight, while positioning his foot on her thighs as she knelt. This allowed her almost no movement at all. The other had placed a glove on his hand, and moved to lift a long handled iron from the glowing coals. She whimpered, wide eyed yet determined to show no fear in the face of this new potential agony.

“No. No! Wait a minute. No!” she grunted as he lifted the iron, and then she screeched horribly as he used it.

* * * * *

Anya stared at the sand as she watched her bare feet rise and then sink into the soft grains with each step. The steel fetters that now decorated her ankles, linked by eighteen inches of chain that clanked with each step, did not make the task easier. In fact, as the hot sun beat down across her still naked body, she winced at both the rasping action of the fetters against her flesh and the steadily increasing heat of the steel as it grew hotter in the extreme climate. Her gaze moved up her legs, to the welts that still remained across her thighs, then to the round circle-like symbol that had been branded upon her lower belly, the mark of a work slave. The mark was a rough circle, three inches in diameter, with eight lines crossed through it to form an asterisk like shape that sat on the circle. She had no idea what this crude 'spoked' device indicated or meant, or how it might signify that she had been branded a work slave – she knew only that the pain of the brand still stung. She had little time or inclination to care, however, as more pressing matters drew her attention as she walked through the sands in chains.

Although her ankles had been tethered in true slave fashion, her arms ached too, and not simply due to the ordeals that she had suffered on the day after she had been captured. She gasped as the cart in front of her jerked across a rough spot in the sand, pulling her arms awkwardly with it.

Elias had decreed that the new slave would not join his more precious pleasure cargo in the steel caged 'cart' that was being trailed by the flat footed reptilian-like beasts that moved far in front of her, leaving large pools of dung behind them that she did her best to avoid stepping in. No, the work slave designate would be tethered by the wrists to a length of chain, fifteen feet behind said cart, and pulled along in its wake, with ankle chains added to make her task all the more difficult.

Anya had been in no condition to try arguing with the order after she had heard Elias give it, first in the language of the snake men and then translated for her benefit. She had still been recovering from the screaming mess that she had been when the hot iron had been pressed into her flesh. She had stopped short of begging for mercy or even crying as they marked her. She realized, with the cool

viewpoint of a trained military operator, that no amount of pleading was going to change what would happen to her. In fact, it might have even made the situation worse or ‘entertained’ the scum who were performing the action. It had not stopped her screams, however.

She grunted as the cart lurched and her arms stretched. She sensed a riding beast behind her, the shadow of the rider falling across her, momentarily granting her shade from the hellish sun. She felt the swish of air at her back, realizing too late that it meant the lash.

“YAHHHHHH!” she cried out, twisting as the multiple strands of the heavy whip slapped against her sunburned back.

“Keep moving, slave,” Elias shouted. She could almost hear the delight in his voice at the power he had over her. “I do not want you slowing up my merchandise. A mere work-slave has less value, but you are still worth something when we reach Urra, rather than leaving you in the sands to die. Come on!”

“AIIEE!” Anya lurched as the savage whip landed again, on her lower back this time, making her involuntarily spasm and twist. She redoubled her efforts to catch up with the advancing cart, her feet hot and tender from the abrasive sands. She wanted to rest and sleep, though she was sure that they had not come that far as yet. Damn these bastards. She had to escape, somehow.

* * * * *

Anya gasped, taking more of the small bowl of water that had been offered to her. She nodded her thanks to the blonde earth woman who had offered her the drink; though this was the first time in the days that she had been walking in chains that the woman from her own ‘planet’ had been permitted to offer her water. Up to now it had been the snake woman slaves, who had treated her with disdain and with little more respect than an animal would receive.

“What... what’s your name?” she asked, wincing as she moved her legs underneath her and the heavy chains pulled at her raw ankles. Her feet were

swollen from the walk over the sands, and the presence of the heavy chains had not made it any easier for her.

“Kat,” she whispered, looking behind her instinctively, as if the very mention of her real name might cause her to be whipped again. Anya could see the marks that countless strokes had left on her body, the body of a slave.

“But the snake-men call me ‘Harethr’. It means... well... it appears to mean... ‘empty vessel’, their way of saying that I’m no good for anything, I suppose.” Her voice shook as she spoke, offering Anya more water.

“How long have you been a slave in this place?” she asked, also glancing furtively at the surrounding palm-like trees under which they took a modicum of shelter in what was otherwise a shapeless desert.

“About four months, I think, since the night I was taken,” she replied.

“Taken?”

“I was going to my car, after a session in court...”

“You’re a lawyer?”

“Yes... I was... Men in masks appeared from nowhere. I thought it was some sort of joke at first, that my boyfriend...” she choked back tears, “had arranged it.”

She turned her face away as the memories flooded back to her.

“And now I clean and provide whatever services these bastards want from me.”

Anya gripped her arm, the effort made her wince. Her body had been wracked with agonies these past days, more than she had ever faced, and yet still she remained unfulfilled. She was not even sure how she could be satisfied. Perhaps if...

Anya moved her hand slowly down Kat’s arm. Kat in turn raised her eyes, suddenly realizing what Anya wanted.

“I can’t,” she began. “I am only permitted to serve the men.”

“I understand, but after what they have done to me, I need...” she paused. Kat sounded so much like a slave, but meant ‘only to serve men’? She remembered that such a fate was not to be part of her future. No, she would be a work-slave, whatever that entailed, though with what she had seen and felt of this terrible world so far, she knew that it would not be pleasant.

Glancing around once more, Kat placed her hand, roughened by the sun and whatever the snake-men had forced her to do with it, slowly between Anya’s thighs, as she gasped harshly in response as if her entire body was tingling from the thought of what might happen.

For her part, Anya had never felt like this before. In her time in the service, relationships and sex had been snatched opportunities between the tasks she had had to carry out, as if she gave only partial lip service to the needs of her body; needs that only now, in the blinding pain of her suffering and torment, she was beginning to recognize and to want. Had this been her fate all along? Had this been part of what her career had been leading to? More importantly, had Michelson recognized something within her that would fit into this damned world of his? She had resigned herself in the last day to the fact that this was no game, no simulation. The marks on her body and the strain that she felt when walking under chain, paid testament to the fact that she was in a reality – a strange, warped, perverted one – but nevertheless, a reality.

Her eyes widened as Kat’s fingers began to move with practiced skill. She guessed that Kat had been forced to serve the snake-woman slave too. Her lot in this hellish place was horrible. To have been a lawyer back on Earth, and then reduced to a slave on this horrible planet, if planet it was. Anya had had little time to think on that, and reasoned that it hardly mattered. All that mattered, she reminded herself, was escape.

Her head fell back involuntarily as Kat massaged her. Anya squirmed; she had wanted this for so long, and she had been teased and tormented by those bastards instead of...

She shook her head as if to clear it. What was she thinking? Did she want the evil bastard? Yes, she told herself, she probably did. If she was going to be a work slave, until she could escape, that was, then she wanted to be satisfied.

Anya cried out as Kat’s fingers continued to massage her, and the chains on her

feet rattled loudly.

Neither of them saw the snake-woman until it was too late. She shouted something in their sibilant language as Kat withdrew quickly and Anya gasped, pitching forward. In the dim light, Anya realized that Zila, the woman from the tent who had so pleased Elias, had seen them and was now sounding the alarm. She was lithe and tall, her body supple and moving snake-like as she gripped Kat and pulled her up, striking her with her free hand in the process. Despite the depredations of being marched across the desert, barefoot and in chains, and the recent tortures that had been forced upon her, Anya moved like lightning.

She rose from the sand in which she had been lying, as particles fell from her naked body, raising her arm across the arc that Zila's hand would be forced to take in order to beat Kat again. The force of Zila's blow was strong, but Anya's training had kicked in now. She had always been a fighter, even before she had joined the military. The training that she had received was something that she could never forget. Old honed reflexes reacted as she first blocked Zila's attempted strike, and then gripped and turned her arm around, in on itself and against her back. Both knew that one simple move could break the limb as Zila screamed. Anya's eyes narrowed. These people had been used to hearing her cry out, under the whip, staked out on the ground and tormented with insects. It was time they heard one of their own, she thought defiantly.

Her personal victory in the face of adversity was to be short lived, however. Zila's initial cry had summoned the guards and even some of the slaves from the surrounding encampment. Both she and Kat were slowly being surrounded. It was not long before she saw Elias, who spoke to Zila slowly and deliberately in his own language. Anya could feel Zila tense as she started to reply in her own tongue, using defiant words, grunting as Anya increased the pressure on her arm.

"Zila has decided that you might yet get a chance to live, Sereth," he said slowly, staring calmly at her.

"Oh really?" Anya replied, her breath coming in fits and starts as she struggled to hold Zila. Kat had moved to the protective circle of Anya's defensive stance, knowing only too well that neither of them had any real hope in the situation, and Anya too knew that the circumstances were desperate. Even if she could have used the threat of the lock she had on Zila to any effect, it was clear that Elias saw her only as slave flesh. If he wanted to, he could buy another slave or,

she slowly realized, perhaps wait for the next attractive Earth woman that Balham might send through the gate.

She tightened her grip as Zila grunted.

“It is pointless, Sereth,” Elias said slowly, moving forward. “Zila has suggested that you fight her in the Harja. If you agree, your blonde friend might yet live. Refuse...” He paused, looking at the snake-men around him. “Refuse, and your bones might be found here years from now, bleached by the desert sun.”

His reptilian stare found her eyes, as she slowly released the snake-woman slave in her grasp.

Chapter 6

When Elias had mentioned the Harja, implying that it was some sort of single combat, part of Anya had relished the opportunity to fight, to hit back at the depredations and humiliation that she had suffered thus far.

Had she known what the trial by combat actually entailed, she might have thought twice about agreeing to it. Although both she and Zila would be allowed to wield weapons – in this case, long curved daggers that Anya quickly realized were finely balanced slashing weapons, there were certain provisos in terms of their ‘freedom’ in the fight. She guessed that these conditions had been put in place at some ancient master’s behest so that he might enjoy the suffering of his naked slave women.

She balked as a heavy iron chain was produced. A central jointing chain was about four feet long. At each end of this, and perpendicular to the line of the jointing chain, ran two further lengths of heavy chain – each with catches of some nature at their ends. Anya stared, believing at first that the two opponents’ legs would be chained in some manner. She gasped as she watched one of the guards start to attach the catches to the thick rings that she now noticed pierced Zila’s chest. She stood proudly as the weight pulled on her, grunting a little. At this point, the guards realized that Anya had not been pierced, and thus there was nothing to attach the chain to. The omission was soon to be rectified.

She realized that matters had gone too far for it to be even worthwhile her fighting back once more. She therefore stared blankly in front of her as the guards pierced and ringed her, grunting once with the vicious sting as they did so. Her eyes watered as they fed the steel ring through, sealing it closed with a two hammer style instruments – one working as an anvil – as she was forced forward kneeling to watch them work on her.

She still wore the ankle chains as she slowly stood, on fire with the pain of piercing, though it was nothing in comparison with what was to come.

She winced as a similar thick chain, this one four feet in length, attached her to Zila. Anya was horrified. They were going to fight like this, chained together with heavy chains? She continued to be amazed at the cruelties and degradations

of this foul place, or planet, or whatever it was. She had read stories of heroes cast into far flung dimensions in her youth, though they had never suffered as she had.

“GAHHHN!” she cried as Zila grunted, testing the chain as it pulled taut, the rings dragging harshly on them. Zila smiled in response, gritting her teeth against the discomfort she herself felt, although Anya felt that this was clearly not her first time in this trial by combat, this Harja as they had called it. Also, Zila’s piercings were old, whereas Anya’s were new and painful. She wanted to tug back and show Zila that she was not afraid, though she held back not wanting the agony it would bring.

She stood stoic, facing her opponent, who still smiled evilly as she stared back at her. They were given the short, curved blades. Anya noted that the blade itself appeared to be made from some sort of dull metal, like steel though apparently lighter – almost stonelike in its appearance. A slave blade? Some inferior metal? She neither knew nor cared, she reminded herself, as she moved her feet on the soft sand.

“I... am still wearing leg chains? She has none?” she remarked. Indeed, the only slight difference outside of the heavy ankle fetters that she wore, was that Zila had a thin steel collar – possibly a mark of ownership, but something that would not weigh against her in the fight to come in the same manner that the leg chains would. Anya knew only too well the debilitating effect of the chains, having walked so far across the burning sands wearing them.

“You are but a work-slave, Sereth, and so you have not earned the freedom that a pleasure slave would have. Be thankful that you yet live,” Elias barked from the ring of snake-men that had begun to form around the two women.

Anya did not wince, and noticed that she did not even feel afraid. Zila pulled on the chains, hoping for a reaction. Anya merely grunted and clenched her teeth together, in anticipation of the fight to come. The blade shone slightly in the firelight, and she used her free hand to test the sharpness of the blade and found that it would be adequate if she were left with no choice but to kill Zila.

Even the snake-men guards surrounding them seemed excited at the prospect of the fight between the two slave women. Part of Anya wanted to end this, to end the suffering, and if she were to go down fighting then at least it would be with

blade in hand, albeit naked and tethered with the iron chains of slavery in this vile place.

“Begin,” shouted Elias, the tone of his voice suggesting that he too was excited at the prospect of the fight.

Zila, who had clearly performed the Harja before, grunted as she wrenched backward, pulling Anya off her balance as she in turn whined as the chains pulled on her. She regained her balance quickly, however, something which Zila had not been anticipating, and Anya’s blade sliced just shy of her ear. The thought passed through Anya’s mind that perhaps this naïve snake-woman had not realized she was fighting a trained soldier who, though not knowing the vagaries of fighting with a blade in this style, had been trained and had even fought in anger with combat knives throughout her career.

Anya therefore felt that the fight would be short, that she might even win, until she saw how fast Zila was. Using the momentum of her lunge, the snake-woman side stepped, her long feet shifting in the soft sand, and brought her knee into Anya’s stomach, moving quickly as she fell with the wind knocked out of her. The crowd of snake-men cheered as heavy chains clanked and Zila’s counter-stroke narrowly slashed past Anya’s sweating belly as she dodged at the last minute.

She was on the ground now, and she clearly would not be able to miss Zila’s second deadly stroke, unless... She gripped the chain that linked them and tugged, her fingers wrapped tightly around the rusting iron as she pulled at Zila’s tethered chest, in turn pulling her off balance and upsetting her next stroke. It was the chance she needed, as she kicked one foot into the snake-woman’s stomach, pushing her back but not down. In a fleeting moment, Anya realized that the ankle chains she wore had acted against momentum of the kick – she had to get used to fighting in chains, it seemed.

It was enough, however, to allow Anya to find her feet again unmolested. The crowd of slavers were cheering loudly now, but Anya’s full concentration was focused on Zila. She could barely hear the high pitched squeals of the guards and Elias, conscious, as if she had needed reminding, that she was fighting for her life.

She could see that she had hurt Zila, although she reasoned that it might have

been a bluff. Zila also looked angry, angry enough to promote a lapse in her concentration as she rushed Anya again, turning the blade at the last minute in an attempt to feint and get inside her guard. It was nothing that an ex-marine could not handle, however, as her trained reflexes allowed her to move with her assailant, matching blade for blade should a movement turn into an apparent strike. She reacted instinctively as the chains rattled and gave her a new weapon. Dropping her own blade into the sand, she moved behind the snake-woman, wrapping the length of chain that held them together around Zila's weapon arm and pulling

With a scream, Zila dropped her blade, but Anya had not yet finished. She wrapped the chain around her opponent's neck and pulled, grunting with the effort as Zila fell to her knees.

Red haze covered her eyes as she pulled harder and harder, conscious that it would take but a few more seconds either to break Zila's neck or to choke her. Either would suffice, wouldn't it? she told herself coldly. She would win, and the woman would be dead. She looked up, once, to see Elias on the far side of the crowd, his face staring at her with a look of... sorrow? Was that pity? Was it remorse? His slave would die at the hands of a warrior woman who he had even named after whipping, staking and branding her. How could a monster like that show pity? She pulled tighter as Zila gagged, seeing Elias's expression change to one of horror. He had expected her to lose to the mighty Zila, that much was clear. She doubted if he would have spared much pity for her.

Anya paused, and slowly let go of the chain, loosening the deadly hold on Zila's neck. Part of her screamed inside. What was she doing? She watched the limp form of her opponent fall, stared at her as she hit the soft sand, and then watched her gag and struggle for breath. Anya let go of her and gasped in pain when her newly acquired piercings were pulled taut as Zila struggled on the ground and became further entangled in the chains.

The crowd of snake-men and slaves that had surrounded the makeshift arena had become quiet. Elias broke the silence.

"Finish her," he said slowly, his face betraying his sense of duty over longing. "Do it now!"

Anya looked up, and shook her head in response. He did not want her to kill

Zila. She could see that plainly on his face. She wondered idly if, had the tables been turned and Zila had been in the unlikely position of debating whether or not to kill her, he would have looked so sad.

“Pick up the blade and finish her,” he repeated. Zila had stopped coughing now and looked up at her master, tears in her eyes as she wiped sand from her face. She made no move to re-engage with Anya, realizing that she was in fact lucky to be alive. She started to unwrap the chain from her body, starting to raise herself to her knees, but making no move to reach for either of the blades in the sand a few feet away. Anya watched her carefully, starting to get her breath back after the fight.

“If you do not finish her,” Elias said slowly, “then...”

“Master?” Zila interrupted, in almost perfect English. “The Earth woman fought well. She has spared my life. I have never been defeated in the Harja, yet she has allowed me to live. It... it breaks the code, but I live. Is this not pleasing to you?”

Zila struggled with the words, and it seemed that Elias struggled even more to hear them. He slowly, deliberately, stepped between his men and strode across the sand toward them. Without warning, he slapped Zila hard across the face with the back of his hand. Her fall pulled Anya towards her, and Elias looked down at them as Anya too squealed in pain.

“Firstly, slave, do not suggest that I lower myself to have an emotional attachment to a slave, and secondly,” he paused as Anya stared up, and Zila nursed her face, whining. “Do not presume to lecture me on the code of the Harja.”

He raised his hand once more, making ready to strike, as Anya tensed. She knew that she would try to defend Zila this time. It was inexplicable to her, but she knew that she would do it. She balanced her weight on her chained feet as they sank slowly into the sand.

Elias did not strike, however. He lowered his hand, shaking, as he backed away.

“Put them both in ball. They’ll both walk to Urra.”

Anya wondered what was meant by being put ‘in ball’, though she was sure that

it was not good. She also wondered at Zila's comment. She had called her an Earthwoman? It implied she was not even on the same planet. She wondered again at what was going on, as her focus was broken by the sound of more heavy chains being dragged toward her and Zila.

* * * * *

Michelson could hear the droning, a rhythmic pulsing somewhere far away, but getting closer. He did not usually choose to sleep in his room at the office building, though, of course, it had been built just for such an eventuality – that he had been working so late, or needed to be in the office to such a time, that he might as well stay where he was rather than make the effort to drive the hour long journey home, simply to have to return to work the following morning. It was one of the advantages of having gone through three marriages, he had mused once more before eventually falling into a drug induced slumber.

What was that droning, he thought again, slowly being prompted to wakefulness by some damned noise that just would not go away. Realization dawned on him, however, slowly and with considerable prompting of his faculties, that it was the cell-phone beside his bed. He had left clear instructions for Balham to call him – disturb him, even during the middle of the night, should he see any developments on his monitors. The gate system offered considerable advantages, not least of which was the ability to monitor certain parts of the reality through access points at the entry zones they had created. Of course, he reminded himself as she slowly turned, as pains in his lower back almost threw him into spasm (damn, he would need more painkillers), they could not monitor every corner of a parallel reality, but their work at providing gates in the relevant places, in positions where only the most technically advanced scrutiny would find them, had paid many dividends in terms of their work.

Dammit, the phone simply was not going to stop droning, he considered as he eventually sat up and gritted his teeth against the pains in his back. He was getting old, but, as he kept reminding himself, he was not quite dead yet.

“Yes, Balham,” he grunted into the phone as he hit the receive button.

“Ah... yes sir... sorry to disturb you, sir...” Balham said in hushed tones as if speaking quietly might dilute the fact that he had woken Michelson from his slumber. “It’s Anya, sir. Ms Larson has arrived in Urra with the slavers. You mentioned that you wanted to be informed.”

Michelson could hear the combination of excitement and heavy breathing on the phone. Clearly, Balham had been watching Anya before he called. Michelson hoped that he had not been fantasizing about her again – especially as it was one of his own employees.

* * * * *

“Run the video, Balham,” Michelson said slowly.

Michelson watched Balham’s hands shaking as he typed frantically on he keyboard. He sighed. How many times had the perverted little prick already watched the scene? He raised his head to the large monitor as it flashed into life once more. The image of the city gate from the inside of Urra was blurred and fuzzy at first, though soon became focused into a less grainy clarity. The position of the gate in this instance faced straight down the main ‘street’ – albeit a dusty, filthy lane rather than a street – winding into the busy city from the gate in the slightly curving adobe style wall. Balham had cut the video playback to show what Michelson (and indeed Balham) had wanted to see.

The procession of Szarja slave traders entered the city with an attitude of supreme arrogance, given to both the human guardsmen who watched sullenly as they burrowed their way into the busy throng of traders, and any who paused to stare too long at either them or their stock. The human women of the city especially shied away from the oncoming procession, lest they should be sighted and perhaps picked out later as good stock for either the pleasure pit of some nobleman’s harem or, worst of all, the chained hell of a wheel on a slave ship, under the horrible whip of a perverted overseer.

The giant desert reptiles pulled the cages slowly along the dusty lane, toward the aspect of the camera.

“Is she in the cage, Balham? I can’t see the women inside. Show me more detail,” he said impatiently, placing his hands on the bench beside Balham, as if hoping that the imposition of his weight on the bench might force some action.

“No... no, sir. Please, if you’ll just be patient,” Balham stuttered.

“I’m not known for my patience,” Michelson retorted, sighing. Then he saw her.

He raised his hands from the bench, folding his arms instinctively as he saw the image of what Anya had become. He did not recognize her right away. At first he saw a dusty and filthy human slave in very heavy chains, walking beside an apparently exhausted and taller Szarja slave woman. He stopped himself from gasping with difficulty when he saw what had been done to her.

He could make out lashes across her lithe, naked body. It was clear that she had been whipped – with some of the welts recent in an attempt to force her to walk across the hot sands, by the look and position of them. What was worse, however, was the effect of the heavy slave irons that she had been placed in. Both women wore the same accoutrements. They had both been pierced with iron rings that now had a heavy chain linking them. These chains, however, were tethered to a towing chain attached to the back of the last of the steel cage-carts. Michelson winced as he saw Anya gasp when the cart lurched and the piercing pulled at her flesh as her exhausted legs tried to adjust to the change in speed.

It would have been easier for both women simply to grasp the chain that pulled them and thus alleviate some of the desperate pressure on them, were it not for the fact that their hands were otherwise occupied. They carried a heavy iron ball in their hands, the muscles in their arms clearly indicating that its weight prohibited it from being carried in one hand. Had they simply been able to drop the ball, matters might have been simple. However, a devious slaver method of torture, which he had seen before in other horrible circumstances, had been used here once more.

A thick steel ring had been used to pierce her between her legs. To this, a thick chain was added – this in turn being attached to the heavy ball. The length of chain was short of the ground. Hence, if she let go of the ball, it would drop and swing – causing agony. The contrivance was known as being put ‘in ball’ by the savage slavers of the Szarja people. Michelson winced as he looked down at Balham, who was licking his lips as he smiled. He had seen the device used

before, and even he thought it horrible. Clearly, the more perverse Balham loved the fact that the tall, lithe and muscled woman who had been Anya Larsen was naked, showed the signs of having been whipped, and now wore heavy debilitating chains across her body.

Michelson could also clearly see the crude brand that had been placed on her navel; the eight-pointed sign of the wheel, the symbol of the work slave. He pushed himself away from the bench as he watched Anya stumble through the street, the strained look of frustration and pain on her face with each step, as her hands and arms struggled with the heavy ball, unable to do anything about the agonizing pull that made her stumble, exhausted, behind the iron caged slave cart.

As she passed away from the monitoring point, he caught a glimpse of the woman beside her, one of the tall Szarja people. Interestingly, that one had worn a collar – a pleasure slave collar, and yet she was held in ball and chain. She must have done something to annoy her master, he reasoned idly, as they passed by the corner of the street.

“Play it again, Balham,” he said slowly.

Chapter 7

Anya's feet were swollen and sore from the walk across the desert. Her arches and soles ached, felt as if they had been burnt from the hot glassy surface and the miles that she had walked. Had that been her only discomfort, however, walking barefoot across the sands might even have been bearable. As it was, the thick chains had pulled at her piercings for hours, stretching her flesh in agonizing fashion. Even that might have been tolerable, if her hands had been free to pull back on the chains, but the ball prevented that – prevented everything.

The steel itself was heavy, and required particular concentration to hold it and walk without causing additional distress. The fact that the length of the chain meant that the ball would fall short of the ground, if it did fall, and pull hard on the ring that pierced her, gave added impetus to the desire to hold onto it, though that meant she could do nothing about the endless harsh pulling on her other piercings. The device and her predicament combined to produce true torture, across the seemingly endless hours that the desert crossing had taken.

Even Zila seemed to be having trouble with her dilemma, perhaps more due to the fact that the erstwhile pleasure slave had never expected to be tethered with ball and chain, walking behind the slave cart across the hot sands, rather than in it. Zila had spoken few words during their travel across desert. Even during the cold nights, she had remained silent. Anya had sensed tears on some nights, as she drifted in and out of a fitful sleep. She had told herself not to cry. She had told herself that she had faced worse situations in training and when she had been serving in the military but, inside, she knew that she had not.

Training had, of course, prepared her for being captured to some degree, even for interrogation, but she had never prepared herself for being held as a naked slave in chains, and certainly never to be sold as a slave. The pain created by the piercings, the ache in her arms from carrying the weight of the ball, and the sting from the lashes that she had received, served to remind her that this was no game, and that she could never have been prepared for it. All that she could do was use that training and experience to survive, to make it through until she could find a chance to escape the hell that she found herself in.

The city of Urra stank. That much she could be sure of. She noted immediately,

however, that the people were human; smaller, dirtier, perhaps less well fed and muscled, but clearly human. Did that mean that this planet, or wherever she was, was mostly human and these snake-people that she had met, who had enslaved her, did not make up the indigenous population? Part of her was relieved, as she grunted, her flesh stretched again by the pull of the cart in front of her. At least now she would not be a human on an alien world, though bearing in mind that most of the people now watching her viewed her simply as another slave, who could be bought and sold for pleasure or work, she was not sure that relief fully described her new situation.

* * * * *

Elias's slave caravan, complete with its heavily chained, punished slaves in the shape of Anya and Zila, eventually wound its way through the dry, stinking city. The smell and the noise assaulted Anya's senses. Being chained as she was seemed to arouse interest amidst the local populace. It was not normal for a slave to be punished 'in ball', especially when she had yet to be sold to a master or mistress and collared. Zila explained this slowly as potential buyers watched the pair walk barefoot through the dry dust and filthy pools of waste in the city streets.

"What... what will happen to you, Zila?" Anya eventually asked her partner in misery, as she held the ball, her arms tired from the daily grind of holding the ball as she marched, her piercings sore and her flesh aching and stretched by the horrible motion of the cart. Zila had said little during the long walk across the sands; indeed, with the little water that they had been spared, it was best to concentrate on walking in time to reduce pain, while focusing on not dropping the heavy steel ball.

"I forgot to thank you for sparing me," she grunted, not answering the question. "I thought that it was a curse you have condemned me to a life of hard work, but perhaps it is for the best. Clearly, my Master does not want me any longer."

So, she was prepared to speak. Anya had already heard Zila speak English, believing perhaps that she had learned it from Elias. She had not known, however, how Zila felt after the Harja. It was the most she had spoken since

Anya had spared her life.

“Maybe he didn’t have a choice? EUGHHH!” Anya gasped as the cart hit a rut in the road, upsetting the delicate rhythm that she and Zila had nearly perfected, as the chains that pulled them tightened on the piercings and almost made them stumble and drop the heavy steel balls, which would have made their circumstance considerably more painful.

“Perhaps,” Zila grunted in response. “Perhaps you know our people, and their not wanting to lose face, more than you realize.”

“They’re no different to many cultures I have worked with,” she gasped, “on Earth.”

““You will never go home,” Zila whispered. “You must make the best use of what remains of your life in chains.”

“You’re just full of good news, aren’t you? And what sort of life might that be?”

“At the wheel – like the wheel that you have been branded with. You will die there in chains. Maybe two years, maybe five, maybe even ten as a bent, broken old hag. But you will die there.”

Anya held back tears at Zila’s words. There was no remorse, no sentiment, no emotion; simply the implication that work slavery was the same as being condemned.

“Well, thanks for sugar coating it for me,” Anya replied. She could not let herself fall into the despair of submitting to slavery. She could not. Their brief conversation was halted as the caravan arrived at its destination. Anya took it all in, and had to remind herself to fight back against despair once more.

The center of the city reminded her less of a town square and more of a massive dustbowl. It was, however, filled with slaves. Many caravans seemed to be congregating in this area, all towing slaves in coffles or, for a few lucky men and women, in iron carts similar to Elias’s. All were naked and burnt by the sun. Indeed, almost all appeared once more to be human, with a few of the snake people dotted about. Of those, most appeared to be clothed slightly, or at least chained and branded in a manner which suggested that they were to be sold as pleasure slaves rather than work slaves.

The caravans assembled and began to set up as if this were a normal style market, with larger purveyors of flesh fighting with smaller entrepreneurs over the area where they might display their stock. Anya saw one unfortunate woman, in her forties perhaps and by the look of her clearly unused to being a slave, being stripped naked of her finery and tied to the post of a cart, where she was promptly whipped harshly for some infraction. A man of similar age, whose name she appeared to be screeching as the lash curled and slapped across her back, walking away smiling, secreting a bag of coin as he did so. Had he sold his wife to slavery? What manner of place was this? Anya reminded herself that she had been asking the question a lot. In the center of the plaza, a large wooden stage dominated the scene. Around it were dotted smaller, round slave blocks. Already, women and a few strong looking men were being displayed in chains, poked and prodded as if they were animals, by buyers who cared little if they were human or not – considering only whether they would work hard or fuck hard.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the snake-man guard who said something to Zila, who winced and swallowed nervously in response, before nodding slowly. As Anya watched, the guard disconnected her chest chain from the pulling chain, although the rings were still left in place through her piercings. She then closed her eyes and dropped the ball, crying out but remaining stock still as it fell and pulled harshly against her.

Anya was shaking as the same guard came toward her. Her eyes were fixed on the dangling weight between Zila's legs as it pulled, and tears began to form in her closed eyes. The hooded snake-man began to unlock her from the towing chain, and as the chain slapped against her raw chest she sighed with relief.

“Drop the ball,” he hissed at her in English.

“What? No... wait,” Anya responded. She had carried it for so long, across miles of sand that had burnt her soles with each step. “I carried it well. Why must I...?”

The cane slashed her painfully, which should not have been entirely unexpected, she considered later, and neither could her reaction have been controlled that much. With a squeal of anguish, she pulled back, almost dropping the ball. The second slash, however, stung so harshly that she dropped the ball instinctively and raised her hands, screaming as it fell, restrained by its own chain and pulling

harshly on her.

She grimaced, wide eyed, and grunted, standing at attention almost, staring at the man who had beaten her as the ball swung lazily between her legs. She stared on. She would not cry. She would take the pain.

“Stand beside this one... now!” he said, proffering the cane again.

Anya moved slowly, trying to control the swing that brought new pain with each step, and stood beside Zila, the iron balls swaying and pulling at them as they stood, ready for display.

* * * * *

Balham watched, as Michelson donned the heavy armored breastplate and moved to the rack to find a suitable helmet.

“But I should accompany you, sir, should I not?” He licked his lips at the thought of seeing Anya in ball, on the slave block, naked and displayed. He tried to control his emotions, though he was finding it hard to disguise the fact that he felt aroused and excited.

“I think not, Balham. Not yet, anyway. I think you’re not thinking straight, eh?”

“Perhaps when we have Anya settled in chains on a sand-ship. Maybe you can visit her then.”

Balham grunted and turned away.

“No, Balham. I’ll be the first to see her in the flesh, so to speak.” He smiled as he continued to dress.

* * * * *

The first time that Anya had visibly reacted to having her muscles squeezed by a potential buyer, she had had her thighs thrashed with the cane – a few strokes to remind her that, as a slave, she had few rights. In fact, she reminded herself, she had none. She winced as the fire of the cane subsided, and she was told that she would be tested for her strength and this would increase her worth. It was Elias himself who intimated to her that a worthless slave should have been ‘left tied in the desert to be food for insects’ – a reminder of the fate she had escaped through her admittance of her lot as a slave; a reminder, perhaps, of how she could end up staked out and forgotten again, if she displeased him.

She noted that Zila had tried once to look at Elias, to catch his attention and determine if her fate, and her being put in ball, was but a temporary lull in her ‘relationship’ with her former master. She was disappointed to learn, however, that Elias now considered her a work slave, pausing only once to remind one of his men that she was to be branded as such, in a similar manner to Anya. It was then that the tears came to Zila’s eyes. Anya wanted to comfort her in some way, but to move from the painful position in which she stood – standing erect, hands held behind her back, with the ball swinging freely from her as she grimaced at the effect its weight was having on her – warranted more thrashes from the cane or lashes from the whip.

Even as she was poked and prodded by men dressed in light material and head covering garb, almost sailor like in their clothing (although she had seen no visible ocean so far), she stared forward and accepted it, yelping once and attracting the attention of the guards as her chain was pulled harshly by a potential buyer, presumably in order to gauge her reaction to pain.

She ached as she stood for hours. Zila seemed stronger, though Anya found herself calling on all her reserves of strength in order to stay conscious. She had received no food and very little water during this new ordeal. At least now the sun was beginning to set, and the effect on her harshly sunburned flesh was easing somewhat, even if the pull of the ball had become agonizing.

“I... can’t stand for much longer,” she whispered to Zila. Her feet were swollen and aching, not just from standing in the same position, but from the effects of days of walking across the sands barefoot. In her survival courses, she had always at least had boots. Granted, she had been naked and held in poor conditions during interrogation training, though she had always known that if she stayed strong she would pass those courses. This was no course, she

reminded herself again.

“Stay strong,” Zila replied. It was almost as if, since the Harja, they were becoming friends – or, at least, slaves who shared the same horrific lives and circumstances and thereby became dependent upon each other to some degree. “We will be allowed to rest soon, I promise.”

Anya made to reply, then stopped as a guard glanced across at them. Judging that she was in no condition to accept further punishment, she stared ahead and remained quiet.

Thankfully, at least for those slaves who remained on display, the plaza had started to clear with the descent of the sun. Anya had witnessed the worst horrors of the market. Men and women sold naked on the block in chains, recalcitrant slaves whipped half to death or caned on the soles as an example to others. She had seen few of the snake-people, though those she had seen had been slavers. In every case that she had seen, however, their women had been slaves, or apparently little more than slaves – some being allowed to wear loincloths, though they appeared to have been exceptions to the rule as they still wore collars. Slaves had screamed as they were branded, reminding Anya of her own painful experience. As the guards came to guide them to another area, Zila was taken aside, to a tent where braziers heated and her branding awaited. She wanted to stop what was going to happen, for Zila’s sake. She could not hope to understand what it meant for a pleasure slave to become forsaken by her master and ‘re-branded’ as a lowly work slave, though Anya thought she at least understood how Elias’s rejection of her could be devastating. She closed her eyes as she walked, hobbled by her swollen feet and the ball, as she heard cries of struggle, the long hiss and the deafening scream that came from the tent where Zila had been taken.

Still in ball, Anya was allowed to wash herself down with water from a barrel, and also allowed to drink from the same water first. She drank deeply, and then began to wash the dirt from her body and dab the aching parts. She had not realized that Zila would have to drink from the same water, as she was dragged into the small tent some moments later. Anya wanted to apologize for using it to bathe in, though Zila, still in agony, seemed not to care, drinking deeply before starting to wash herself.

“I... They told me that we will have to serve at Elias’s table tonight. He has a

guest.”

“Serve?” Anya replied weakly, almost falling down as she sat to rest on a mat.
“What does that mean?”

“I will explain. You must listen carefully, for to make a mistake could earn harsh punishment,” Zila explained.

“Why does that not surprise me?” Anya moaned.

* * * * *

Anya hefted the large wine jug. The muscles in her arms tensed as she did so, the weight of the large, double handled container seemingly designed to combine with the weight of its contents to make the life of the slave even more agonizing. She could handle it, she told herself, as she pulled the jug from the bench where it had been filled with wine. She did not dare look at the snake-man guard, who coiled the lash – a thick whip that she had just felt across the back of her thighs for working too slowly. Her loud yelp had been brought on less by the whiplash and more from the movement of the chain and ball that rattled and swung freely as she twisted. Her chest chains rattled too, though with less pain. Zila carried her own jug of wine as they both moved toward the door that was pushed open by the guard.

After the slave market, they had been allowed to sleep on the dusty wooden floor of a large adobe building – which Elias had either hired for his stay in Urra, or actually belonged to him. Either way, it was sparsely furnished and stank of slavery; a smell of sweat mingled with piss and fear, which Anya was gradually getting more used to with each passing day in chains. She reminded herself that the most comfort she had had in the last few days had been centered on her being allowed to sleep on a wooden floor, and being given water.

The ball and chest chains had been left on both of them. The ring of the ball chain now caused Anya considerable discomfort, though she noticed that Zila had little trouble – perhaps being used to a life of slavery and its requisite piercings. Her own ring had distended and pulled at her, making the piercing red

raw and making it difficult to walk or even to piss. She had prided herself, even in her military life, in trimming her pubic hair. She had had few lovers, but the affairs had always been passionate, and she knew what men liked to see ‘down there’. The only thing that past care and attention to her pubic hair created now was a more obvious swollen area, which potential buyers could look at before they saw the work slave brand. Strangely, she had noticed as she had stood being looked at by buyers, they immediately looked at and felt her mouth after seeing the brand. She was unsure exactly why that was. Were they ascertaining whether she could service them with her mouth in a pleasing fashion? She shuddered, and put such thoughts from her mind.

The room that Zila and Anya now entered was in semi darkness, with drapes pulled across the openings in the wall to shelter the two figures who knelt on cushions at a low table from the rays of the sun. The room was cool, strangely, Anya thought as she limped and grunted, carrying the wine jug toward the table and the two figures, who had both been whispering.

“Ah. Wine has arrived.” Anya gasped as she recognized Elias’s sibilant voice nearest her. She could see the other man now, his face strangely familiar as her eyes adjusted to the light, and he was clad in some form of light, though ornate, armor, a large sword on the floor near by him. Anya tried to remember what Zila had told her; to pour from the left side of the master (so that his sword or whip hand might remain free), to never let the jug touch ground or table (so that the slave might never achieve a position – morally or physically – wherein she might be seen as more powerful than the master), and not to wince or cry out due to the movement of the ball – and especially not to let it swing so that it touched the master (so that it was made clear to all that the slave knew her place). Anya had wanted to scream at being told such rules, scream that she was expected to perform like a slave, and scream for escape and revenge. She was a soldier, damn it, not some slave to serve like an animal.

Gritting her teeth against the movement of the ball and the effort of carrying the jug, she moved to Elias’s guest as Zila began to pour the wine into the large pewter jug by Elias’s hand. The man in armor looked up. She knew that she must not look him in the eye, unless she was told to. Still, her frustration at being treated like an animal was palpable as she set her jaw, knowing that the price of rebelliousness would be the whip, or worse.

She positioned her legs both to heft the jug and ensure that she spilt none, as Zila

had told her, and to ensure that the steel ball would not swing – not only so that she could avoid pain, but also so that she minimized the likelihood of the ball striking the master.

The wine began to pour into the cup. She was sweating now. Why could they not just open a drape, let some air into this damn place. She moaned a little, the combination of position, swollen piercings and heavy chains having their effect upon her. She needed food and water, and she was being treated like a slave. She could do little as the armored man reached slowly for her dangling chain and began to pull.

“GNNNN!”

What the hell was he doing? Was this some part of the test? Some further degrading way of keeping slaves in check.

“I see that this one is destined for the wheel... or perhaps the mines, eh Elias?”

Anya gasped. She recognized the voice, and in a lapse of concentration she looked up. She had positioned her chained feet so that the weight as she poured would be measured. The slight lapse of concentration might have meant that she spilled some of the wine, though initially she remained stock still.

Her eyes widened, however, as she recognized the face in the steel helmet. The face of Michelson.

Chapter 8

“M... Michelson,” she gasped, her body and mind in shock as she recognized the familiar face of her superior in the company. It was too much, of course, her lack of control with the startling revelation that shocked her to the core tangible now, as the wine spilt on the table and she stepped back, letting the clay jug hit the floor and smash, the ball dangling and swinging against its largest remaining piece with a clang.

“Michelson?”

Elias stood up, brushing Zila away with a movement of his hand, as the guard in the next room stormed in, uncoiling the long lash in his hand, looking to Elias for a sign that he should beat the wench to the floor with lashes.

Tears formed in Anya’s eyes as she desperately tried to cover herself, a hand moving to the piercing between her legs and an arm moving across her breasts.

“I’ll have her whipped and crucified, Captain,” Elias hissed.

Anya stared at him, and then back to Michelson, instinctively backing away as the ball bounced against her leg.

“You... you bastards. What is this?” she shouted, almost hysterical, as Zila shook her head, trying desperately to get her to be quiet.

“Dammit, Sereth! Elias said, and then glanced back at Michelson. “I’ll put the nails in myself, Captain. I do apologize,” he said behind gritted teeth as he signaled his guard and moved toward Anya himself.

“Wait, Elias. Please wait,” Michelson said slowly, standing up and raising a hand. Both Elias and the guard stopped. As Anya began to get control of herself once more, she realized that Michelson, whoever he was in this world, clearly had influence – though perhaps having influence over a snake man slaver was purely relative.

Anya shivered now, as Michelson approached, smiling. The armor made him

seem imposing. She realized that she still covered up in front of him. She slowly began to drop her right arm, which she had used to cover herself, the thick chain rattling as she did so.

She tensed, her arm muscles quivering. She was going to strike Michelson, for what he had done, for sending her here, for turning her into a branded, chained slave. She knew that the punishment would be severe. In fact, Elias had hinted at crucifixion for her even pretending to be human again. She did not care. If he wanted to put in the nails, as he had said, then so be it. She had had enough. She began to raise her hand, her body filled with what was left of her adrenalin, as Michelson, the heavy armor seemingly slowing him little, moved first. He gripped her wrist, caught it mid movement, even as she tried to jerk it away.

“We have a lively one, Elias, yes?”

Anya grunted, staring into the eyes of her former superior, who was now clad in the garb so reminiscent of the few military men she had seen in the city, both on the way in and in the plaza – surveying slaves.

Her eyes narrowed. It was Michelson. It truly was, but did he even know who she was? Was this some other particularly cruel device of this particular hellish reality in which she found herself suffering? Oh he knew all right. She could see it in his eyes.

“Follow my lead, Anya, or he will have you nailed to a cross to die,” he whispered in her ear, as she gasped. He knew, and he wanted this.

She was angry at first, her body responding by moving the hand that he gripped in vice like fashion. Had she been stronger, she might even have got away, welted the heel of her hand into his nose as she had been trained. As it was, she was weak. Days of trudging naked in chains across the sands, in addition to the savage whippings that she had received, and the poor food, had made her weak. She nodded slowly, stepping back, the ball swaying and pulling on her.

“Yes, Captain. She is a feisty one, as you say. But I will have her punished,” Elias said, his voice low and sinister as he stared at them. Zila had by now retreated well out of range of the lash, or whatever instrument Elias or his guard might still use to quell the situation.

“Wait, Elias,” Michelson retorted, not taking his eyes off Anya. She was shocked

by the effect his words had on both of the snake-men, who had started to move before he spoke, then froze stock still.

““Let me deal with her. She might even be of use to me. If she pleases me, I might persuade you to let me buy her.”

Michelson smiled at Anya before turning his head toward Elias and nodding.

* * * * *

Anya knelt in the uppermost room of the tall adobe building. She was bathed in sweat. The room was cool, and a pleasant breeze made the window covers rattle lightly. The pain still gripped her. She had been brought upstairs by snake-men. Elias and Zila had stayed behind with Michelson. She wanted to tell herself that she was lucky to be alive, though she scarcely believed it.

She had been forced to kneel and push her knees apart. The guards had then, unbelievably, she thought, started to remove her chains. She had worn the ankle chains for so long that they had left a mark where the steel had rubbed. She winced as they were pulled away. Her wrists were pulled behind her back and tied tightly together with some type of thin leather cord. They pushed her knees apart again and reached for the chain. She pulled away, gasping, until she realized that they were unlocking the ball and chain that had pulled at her for so long, leaving the piercing to which it had been secured. She sighed with relief. She might be allowed to walk without the ball again – though she realized that it was unlikely, after what she had done. No, she told herself, she had done nothing wrong. She would not start to think like a slave from some fantasy story. The snake-men repositioned her knees to adopt the proper kneeling position, pushing her in the back until she sat bolt upright. One pointed to her chest chains and spoke in the language that she did not understand. The other answered as they turned and began to leave, locking the door on the way out, leaving that chain in place.

Anya’s head fell as she looked down at herself the round ring still clearly evident, the eight pointed wheel brand clearly marking her. The cruel ball and chain had been thrown into the corner of the room.

So now what? she asked herself. I'm to wait for Michelson to come up and have me? She shook her head at the thought. No, she reasoned, this was it. She had been partially released from chains and she would take her chances – possibly even get a weapon and take a few of these bastards with her. Perhaps the ball and chain might be used as a weapon, she considered.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the door being unlocked. Damn, she did not have time to prepare an ambush now, she considered.

She looked up as the armored figure entered. It was Michelson.

“You bastard,” she grunted as he walked toward her. She began to make the effort to stand.

“Stay on your knees, Anya, or I'll whip you,” he said, letting the long length of leather fall forward as she heard it swish on the ground. She gasped inwardly. She knew how it would feel against her back, her thighs, her belly, and she had no wish to feel it again. She remained erect on her knees, staring forward as her frustration was evident on her face. Michelson moved towards her and grabbed the heavy links of chain as he did so.

“They pierced you and chained you then?” he said. He pointed between her legs. “And a piercing down there. How nice. You really must have pissed these people off, Anya.”

“You go to hell, you perverted bastard,” she hissed behind her grimace. “What the fuck is this place? How do you do it? Was I drugged, or...?”

“Oh Zirith is quite real, my dear.” He tugged on the chain, pulling her forward and she grunted. He would not make her scream. He would not, she told herself.

“GNNNN... and, they make someone like you important here? Bullshit. This is some sort of wet dream cooked up by you and Balham... EAHHHHHH!” She cried out as he hooked the whip handle under the chains and yanked hard. Her arms flexed, unable to stop the torment.

“Yes, that's correct. I wanted to see how a warrior like you might fare here. And, of course, I had other reasons.”

He turned to face her now. His trows were baggy – a light, thin, leather style

material with fashioned armor pads on them. She noticed the distinctive signs of arousal there now. She shook her head.

“I’m not going to fuck you, Michelson. You can forget it.”

“You’re a slave, Anya. You’ll do what you’re told,” he said, bringing the whip handle back and taking a step away from her. Her attempt at spitting was weak – she had little enough moisture with which to form the spittle, though it landed on his boot as he sighed in frustration.

“You could be crucified for denying the slaver downstairs, and you could face slow torture, over days, for what you just did.”

Without warning, he raised the thick whip and brought it down across her splayed thighs as she yelped agonizingly, closing her legs in response to the slap. He circled her, using the lash expertly another five times, laughing at her screeches as her body twisted and arched in response to the fiery whip strokes that tore at her.

“GNNNNN.... fuck you,” she said, her head falling again.

“Your body has been marked harshly by Elias’s whips, Anya. I expected nothing less after you were taken into slavery. Indeed, his decision to mark you as a work slave is unsurprising. You could do little else, though I think you will accede to my demands without my having to force the issue,” he said slowly, circling back around to stand in front of her.

She tried to laugh now. “And why exactly do you think that?” she said, finally raising her head, panting from the effort of taking the hard lashes across her body.

“Because, if you submit to me, I will tell you where on this world your husband Carlos is...”

Anya’s eyes widened in horror.

* * * * *

Zila raised her head and licked her lips.

“Might this one speak, Master?” she whispered softly as he moaned, lying back on the thin sheets of the low bed.

“Very well, slave, though you know that there is little I can do to change your fate now,” he responded, not even deigning to look at her as she crawled along the lower half of his body, her chains rattling.

“I understand that it is your wish that I now be... broken as a work slave, Master, and that I will be bent to my task and whipped, such that only the foul overseers will take pleasure from me.” She dared to glance up his lithe body to see if her statement had provoked a reaction. It had not. “...but this one wishes to ask what will happen to the Earth woman.”

Elias stirred now, and stared down at her.

“You care about the woman who humiliated you at the Harja? The woman who not only defeated you, Zila of the many victories, but who then allowed you to live, adding even further to your disgrace? You care about her, slave?”

Zila paused, knowing that to admit she might be even remotely interested in Anya’s fate might earn her the lash, or even the cross beside Anya’s if Elias decided to go ahead with the crucifixion. She had to be careful, but then, as a slave, she had spent many years learning what to say and what not to say.

“I merely wish to know if I might watch as you crucify her, Master.” She lightly kissed him as she finished speaking, distracting him.

“Gnnn... she will not be crucified,” he moaned.

“No, Master? Did you not say that you would hammer the nails in?”

“Have a care, slave,” Elias grunted as Zila bowed her head even further. “Captain Mykel-Sun has decided that he will have her to himself before she is sold at market. Perhaps being a slave to his whim is punishment enough for one such as her.”

Elias began to sit up, looking for his clothing.

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Anya had cried horribly – believing at first that Michelson’s twisted logic was designed in some way to torment her still further. She struggled in the bonds, but the thought that Michelson, twisted as he now seemed, might somehow be telling the truth, kept her on her knees, unable to stand or even move.

“You’re lying to me. The same way you lied to me about why I had to attend a science division training course, so that you could see me naked and chained?”

Michelson slowly placed the handle of the whip under her chin and raised her head.

“No, Anya. I’m telling you the truth. Carlos is here, mind and body. He wasn’t killed during any firefight. The story that you were told was a lie.

“He... He wouldn’t leave me, not without telling me, calling me...” She was struggling for words, for understanding. Of all the tortures that she had recently suffered, even the slightest doubt with regard to her husband’s death was the worst of all. She shook her head. “No, I won’t believe it.”

“It’s your decision,” Michelson said, lowering the whip as her head fell. “But when I walk out that door, you will be sold at market as a slave. Either way – there is nothing that I can do now to change that.”

“It’s what you wanted, you bastard,” she screamed.

“No. I wanted to see how you would fare in this world. So far, you have been impressive. A stint as a work slave might do you no harm,” he laughed.

“This isn’t a test. It’s your perverted wet dream,” she said in response, twisting on her knees in an effort to stand.

He began to untie his treads as she spoke, her eyes widening.

“Please me, and you will be sold with the knowledge of where your husband is. Choose carefully, for I will not force myself upon you. I can easily walk away and leave you without that knowledge, though with it, you might escape or find your way to the city where he lives. He might even buy you as his slave.”

Something about the statement seemed to excite Anya. If Carlos was alive, and if they were forced to stay in this place, would she not yearn to be his love slave? She realized that it had perhaps been one of her fantasies during their marriage, but not one that she had ever spoken about to him. Whether she liked it or not, something rang true in what Michelson said. Carlos’s body had been badly burned, and the tragedy of not knowing that it had been him had made her loss even worse. Was Michelson lying now? He had a point, though. Armed with the knowledge, assuming that he told her the truth, might help her in this place. She might even find him, and it would certainly explain the nature of his disappearance, if not the reasons for it.

“Very well, Michelson, but if you lie to me...”

He smiled. “Lie on your back, Anya.”

She gasped. Was she really going to let him do this? Was there really any chance that he would tell her the truth? What choice did she really have? If Carlos was alive, she had to find him. She slowly rose from her kneeling position, moving awkwardly with her hands bound, and she lay back.

Chapter 9

Anya had been left alone, lying on the floor in the room for hours. She had been untied, though that did not mean she could escape. Guards had left a small amount of water with her, even as she still quivered. She sat up suddenly, recovering a little. Michelson? He had told her nothing... nothing! He had promised to reveal where Carlos was. She looked across the room and saw something. What was it? A piece of paper, or parchment, perhaps. She winced, crawling toward it as her chains rattled.

She made slow progress toward it, every movement painful for her legs and lower back, and when she reached for the small sliver of parchment, it fluttered to the floor as she misjudged her grip. Damn, she thought, she could not even hold something. She lifted it from the floor. There, in printed writing, in letters that she recognized – having seen Michelson's writing before, a single word – Chelen.

What the hell did that mean? Was he telling her where she might find Carlos? Was Chelen a place or a person or, in this place, a thing even? She let the leaf of paper fall, hearing a sound outside. The chains rattled as she turned and tried to stand. She moaned, and she could hardly move her legs. She had almost passed out, and she was unsure if part of that feeling was due to the fact that she was dehydrated, on the verge of passing out anyway, or whether the shock of the reality of being a slave had made her slightly unhinged.

She would remember the name, that much was certain, hoping that Michelson had not lied to her. She turned as the guards opened the doors, approaching her with heavy arm and leg chains.

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The slave market was bustling once more, if such a word could be used to describe it. 'Bustling' conjured up an image of traders and shoppers, purchasing

goods and wares in an innocent setting or backdrop. There was nothing innocent about this slavery, Anya quickly decided. She was paraded with other slaves in the morning, and then forced to stand in heavy leg chains, wrist manacles and the chest chains. She was thankful at least that they removed the cruel ball arrangement from her. Zila too had been freed of the horrible weight, though she was similarly clad in hand and foot chains. They were unable to speak to each other, as they were once more placed so as to permit inspection by prospective buyers. Both seemed to draw attention from buyers in terms of their applicability as pleasure rather than work slaves – the propensity for enquiring men to squeeze and pull at whatever part of them they chose, increasingly indicative of their wishes despite Anya’s inability to understand their language.

After hours of this treatment, with the threat of the whip ensuring that they could do little about it, both were concerned to see a woman inspecting them. Unlike other prospective buyers, she checked muscle and thigh, prodding at their backs. Anya winced as old whip scars were felt and her back muscles prodded.

“You are from Earth?” the woman said at one stage, with a clear English accent

Anya’s first instinct was to look at the guards, as if permission even to speak was something that had to be granted or earned.

“Y... Yes,” she whispered, wanting to ask the woman, who appeared to be in her forties but fit and lithe in her white dress with hair pushed up and tied, if she was ‘of Earth’ herself.

“An American?” she said, moving around to Anya’s front and casting a glance also at Zila, who stood tall and erect, her smaller breasts pushed forward, the chain still attached to her.

“You ended up a work slave, hmmm.”

She ran her hand across Anya’s stomach and down her thighs as she shuddered, remembering Elias’s touch and closing her eyes.

“You have training,” she said. “You aren’t like other Earth women. You are hard, strong. You might last a number of years on my wheel,” she said at last, her mouth close to Anya’s face as she spoke.

“Slavery is still slavery, however. You’ve taken the lash, a little. Your back is

strong, as are you. Yes, you might prove a good acquisition.”

The woman had her own guards, who surveyed Anya and Zila quietly as their Mistress appraised her potential new stock. Finally, she stared Anya square in the eyes, before turning and walking away.

She said something in the language that Anya did not understand as she left, her small entourage nodding their understanding, looking back at the slaves.

“What did she say?” Anya dared to whisper to Anya, when the snake-men guards had turned their heads away.

“That she would bid for us, when we are on the block,” Zila replied matter-of-factly.

Anya shuddered.

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Anya watched as Zila was led in chains up the wooden steps to the block. From her point of view in the line of slaves to be sold, she could see her only partially, but she could clearly hear as the crowd began to shout and call bids at the slaver before he had even started to jabber and encourage them to bid. She seemed popular, and there appeared to be some consternation at the sale. From what Anya could gather, despite her having been branded with a view to her being sold as a worker, several parties, seeing her lithe body and slim figure, had apparently registered their interest in her as a pleasure slave. At the end of the day, Anya reasoned, as she stood in line, the heavy chains grating on her wrists and ankles, what a master or mistress decided to do with a slave after purchasing ‘it’ was purely up to the master or mistress.

There were cheers from the crowd as the bidding intensified. Standing on tiptoe, staring at the side of the stage, Anya could see that Zila stood forlorn, her head bowed as the crowd whooped and encouraged the bidders to go higher and higher with their money.

A flick from a whip across her backside made her yelp as she came back down onto the soles of her feet, the chains rattling as she did so, a grunt from a slaver reminding her of her station.

It was soon over, and Zila was led from the stage. Anya could not see whether the mysterious woman with the English accent had been there to bid, so had no idea whether she might be sharing a fate with Zila or not. Zila seemed deflated, lacked the pride and bearing that she had shown only days before when she had been a faithful pleasure slave belonging to Elias. Anya looked up, hoping that Zila might register her, might give her a sign, but she was crying tears that began to drip down her face. What had happened?

There was no time to debate or consider it as she was pushed forward, her dirty chained feet being forced up the dusty wooden stairs, the heavy chains bouncing against her torso with each step. She had not considered how difficult it was to climb stairs in the leg chains, and she almost stumbled as she reached the top. She suppressed a shudder as she saw the auctioneer. He was a massive brute with one eye and a hunched back. Saliva fell from his slack jaw as he reached forward and gripped Anya's arm, pulling her toward the edge of the stage, talking in some foul language that she did not understand.

He pushed her forward in her chains, until Anya realized that she was meant to stand on the very edge, her long toes actually curling around it so that all her body could be seen. Perhaps work-slaves were required to be surveyed from head-to-toe, and thus evaluated on the basis of muscles, hands, feet and physique. She shook herself from such thoughts and focused on the crowd. She had faced enemy fire, interrogated prisoners, and even found herself interrogated by 'difficult' officers in the past, though nothing compared with the humiliation of facing a crowd of men and women, naked and in chains. She swallowed nervously as she felt their eyes upon her body, felt their gaze upon her piercings, her legs, her chains, the raw sores that had not healed from the piercings, and the older lashes that still covered her body and lower torso.

The slaver barked some words, poking her belly, gripping her legs, bringing a cane down across her thigh lightly as she grimaced, and the bidding began.

Despite the fact that she could not understand the words, Anya had seen cattle auctions in her past. Standing there, with bids and excitement building in the crowd, while the hunched brute beside her gripped and prodded in order to

excite the crowd, she tried not to think of how she was the cattle in this instance. She found a place beyond the crowd, a white adobe building on the far side of the plaza, far from the horror and stench of the slave market, and focused her attention there as the bidding intensified and her value increased. She could tell instantly that she was not as popular a find as Zila had been, but then she had not expected to be. Zila had been an experienced pleasure slave and that had probably been evident to the crowd of knowledgeable buyers. The fact that she had been branded again as a work-slave no doubt added an air of mystery and excitement to her as a potential rebellious slave who had to be broken to the lash again.

As the bidding went on, however, conscious of the fact that she was being viewed for hard labor, it became evident that the activity was becoming less heated as the price got higher. Her concentration on the edge of town was interrupted as she looked back at the two main bidders. One man, clad in a headdress and whose face was mostly covered by his beard, was bidding excitedly. She shuddered at the thought that she would become property, his property. As she focused on him, however, a second bid came in from the far side of the crowd. The other interested party was clad in armor, and Anya could see a small retinue of armed men and women with him – a line of purchased slaves was already being formed into a coffle for transport in their group. Behind them, on horseback, issuing instructions to the soldier that was doing the bidding was the English woman who had inspected Anya earlier.

Anya could not now take her eyes off her. She was from Earth, that much had been clear, though she did not expect any help from her on the basis of their last encounter.

She finally realized what it was that had made Zila cry. Though she had been used to being a slave, this act, this procedure that entailed being sold like a piece of meat, being less than human, tore at the psyche and the emotions. They had viewed her as a means to push a wheel, to pour wine, to serve her master or mistress in any way – and little else. Having being preferred by Elias, and now subject to the whims, lusts and bids of many potential ‘masters’, Zila’s nerve had been shattered, her confidence broken, and what faith in her future she had built up, had been rent asunder.

* * * * *

The journey out of the city was harsh. Anya counted seven slaves trudging across the hot sands outside the massive walls of Urra. Zila was not among them. Of the women that were, two were hulking and large – barbarian like – while the rest seemed normal. All were human, like her, though the weaker ones seemed even more wretched than she was. One, in constant tears, bore no whiplashes and seemed to have been sold to slavery for the first time. Of the others, who bore the marks of chains and were thin and emaciated, she guessed that they had been prisoners whose husbands or lovers had either cast them into slavery or were not able to pay whatever fine had been assigned to their partners.

The slaves had not yet been collared and were linked by having a chain passed through whatever piercings or chains they had. Despite her protests, Anya had had little choice but to accept the linking chain that was passed through the ring between her legs, and now was forced to march awkwardly out of the city, led by it. She sought some relief in the fact that at least she had not one more been placed ‘in ball’.

As they cleared the dune just outside the city, she saw the row of sand-ships for the first time, and finally realized just what had been meant these past days with regard to the term ‘wheel-slave’.

The End of Book One

Anya Larsen will return in Book Two – Slave to the Wheel