



YEAR OF THE OAR

CLARE SEVEN

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Chapter 1

"Name?"

She asked me again, as I glanced about the drab office. Paint was peeling from the walls, and the room stank of sweat and boredom.

"Justine ... Justine Laing. It's written on the form."

The heavily built, bespectacled, woman looked up from the pink form in front of me, as the desk creaked under her weight. The look on her face betrayed the fact that she was having a bad day, in a bad week, perhaps in a bad life.

"Thank you Miss Laing," she replied curtly, her voice wavering.

"Now," she continued. "You are out of work yes? And what is it you've been doing?" She glanced at the form. "You're thirty-three years old now, is that right?"

I nodded. "Yes. I've been a professional triathlete, with lottery funding. I injured a knee last year. I've recovered, but I won't be at my peak again."

The regret bit at me, as I looked away; a career, a life – over completely – since the injury, and now I was forced to talk to some fat, angry, office jerk, in order to try and get a job.

"I see. You're a failed athlete then?" She smiled as she glanced up.

I stared at her, bit my tongue. No point getting angry. I ignored her comment.

"I have some coaching skills."

"Can you type?" she interrupted.

"What? No, of course not."

"I see," she said, face now fixed to the notepad on the black file.

"So you have few skills then, would you agree?"

I could feel anger brewing up inside me. I breathed deeply, and slowly, then nodded, "And so, what would you recommend?"

"Oh, we have many courses that you can..."

"But I need a job now!" I retorted angrily.

She stared back at me, as I suddenly became conscious of the fact that I was just a number in her records. Just another jobless woman without the skills that she thought would tick the box in her file, so that she could feel that she was doing a reasonable job.

"Well shouting won't get you anywhere Miss Laing."

* * * *

I remember storming out of the employment office, my heart pounding in my chest, pushing my dark hair back, and tying it.

Training over the years had helped me listen to my body. I hadn't been that stressed in such a long time. Well, not that type of stress anyway. My heart rate was rarely so high.

At least before a race, I knew that I would burn up the frustration and fear just as soon as we got started.

The end of my career as a triathlete could have gone better I guess. The knee was much improved, but the prospects of getting back into the national team, and achieving funding, were a lot less hopeful.

I had considered focusing on one element of the sport, aside from running, which the knee had effectively stopped. Cycling, swimming maybe. But I was thirty-three, recovering from injury, and despite my experience, I would never be as fit as I had been and I was already less competitive than the twenty somethings who were looking for places on the national squad.

I mulled over my future as I sipped the glass of wine in my apartment. I'd been invited to a party by a friend, who promised that I could get a job with some of her 'networking contacts'.

Great, I pondered, a desk job somewhere working like a slave for some exec who didn't really give a damn. I couldn't wait. I'd go to the party of course. What the hell else was I going to do? Besides, I'd known Jennifer for a long time and had promised her that I would go.

I'd met her at college. She had tried out for the triathlon team, but had always been let down by her lack of stamina. Strange, I mused, she always seemed to take it well. Had I been in her position I'd have been more jealous of a friend who had seemed to excel at the sport, made the team, competed at an international level. I guess she'd gotten over it.

It had been a while since I'd seen her last, though. In fact, her call had been somewhat out of the blue. We'd chatted, gotten up to date with gossip, reminisced; then she'd blindsided me with the party invite.

* * * *

The little black number that I'd chosen to wear was a poor fit. Either it was the muscle around my buttocks, or the small amount of weight that I'd put on during my convalescence for the knee injury.

Dresses weren't designed for triathletes, with large thighs, wide shoulders, and arms and legs like pistons, I mused, silently screaming with embarrassment, swearing that I could feel the eyes of everyone at the party focused upon me, for all the wrong reasons. I felt distinctly uncomfortable as I stood in the corner of the bustling room, blushing slightly as I tried my best to look 'cool' while hoping that I wasn't attracting attention.

Jennifer had been kind enough to invite me, even make me feel welcome, though the site of a well built, muscled brunette, who looked angry enough to bite the head off any potential suitors, seemed to make the prospective approach of most a little unlikely.

I sighed as the party got into full swing and as I found a seat near the

kitchen of the well-furnished apartment. Jennifer gave me an awkward smile from afar, as if she knew that not only was I not enjoying myself, but every attempt that she had made with one of her 'friends' to approach me about a job, had so far failed. It didn't look like the situation was about to improve anytime soon, either.

Jennifer had certainly changed in recent years. I had always thought that her lack of success in triathlon had been due to her eating habits. Simply put, she just couldn't stop. She would constantly put on weight, and thus train harder to lose it, but this left her 'overtrained', exhausted and unable to get into the proper heart rate zones. Her weight had gone up and down, as had her moods I seemed to remember.

But now? Now, she seemed to have everything under control. Her blonde hair was wild and untamed, her body shape was muscled, but toned and she had lost a lot of weight. She did seem to have picked up a slight limp, I noted. An injury, I guessed. I hadn't really had much of a chance to talk with her since arriving at the party. I guessed now, that I wasn't going to. I wasn't sitting here any longer in embarrassment, I decided.

I stood up to leave, and placed the empty glass on a nearby table.

"Jennifer tells me that you are looking for ... employment?"

I gasped and spun around. The man had appeared behind me. I must have seemed visibly shocked. He was tall, dark, middle aged and obviously fit. His hair had once been dark, very dark, but was now graying at the temples. His skin was tanned, but not to the extent that it was dry and wrinkled. Perhaps he moisturized, I mused, suppressing a smile, while at the same time feeling myself blush at how handsome he was.

"I ... yes ... well I'm not desperate yet," I grunted, immediately regretting how the words might sound.

"Oh, do I appear to be desperate? I do apologize." He laughed a little.

"No, not at all. I'm sorry."

I extended my hand in an attempt to diffuse the rapidly worsening encounter.

"I'm Justine," I said. I could feel my face reddening. He took my hand lightly and bowed to kiss it gently.

"I am Joshua," he said, in a smooth voice, which seemed to grow deeper, as he completed the fluid movement.

Oh, tell me he's trying to pick me up, part of me thought idly. "You ... mentioned a job?" I grunted, instantly regretting it.

"Yes," he said, his eyes boring into me. "It would be a one year contract"

"A contract, oh." I found it hard to hide my disappointment, I had been hoping for something a little longer term.

"Well yes, but a very lucrative one, if I might say so."

He sipped at his wine, glancing at my hips and thighs. Was this guy some sort of pervert?

"Doing what exactly?" I said, smiling back. Somewhere inside, I wanted him to take my arm and pull me closer.

"Well, Jennifer tells me that you were a top, well, a professional triathlete. A business partner of mine has need for your ... skills, shall we say."

"Skills?"

"Yes, your fitness and physique for a start?"

"My physique? Oh, coaching or something?" I was interested now.

"Not exactly. Let's sit down, shall we?"

I watched as his gaze rested upon the end of the dining area table, where a man and woman had just risen to move elsewhere. God, were they going to a bedroom? Was this guy, Joshua, trying to do the same with me?

"Sure, why not?" I said, following him.

I felt awkward, too tall and too muscled, sitting there, as he stared at me.

"So, it's not coaching?" I said, interrupting his stare.

"No. No it's not."

He paused, sipping his wine and looking me up and down once more.

"It's very hard work, but I'm sure you would fit in perfectly."

"Hard work?" *What the hell was this about?*

"More ... labor."

"Labor?"

"Yes. It's nice how you keep repeating after me, but trust me," he said smiling, "the amount of money concerned is considerable."

"I see. I work hard for money. You really have me here Mr ... Joshua. However..." I ran my finger around the lip of the glass, the alcohol granting me its magical confidence. "How much are we talking about?" I said.

"Well, for an athlete of your standing, working for one year..." He paused to consider, again looking at my hips, legs, shoulders. "One million dollars!"

I almost choked on the wine, but tried to remain calm. I wasn't going to give away the fact that I needed not only the money, but the distraction, never mind a direction in my life. Hiding my embarrassment, I started to laugh loudly, attracting the attention of some of the revelers.

"That's a lot of money for ... labor, as you call it."

"Yes," he replied. "It's exhausting, a very high pressure environment, with extremely bad hours, and work colleagues who are – shall we say – mostly in need of strong motivation. The pressure is such that your benefactor would seek to financially reward you handsomely for each year that you do. It

would be a challenge, but then, I thought you were the type of person who might respond to that."

He sipped at his wine, taunting for a reaction.

"So, what is the job? What the hell could be worth a million dollars a year? Wait, I'm not a sex worker, if that's what you're thinking."

He paused.

"You would row an oar on a galley."

I stared at him. My first thought was that he meant a galley kitchen on a yacht. But he had said row, hadn't he?

"Row?"

"Yes, like in those old movies. Have you seen a Roman galley?"

"I-I have. You mean where the slaves row? The men below deck?"

"That's it, yes. Your employer has had a replica ship built. He uses it to cruise around ... well, some of the more isolated areas of the Med."

"Sounds like good training?" I said, sipping from my own glass, remaining calm, not wanting to give in and make him think that he had intimidated me.

He laughed in response, looking down at my stocking clad legs. Again, I noticed how he looked at me, as if sizing up my potential.

"Are you checking my physique, or is it some sort of pervert thing?" I heard myself say. Damn the wine, I was losing what inhibitions I had left.

"Neither. I am imagining you at the oar, Assessing whether your frame would take the workload, over time. Whether your body would adapt and thrive, or weaken and ... break"

"Oh, I think I'd be fine," I said.

"You'd be surprised. We've had athletes before. A lot of them show even less endurance than the prisoners."

"The what?"

"The prisoners. Oh, they're locals for the most part. Your benefactor has an arrangement with a few of the more isolated prisons; they get a reduction in their sentence for agreeing to row on the Master's galley. But, of course, he loves to employ those more, shall we say, fit, western women."

"It's a prison ship?" I said, a little too loudly.

"After a fashion. But you need not fear the prisoners, discipline is swift and effective."

I nodded, apparent understanding coating my face like a veneer, but wondering how the hell I was going to lose this insane freak.

"I see, and the ... volunteers? They are protected in some way?"

"That is often a question that the volunteers ask," he answered, considering his response. "The paid rowers are treated exactly as the prisoners, in most ways. They are paid for their service, after all. And you are all there to work. All rowers are chained, lashed when they falter, punished if there is persistent poor performance."

"Lashed? I ... don't understand?"

He moved his free hand in a swish like fashion.

This time I couldn't hide my feelings. I gasped audibly. "They are whipped?"

"Of course. It is very much a traditional slave galley. Did you expect something else?"

"That can't be...allowed?" I blurted, astonished at his blasé tone. "So we ... they sit in chains and rags, and get whipped as they work?"

"Oh no," he sniggered. "No rags; All rowers are completely naked."

I understood what he said, but looked away, almost not wanting to acknowledge it.

Jennifer caught my eye from the far corner of the room, watching us. She obviously thought I'd been talking to this guy in relation to his job offer. He'd started the conversation with that, hadn't he? God, Jennifer must have innocently pointed him my way, thinking he had a genuine damned job to offer me. How wrong was she?

I swallowed nervously, wide eyed as I stared at him, finding it hard to believe that he actually wanted me to go through with this. I put down the drink, conscious that I might throw it over him.

"So, let me get this straight," I said. "You want me to row naked, in chains, and have people whip me, for a year, for a million dollars, is that it?"

He nodded slowly, his face impassive as I stared blankly back at him.

Chapter 2

I wanted to throw the drink over him and walk away. I wanted to slap him, as he continued to stare at my body. I could see his eyes, his mind, imagining how I might look, chained, whipped and working like a slave at the oar with other women, in some perverse version of an old Roman-style movie. Something stopped me. My next words seemed to come from someone else's lips, as if I was watching the conversation from across the room.

"And how would you guarantee that I would receive payment? How do I know, that after a year, I'd be freed?"

He seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. It was as if he had asked the question so many times, with few accepting the strange, cruel request.

"Are you used to receiving shocked answers to your question?" I whispered.

"Yes," he replied curtly. "We do get our share of volunteers, of course. I can draw up the papers for your attorney. In fact, we will pay for his fees, and he need only know that you are doing work for a contract of some nature."

His voice was hushed now, serious, as if he knew that he had hooked a fish with his bait.

"Your point of release in twelve months will be decided, and recorded. The money will be placed in your account upon your agreement. Of course, at that stage, there is no turning back. You row for a year then, one way or another." The words were rehearsed, familiar to him.

"One way or another?" I said.

"If you decide to change your mind a month in, the overseers are not going to simply say 'yes of course – you can leave', you understand?"

"Overseers. The ones with the whips?"

"Yes."

"And if I do, change my mind, as you say?"

"There is no choice," he replied sharply. "You will be forced to row on, until the end of your contract."

"Forced?"

"Yes. As a slave would have been on a galley ship."

His eyes indicated how serious he was. I found the whole conversation intense now, as if, in some insane way, I had been waiting for an opportunity like this. But, to be whipped, effectively a slave on a galley, in modern times? Sure, I might never need to work again, but at what cost?

I couldn't understand what I was doing. Was I seriously continuing this conversation with some pervert, a stranger I didn't know? God, Jennifer would ask me how the conversation had gone afterward, wouldn't she? What was I going to tell her after all this was done? Perhaps I would humor him, pretend that I genuinely was interested. A voice in my head was telling me to continue, to find out more, in case....

"I still have questions," I whispered, feeling isolated and alone, despite the number of people in the room. I raised my head to check that they weren't all watching us. I caught a glimpse of Jennifer staring again, smiling. She looked away as she saw me. My heart was pounding.

"Of course you do. You are wondering whether the marking of the lash will be permanent. You are wondering whether, if it is, you will be able to live with those marks, and whether the amount of money makes it worthwhile."

I nodded. "How ... how did you know?"

"Because that is what all attractive women wonder, but you are strong."

He sipped his wine before continuing.

"Most of the work will require strong thighs and shoulders. You have both from your chosen sport, which is fortunate. The lash is used to keep rhythm, and punish infraction. The overseers use the whip without mercy upon the back and breasts, or thighs."

He pointed at my legs, as if to illustrate his point. I felt my legs rub together as I shuddered, then stepped back slightly in response, as if his words could bring me stinging pain. I was sweating a little. In fear? Or was I excited at the prospect of this perversion?

"As to whether you might bear marks upon completion of your contract? These would fade with time, however. Much would depend on your stamina and obedience. I feel that you might be defiant, rebellious, a problem for the overseers, no?"

"I-For that sort of money, I might be compliant." I tried to smile. It wasn't convincing.

"Indeed," he snorted, a cruel grimace wrinkling his features, as he continued to stare.

He talked on, describing, what to anyone else, would be a scene from hell. As he talked, however, part of me, a small part, felt that I had been waiting for this chance. It was a challenge.

Despite the erotic illusion that appeared to have opened up in my brain like a tidal wave, however, the sensible side was telling me that I would be chained and whipped. What the hell was I even considering this for, despite the vast sum of money?

As if reading my thoughts, he passed me a business card, before walking away.

* * * *

I hadn't stayed for long after that and had avoided the conversation with Jennifer. For days after the party however, I found it difficult to get Joshua's words out of my head.

I dreamt of rowing, on a crowded galley, full of sweating, whipped women. So much so, that I rented an old movie about a Roman galley, watching it and imagining how difficult the work might be.

A million dollars. It was enough cash to ensure that I never need worry about money again. Well, not for a long time at least.

Joshua had left me his card. It had a simple, business, style, giving little indication that he worked for a pervert; in fact, that he was, himself, a deviant of sorts, I reminded myself; who used prisoners, and volunteers, to row a sex galley in some isolated area of the Mediterranean.

No matter how I tried, I couldn't get the idea out of my head, although I had to keep trying not to think about the money. It was a hoax of course, a trick to lure women into some sort of trap. I was sure of it, wasn't I?

I had another appointment with the unemployment office coming up, I had bills to pay, and it seemed that coaches and colleagues from my days as a triathlete were taking little interest in a 'has been', whose injury had put an end to her career.

I spoke to Jennifer on the phone, in hushed tones, trying to find out if she had, in fact, known anything about this Joshua fellow and the work that he actually did. If she did know anything, she made a good job of hiding it.

She had known him through a business colleague, and was aware only that he had employed ex-athletes for coaching jobs, she assumed.

I hadn't had the courage to tell her what he really did. She had spoken in clipped tones though. It seemed strange at the time. I had almost expected her to ask me about what the guy had said, ask me if I wanted to sleep with him or something, but she had said nothing about it. I thought that she might be jealous, made an excuse, and ended the conversation.

A week passed. The sensible part of me was saying that I was crazy to even consider the offer. How did I know that the contract would be honored? I'd be naked, in chains, and being whipped, for a year. Was I really going to be able to fight back, if they said I had to stay a while longer?

Despite these thoughts, the challenge and the image of me rowing hard, showing them all what I could do, with the fitness that I had, would not go away. It intruded on my daily routine, my morning runs, my dinner and my conversations with other people. I thought about the labor, the constant, backbreaking, gnawing work, the prisoners and how terrible the conditions might be and, of course, the money.

I found myself watching old black and white movies about galley rowers again and again, imagining myself in such a position, with some muscled overseer whipping me across the back for missing the beat of the drum, or not pulling hard enough.

Sometimes, my imagination shocked me, but as I watched the movie, or that part of the movie, again and again, I found myself wanting to touch my sex. I stopped short of playing with myself on more than one occasion. God, what was happening to me?

In addition to the effect that Joshua's disgusting conversation was having on my mind, I wasn't having any luck getting a job. Coaching seemed to be out, I wasn't experienced enough. Interviewers for office jobs took one look at me, and guessed that I wouldn't fit into an office position. Even working in a factory seemed out. I was considered overqualified, told that the work would not fulfill me?

Did that mean that rowing like a slave, on a vile prison ship, would?

I was beginning to doubt myself, doubt what my mind was telling me, doubt whether I would actually regret making enough money, so that I might never have to work again. All for a year of my life? A year where I would show them how powerful an athlete I was? How difficult could it be, with mostly prisoners? They couldn't fail but be impressed by me.

* * * *

The interview had been one of the worst, I told myself as I left the office building. They had even insulted me, leaving me with the impression that I shouldn't have applied for their damned job. So why had they asked me to come in? Did they think that public transport cost nothing? I was so angry. I

was even angry enough to call Joshua.

The card was soggy when I pulled it from my pocket. I remember that it was raining when I phoned. I let the water drench my hair, not caring that it dripped down my back, or soaked my trousers and coat. I walked slowly to the bus stop, letting the tone ring.

"Hello?"

"Joshua?"

"Yes." The tone was dignified and official.

"It's ... it's Justine, from the party. A while back?"

There was a pause. I could almost hear his mind working.

"Ah yes, the triathlete."

"Yes," I replied, suddenly wondering how he knew, I had only mentioned that I was an athlete of some kind.

"How's the knee?"

"It's ... better, better now." And he knew about my injury?

"So, it can cope with the pull of the oar, your legs pushing against the wood at your feet, keeping pace with the drum, despite the stroke of the lash across your naked back, thighs, even breasts?"

I gasped. He heard it.

"You are having second thoughts?"

"I haven't even asked, or agreed, for that matter!" I almost shouted down the phone, the volume of my voice attracting the attention of a man in a suit, and an old woman at the bus stop. I stared back, afraid that they could hear what he was saying at the other end of my cell phone.

"But you did call me Justine. You did call." His voice was low, serious.

"You knew I'd call, didn't you?" I said slowly, finally understanding that he must have known all along. I felt the rain soak me. I didn't care anymore.

"I knew from the moment I saw you Justine. You want to row. You see it as a challenge, and the seriousness of your impending situation is diluted by the fact that, if you were to accept this challenge, you needn't worry about money for a long time afterward. But, I want to hear you say that you want to be a galley slave."

"What?" I replied.

"Say it."

The rain got heavier. I looked around. People ran for the bus that had just arrived – the one that I needed to get. Instead, I stood still, watching them. Cars drove past, horns blaring for no good reason. People rushed by, ignoring each other, hurrying in the rain, and for what? I had worked hard to achieve a dream, and now I was on the scrapheap of ex average athletes. No one cared; not colleagues, coaches, friends. Was I doomed to live alone, looking for a dead end job for the rest of my life?

"I want to be a galley slave," I said slowly.

Chapter 3

Everything seemed to happen so very quickly after that – after I had said the words; agreed that I wanted to be a galley slave.

Joshua had made arrangements, efficiently leaving me little to do but turn up at the right place, at the right time. Thoughts of how well organized he might be, however, were tempered with the knowledge that he had the benefit of obtaining a willing slave for chaining, and 'the lash', as he called it.

His solicitor, and mine, made short work of the contract. On paper, it was a twelve-month arrangement, which meant that I would earn the money that I was paid up front. It was entered into a secure bank account. I checked and signed for everything, without really thinking about what lay ahead.

Instead, I focused on what I would do with the money, even though a clause precluded me touching it, until I had completed the contract successfully. I remember asking what that meant, and Joshua indicated that I should merely be at the locations required for the full twelve months. I nodded in agreement, assuming that the lawyers knew nothing of what was about to happen to me.

I signed confidently, as Joshua gave me papers with a summary of the itinerary for the coming days. I would get a flight in the morning, stay a night in a hotel and be driven to a remote port during the next day, where the galley would be anchored. It was all happening so very fast.

The city was hot, even at night. I found it difficult to sleep, knowing that the next day saw the beginning of my galley service. I rose early for breakfast, wearing only the light clothing, of a disposable nature, that Joshua had told me to wear. I had tied my hair up, and sat in the blouse, jeans and sandals that I had brought, with practically no other luggage. The sun shone through the large windows at the front of the hotel, as the black car pulled up slowly and Joshua stepped out.

Joshua remained quiet, placid even, during the short car journey. As

minutes turned to hours, the road and surroundings became more and more remote, the coastline always on my left, as we approached small villages, where dark skinned locals stared at the large car which had strayed so far from the city.

We started to move downhill, getting closer to the coast and the waterline, and the rising pawls of dust. As we slowed, I could clearly make out the outlines of rough buildings with corrugated steel roofs, their exteriors darkened, and worn by wind and age.

Dominating the scene, however, was the massive ship that was moored at the dockside. I could almost feel Joshua's grin as I gasped. The galley seemed to be over two hundred feet long. Oars protruded from the sides, massive and heavy looking.

"That's the galley? It ... it's so big!"

I turned to the impassive man that sat beside me. As the car stopped, Joshua spoke for the first time.

"Get out Justine, and follow me."

I coughed as the door opened, tried not to gag. The stench was pungent. I could only guess that it came from the galley. It seemed to be everywhere, and crazily, it reminded me of my last trip to the city zoo, or the stench of the sewer.

"That stench...?" I wheezed. "Is that from the ship?"

"Just keep walking, Justine," Joshua grunted, heading towards the largest building.

* * * *

"I said, remove your clothes!"

The muscular, unshaven, man hefted the whip. I stared. I had heard him the first time, of course, though that didn't seem to make his request any easier to comply with.

It was too late to turn back now. Joshua had said very little during the journey to the port, which seemed to house only a few rough buildings, which were not air conditioned, and the massive galley, which sat along the pier. Joshua had laughed when I said that it smelt like a zoo, or even a sewer.

I had been taken to a large corrugated steel shed, a workshop of sorts. Tools and steelwork were scattered about; benches with assorted stamping machines with steel tags, rings and thick, rounded, steel pieces. I gasped as I realized that they must be fetters, for chains. Even as I had looked around the poorly lit room, Joshua had simply left. I couldn't help thinking that he had gone to find his latest slave somewhere.

My hands were shaking as I began to undo my blouse. The overseer watched me slowly undress.

"The boss says you're to be left alone woman, since you're not a prisoner. But that doesn't mean that you won't be treated like all the others on board otherwise. Is that clear?"

I nodded, pulling the blouse away now, revealing my bra.

"Will I get my clothes back ... after ... after a year?"

"No."

I stared at him.

"I said clothes off, NOW!" The whip had a long handle, which ended in a thick leather lash, maybe a meter long. His muscled arm flicked it expertly, as the lash caught the flesh under my ribs, slapping hard.

"YAHHH." I reeled back as I screeched, having tasted the whip; its sting and fire, for the first time.

"By the time you leave the galley, bitch, you'll be a lot thinner and those rags won't even fit you. Though your thighs and back will be crisscrossed with the marks of the whip by then, and your nice, round, mouth might even have tasted my cock!" He laughed, his large muscled chest vibrating, as I

shivered.

I closed my eyes, body still stinging from the lash, removing my bra. I still had large breasts, despite the training, and they were still firm, a fact, which the overseer noted. I grimaced at the smile on his face as he stared.

"A pity you're to be left untouched, otherwise...," he whispered, staring at me, the reaction in his jeans very prominent.

I undid my own jeans and slid them down my muscular legs. Pulling my feet from the sandals, I took the trousers off and lifted my clothes. The overseer, still staring, lifted a clear plastic bag, indicating that I should dump my things inside. I did so, and embarrassed, brought my hands back to my body, slowly hooking my thumbs into the black thong that I wore.

"I don't get to keep this?" I said, my voice shaking, as I slid it down my legs, revealing the small triangle of dark pubic hair.

"No, now hurry up. I have to get you tagged and fettered!"

He let the lash slide out from his grip as he said it, angling it with expertise and lashing out at my chest. The tip of the leather strip struck me near the nipple and I cried out in pain, almost falling over, as I let go of the thong and it slid to the ground at my ankles.

Staggering to one side, gasping, I stepped out of the garment, as it lay on the filthy stone floor, grasping my breast with one hand, looking back at the smiling overseer.

"Gnnn ... tagged?"

"Yes," he muttered, moving to one of the workbenches. "You'll have a steel tag, with your release date stamped on it, on a piercing through your nipple. Helps us know when you're to be freed."

"A piercing? I wasn't told about that!" I said, almost defiantly.

He looked up, his stubbled face, ugly and angular, in the sunlight and shadows of the sweltering hut.

"There's probably a lot you weren't told about. Too late to back out now, and if you do decide to protest, I'll have you whipped and put on the horse before you even get rowing blisters on your hands and feet. Clear?"

I wanted to run, but realized that not only had I nowhere to go, but he was much stronger than me, and I was naked. I might get to the road, but without being caught? It was unlikely. I closed my eyes, almost in despair. Had I really done this for money? I yelped as he pulled me toward the bench by the arm.

"Do I have to tie you for the tag? You seem strong?"

He drew his face close, smelt me. "You're defiant, but the lash will make you obey. So, you'll take the tag without much of a word, I think."

I stared at him, watched as he raised a hammer and punch, moved toward a flat plate, maybe two inches by one, attached to an open metal ring. I tried not to react, realizing that he intended to stamp it and place it through my breast. I watched silently, naked and vulnerable, as the date was stamped, noting with dismay that it was in the future, exactly one year in the future.

I gripped the bench with each hand as I was pierced, watching with gritted teeth as he inserted the ring and tag and closed it with pliers. I did not cry out, though I could see that leaving me untouched was an effort for him. He stared at my breasts and the curves of my muscled body. Part of me wanted him to touch me. Oh, what was I becoming? Clearly he had been ordered to remain at bay however.

My breast ached as I gasped, pushing away from the bench, the large tag on my left nipple feeling awkward and big. I felt his hand rub along my thigh, toward my pussy, as I shuddered.

"You're strong. Very strong. It will be good to see you row."

I stared at him, still defiant.

"Put your foot on the anvil. I need to fit your fetters, for the chains on

board."

The anvil was filthy. He saw the look on my face and laughed.

"Oh, don't worry. This place is clean compared to where you're going. At least the dirt here is honest grime from metalworking. You'll be sitting in a sweating, dirty hell! HA!" His laugh was evil and intense.

I raised my head, still defiant, and placed a foot on the grimy anvil, hooking my toes around its curvature, as he lifted a hinged steel fetter, coated with brown rust, and obviously heavy.

I winced as the steel encased my ankle, the weight already grating against my skin. A ring dangled from the fetter, destined I guessed, to carry the chain that would restrain me to the ship that I would row upon.

* * * *

My heart was pounding now. It was bad enough that the rusted steel fetters grated terribly on my ankles, bad enough that I had been handcuffed for my walk to the galley.

Neither the tag nor the cuffs had been the greatest indignity, however; sitting on the rough steel chair, having my head and pubic hair shaved, had been obscene. Worse even than the slave accoutrements which had been attached to my body, the shaving had seemed to bare my soul, for all to see. I had held back tears.

He had told me that I was strong; that many broke down during the head shaving, He had told me that it prevented lice on board and that I might not be shaved again for the year, though by halfway through my contract, I would be craving it, as my hair grew back and provided a home for the parasite population.

I had tried not to let the degradation affect me, tried to convince him, without words that I was strong and would be one of the best rowers on board, better than any prisoner. There would be no need to punish me.

"You'll be forced to offer the mouth. Do it without resistance, or the overseer has every right to have you punished. Do it badly, and he can do the same. You won't be touched in any other way."

"Uh? Offer the mouth?" I winced as the weight of the fetter grated against my ankle. I limped along, trying to avoid letting the weight nudge against my anklebone.

"You'll be chained to the bench," he sighed, as if explaining in simple terms. "You'll have to suck their cocks."

"What? But I'm a volunteer, not a prisoner!"

"It makes no difference. Do it, or you'll be punished."

I was sweating now, in fear, anticipation and, even though I tried to deny it, excitement.

"Punished if I don't suck them? That's ... insane."

"Just do it. Trust me, you'll not like the alternative."

My shaven head felt cold, as I placed a bare foot on to the wide gangplank that led onto the deck. The stench was awful, like an open sewer. It had got much worse as I had got closer.

I could see movement through the open oar ports, flesh; dark skin. Were they the prisoners? I heard rattling of heavy chains from inside, some speech in a foreign tongue, as I paced slowly up the creaking wooden boards.

God, the stink, it was overwhelming. What would it be like on the rowing deck?

More rattling, and then the swish and slap of a whip. I flinched instinctively, as I heard a desperate cry of anguish. As I reached the upper deck, the cry had faded away.

My movement attracted the attentions of another overseer, in sandals, shorts and t-shirt, smoking by the handrail. Were it not for the long handled

whip that he carried, I would thought of him as just another tourist, though he was well built and muscled.

I shuddered as he approached, as I was pushed forward.

"Another prisoner?" he smiled, intent in his eyes as he said it.

He reached for my tag and pulled it, stretching my breast, as I cried out, wide-eyed and staring, pulling on the cuffs that held me bound. I gasped as his hand played with my shaven mound, fingers exploring my pussy.

"No. This is one of Joshua's finds," the man who had tagged me said. "But she'll still offer her lips, I'm sure."

They both laughed as I was pushed toward the wooden steps that led down to the rowing deck.

Chapter 4

My first sense was the smell – sweat and much worse. It got no better, even as my bare feet descended the creaking wooden boards that led onto the rowing deck. I gagged, unable to cover my mouth, the cuffs still pinning my hands behind my back. The wood of the deck was slimy underfoot, as if the filth that I could smell had somehow made its way into the dark timbers. The light was extremely poor, but I could discern shapes as my eyes eventually adjusted. As I cleared the end of the stairwell, I gasped.

The light from outside illuminated part of the deck. The effect of the sun shining through the oar ports created bands of light across the bodies of the assembled women. I had been brought onto the bow of the vessel, not at the stern, where the cabins that I had seen from the dock had been. I could never have been prepared for the sight that greeted me as my eyes began to adjust to the gloom.

The first thing that struck me was their backs. Most of them were darker skinned, locals, I reasoned. A few were pale white, but all were sweating and clotted with grime, and covered with welts from the whip. Many of their heads had been recently shaven, though all of them were bent across the thick wooden oars, which had been pulled in from the water.

There were two levels of rowers. Something which I should have noted from outside, but which had not been immediately obvious. A catwalk divided port from starboard. As I slowly walked along it, trying not to slip on the slime, the horror of the conditions began to sink in.

The women in the lower tier sat on a rough bench, maybe half a meter wide, with scarcely four inches of thickness for their buttocks, so that their rear ends hung off the back of it – more the edge of a plank of timber rather than a bench in fact. Judging by the condition of them, I guessed immediately that the rowers were rarely removed from where they sat.

I grimaced, tried to hold back the bile building in my throat. A river of brown water ran beneath the lower tier, with some of the rowers letting their

heels dip in it. I noted too, that their ankle fetters were fastened as I had suspected, a length of rusted chain running between each ankle and under the catwalk. The heads of the women on the lower tier were at the height of my waist, as I walked slowly past them.

The women in the upper tier seemed to have a much better life, though they too had seen their share of the whip. The bench here was longer, so that two women might sit and ply the oar, which was much longer in their case. Their benches were staggered, so that as I walked, I passed a lower tier, then higher tier, then lower again. They pushed their feet against a horizontal timber, which was supported via an upright at the deck, the rowers on the lower benches must have moved beneath this as they pulled, looking up at the filthy legs and feet of the upper rowers.

I noted with horror that the rear ends of the women on the upper tier sat above the legs and feet of the rowers below. A pale woman, on the upper benches, coughed and gurgled noisily, as I walked past. Her body bore the marks of the lash; her hair had perhaps once been shaved, but now was matted and tatty. Welts decorated her naked back, thighs and breasts. Her body was coated with the grime and sweat from of the work, the back of the bench filthy too. I wanted to be sick.

I hadn't noticed the wooden spikes that coated part of the deck. The men guiding me barely felt them through their shoes. I lurched as I walked across them, ducking to avoid the large wooden contrivance, which was suspended from the ceiling. As I reached the end of the spike portion, they noticed my discomfort.

"We attach the yoke to rowers, make 'em stand there for a few days. Makes them obey."

"S...Stand on the spikes?"

"Yes," the overseer whispered from behind me. "Row well, and you won't have to find out what it's like."

"Oh, this one will be on the horse, I dare say," the rugged man who had chained me chuckled.

I continued to walk. Row upon row of rowers extended into the darkness, some wearing wrist manacles that had been nailed to the oar. Many of the volunteers (as I surmised of the women who clearly weren't local) seemed to have these. I noted, also, that few of the newer women seemed to be in the upper tiers. I judged that the lower benches must have been akin to some kind of rite of passage, a method of breaking those that might fight back. I grimaced, noting the empty bench ahead on the right, on the lower level. There was a grille on the floor nearby. I tried not to think of what conditions might be like down there.

I stared forward, noting a large dark woman sitting at a drum—clearly used to sound the beat— but my attention was quickly diverted to the poor creature in agony behind her. She was a local, perhaps in her forties, her body lithe and muscled, from time at the oar. Despite her dark flesh, I could still see the marks that the whip had left on her breasts and belly. She wore a thick wooden yoke, which held her wrists and neck in place above the terrible wooden instrument, which she sat astride.

The dark wood sat on four sturdy legs and was triangular in profile, so that her thighs were separated by it and her pussy was forced to straddle the apex of the wood, which, far from being dulled or flattened, formed a perfect apex. I stopped, staring.

They pushed me on toward the empty bench. I gasped, noting now how her legs seemed bowed, as if pulled downward. As I slowed down, closing with the bench, I noted how a wooden bucket full of stones and bricks had been tied with thick cord to her big toes, its weight, and its contents, pulling her down onto the splitting action of the wood. Her face was contorted in dull agony, as if the core of her being concentrated on making it through the ordeal. I stared, as the men behind me laughed.

"So, you like the horse? She has the next shift to do. Another three hours. You'll do your turn too."

I turned sharply. "No, I don't want to. I'll row well, ok?"

They laughed again.

"Get on the bench!"

I looked down. The narrow bench was slimy and covered in filth. Beneath it, the brown water of the bilge, a rusted length of chain running from underneath the catwalk to the wall, still unfastened.

The end of the lash fell across the back of my knees.

I gasped and moved forward.

"Get on the bench ... hurry up!"

I could be chained here for a year. I moved slowly, carefully climbing down, knowing that I would have to step into the foul bilge water. I did so, wincing at the feeling of the cold, muddy, liquid squelching around my foot, dropping my other foot into the water, turning as if to sit, as they grasped my arms and unlocked the cuffs.

"Sit."

I lowered myself down, feeling the soggy bench underneath me, lifting my feet from the vile liquid, noting the wet stain on the back of the wood in front of me, left there by the previous rower.

The overseer grabbed the chain, his fingers dripping into the filthy bilge. Grasping my ankle, he threaded it through one, and then the other, fetter, locking the chain onto a bracket on the hull.

I pushed my feet against the thick timber, watching myself become one with the ship, my heart pounding. I hooked my toes about the wood, realizing that it would be impossible to row without my heels dipping in the water. I stared forward, as he rubbed his filthy hands on my thighs, smiling.

The stink still assaulted my nostrils. I was naked, chained and isolated now, seeing only a sea of whipped backs in front of me, together with the woman at the drum and the woman in agony behind her. I thought with horror, of how I might sit here for a year. The dark, filthy, feet of the women behind and above me, were near my head, their long, ragged toenails, making

them seem like claws. Just in front of me, at head height, the upper bench of the women in front, clogged and foul. I gagged again.

The oar sat in front of me, pulled toward the back of the rower ahead, so that I could sit down. Now, the overseer in shorts pulled it toward me, dropping it into my lap. I grunted, as the heavy timber, wet from the salt water outside, and mired with grime, landed on my thighs. The heavy thump against my legs forced my feet into the bilge water.

"Get used to the oar. It's yours for the next twelve months."

As he spoke, I watched another man behind him, a thick set local, watching me intently, the reaction in his grubby jeans betraying his wish as he spoke excitedly in a foreign tongue. The two other men replied, laughing as they did so.

"Looks like you'll have to offer the mouth sooner than you think, right after the first shift at the oar."

I shuddered.

"Do as the others do, row well and obey, and get an easier time. Rebel or fight back, and you will be punished. Understand?"

I looked up, in awe of the men standing over me, overwhelmed by events. I heard the swish of the whip before it welted my back. I cried out, wide eyed, and twisting, as the tip curled around my belly.

"I said ... UNDERSTAND?"

"Yes ... YES ... I understand," I gasped, wincing, my back on fire. "No, wait!" I said, watching as he raised the whip again, raising my hands, as he brought it slashing across my legs. "YIAHHH!"

I pulled my legs together, watching the welt rise on my muscled thighs.

"That's yes, OVERSEER!" he shouted.

I paused, groaning, part of me wanting to tell him to go to hell.

I didn't see the local overseer bring his whip down across my lower back. I yelped loudly and arched again, my mouth agape.

"Y...Yes Overseer!"

"Good," he said quietly, moving the handle of the lash under my chin, holding my head high. I shuddered instinctively, as the leather dangled amidst my stung thighs, my breasts shaking, as my body lurched slightly.

"You'll learn the discipline of the lash and row well, or else, you'll be punished."

Instinctively, I looked at the poor wretch on the horse. He followed my gaze, before turning to me once more.

"Obey, and you may avoid it."

I nodded as he removed the whip handle.

"Yes Overseer," I whispered, staring at him, a little defiance in my gaze.

Chapter 5

I pulled again, my arm joints aching, thighs bulging with the effort, listening to the collective moan of the women, as they pulled, agonizingly, against the resistance of the oar in the water; all of the naked, filthy, welted bodies moving in perfect synchronicity.

I leant forward again, lifting and pushing the oar, in time with the beat of the drum ahead of me. That was the hardest of all, lifting the heavy wooden oar and pushing it forward, before dipping and pulling again, moaning and gasping with the other women, as we used all of our effort and weight to move the ship forward in the water.

Despite my training, despite my ability to deal with exertion and pain, I was clearly carrying a little more body weight than the other rowers, who were lean and wiry, their bellies rippling only with muscle and slight folds of skin, as they leant forward and pulled back. I imagined that I would be like them in a few short weeks, as my reserves of fat and fuel ran out. I reasoned that we must be fed some high carbohydrate mix, but the evidence around me told me that it was just enough to provide fuel for the vessel's human engines.

I had been rowing for an hour now and I was drenched with sweat. I bore four new welts across my back, and two across my thighs, and could still feel the fire from the sting. Most of the strokes had been early on during the shift, until I got the rhythm that the rowers were forced to adhere to, in time with the drum. I slowly became used to timing my movements with the monotonous, dull, tone of the beat.

BOOM! Push forward with the oar above the water.

BOOM! Dip the oar in the water and make ready for the pull.

BOOM! The pull –where I realized quickly to use the power of my legs, at times extending so far that just my toes pushed against the slimy board in front of me.

BOOM! Push down on the oar to lift it from the water and ready for the push forward again. I found this hard on my shoulders. Somehow, my training had made the efforts of the pull easier on me as I flexed my leg muscles, but lifting the oar from the water exhausted me and made my arm sockets burn.

I had been unable to stop myself emptying my bladder on the bench once, as I rowed. I was disgusted as it came, as I was forced to keep to the rhythm as I did it. I could not move from my position on the rough wood, since it would attract the whip and no one seemed to notice as the pool of liquid formed about me and dripped into the bilge. I had not got used to either the smell of the deck, or the fact that my heels dipped into the foul material beneath my feet. I supposed that over the next twelve months, I would become so.

Most women, even those locals who seemed strongest, seemed to find the pull hardest of all. Some grunted as they moved, their heads lolling, as if they were poorly oiled machines.

I focused on the rhythm of the exercise, bathed in sweat, conscious that one slight deviation from the rhythm would earn another stroke from the cruel whip of the overseer. They were experts with the long handled instruments, causing agony with a flick of their wrist, as the thick leather snaked out gracefully to slap against the back or thigh of a poor rower.

I was slowly becoming accustomed to the sound of the swish in the air, followed by the slap and cry, or gasp, of the victim. Instinctively, I would close my eyes each time I heard the sound, praying that my back had not been targeted for their discipline.

I pulled hard as I heard the footsteps behind me, the motion of the push disturbing the foul bilge water, as my heels moved in it. I glanced up as I finished the motion, grunted as I pushed – my weight down on the oar to raise it from the water, the stink of the bilge water more pungent as I leant forward. As I moved with the drumbeat, my muscles sluggish, I realized that I had slightly missed the beat, though not paying attention. I gasped as I tried to push forward, to correct, tensed as I saw him bring the lash down.

"AIIIEIE!"

The whip caught me on the upper back, its end actually flicking round to catch my shoulder. My mouth was open, eyes wide as I pulled, stretching, trying to keep pace. I had not expected the second lash across my belly. It threatened to upset my rhythm entirely as I screamed, head down as I pushed, gasping for air.

It was the dark skinned overseer at my side now, coiling the lash, as I ached from its bite. He spoke in a language I could not understand, as I regained the rhythm. As he began to laugh, the man who I had first seen on deck emerged, as I grunted with the pull again.

"He says that he looks forward to you offering your mouth, slave."

I dared to glance at them as I pulled, the oar banging against the tag at my breast. I watched as they stared at my stretched body, glistening with sweat. I tried to stare back, but did not want to risk missing the beat again, as the boom of the drum continued.

The overseers smiled as they watched.

"I'm Simon, by the way, and after Jareth here is finished with you, I think I might want to try those lips. Clear, slave?"

I grunted with the pull, staring hard at the back of the moving woman in front of me.

"I said CLEAR?" he repeated, slapping the lash lightly against my thigh, as I winced.

"UGHHH y-yes overseer Uhhh..."

I closed my eyes as they walked on up the deck, pushing my feet against the board for another pull, wrapping my toes around the top of it.

The oar shift continued. By now, with the movement of the massive galley, the woman on the horse was screaming for release. So much so that she was gagged, so that her cries would not upset the rowers' rhythm.

I shuddered as I watched her ordeal, realizing that if I did not 'offer my mouth' to these people, I would end up riding that vile instrument. I winced with the effort of the pull, my arms and legs numb from the exertion, but my heart rate remained strong.

Jareth, who appeared to be tasked with patrolling this particular section of the deck, took his anger out on the women, whipping indiscriminately, constantly looking at my naked body, which was still reasonably clean, compared to the others. I could tell that he looked forward to the end of the shift, when he was sure that my lips would be around his cock.

Would I have to do it? Surely, if I said no, they would not force me to ride that damned horse. Yet, I knew that it was hopeless, that I would indeed have to do it, offer my mouth, like the galley slave that I had truly become within a few hours of sitting on the vile wooden bench.

* * * *

I gasped, breath tight in my chest. I was sweating so much that I was starting to become dehydrated, as stars began to appear in front of my eyes.

Hours had passed. I had received several more lashes from Jareth, who it seemed, now specialized in whipping me across the thigh and belly, reasoning perhaps that these softer parts of the body made the resultant sting of the lash more painful, yielding more results in the longer term. I could not fault his reasoning, as thick red welts across my legs and body bore testament to the number of times that he felt that I could do better.

A muttered word as he walked past, and a movement of his hand to his crotch, indicated that the shift was almost over. If I would get water, it might almost be worth having to give him something in return. At least the rest of my body, it seemed, would be left untouched.

My head lolled backward as I pulled, arms and legs shaking, mouth open, as I gasped for water.

"Lower tier ... stop!"

The command was given in another language as well, and was gratefully received. The first three-hour shift was over. The collective moan of relief from the rowers, just above the bilge, was a cry of exhaustion and the desperate need of almost broken bodies to stop.

The upper level continued to row, as I fell across the oar, my feet falling full into the bilge water. I could see the legs and feet, toiling and pushing above me. I didn't seem to care about the conditions anymore, as my exhausted body found some respite. I watched the others pull their oars in, covered with water and spray. The whip slapped across my buttocks as I leaned forward, followed by a scream in foreign tongue. I had not pulled in the oar. The lash fell again and again across my ass and lower back, as I screamed, pulling at the thick wood.

"I-I didn't know. AHFFFH ... PLEASE ... I didn't know. YAHFFFH!"

The strokes ceased as the wet oar was pulled in and I fell, shivering, across it.

As I lay across the timber, breathing heavily, trying to recover from the pain that wracked my lower body, the overseer pushed the handle of the instrument that had dealt the blows under my chin. He shouted at me in dull, animal like, grunts, as he slowly raised my head. He pushed the handle until my upper body was elongated to an awkward sitting position, my sweating breasts rising and falling as I panted with exertion.

His hand flashed forward to grab the tag at my nipple, pulling it savagely, as I screamed and raised my hands instinctively to his wrists. This simple action seemed to make him incessant with rage as he backed off, tongues of spittle flying from his mouth as he raised the whip.

I cowered, trying to slink further along the rough wooden bench, which was slick and soggy, stretching the rusted chains and fetters that pulled at my ankles, as the whip came down again and again.

I remembered receiving seven, very hard, strokes across my body, one particularly accurate stroke striking the very tag that he had pulled, creating a sting of agony in my breast as I screeched, hoping for respite from the fire of

the lash. I heard words from the language that he spoke again, but this time in a familiar voice.

I dared to look up as the whipping abruptly stopped. I was shivering as I stared into Joshua's eyes, as he in turn spoke sternly with Jareth. For the first time, Jareth no longer appeared to be the monster with the whip that had towered over me a moment before. He nodded his head in understanding, bowing apologetically to Joshua, as if he had carried out some major infraction against the rules.

"J-Joshua," I gasped.

He had never been kind to me in the brief time that I had known him, but if I had been asked to offer him my mouth at that time, I would have done it without question. He had stopped the whipping after all.

"Justine. I see you have started well on your first day," he said sarcastically, adding that characteristic smile that I had last seen at Jennifer's party.

Jennifer, I thought back, *if she could see me now...* It all seemed such a world away from here.

"Jareth was a little overzealous on your first day. He tells me that you were to offer the mouth to him, hmmm?"

He said it in such a matter of fact way. I was disgusted, yet amazed that such a place could exist, that I was living in it, and that we were talking about me servicing this man with a whip, in such a blasé fashion. I nodded, still shuddering and sore from the beating that I had received, as I cowered at the side of the wooden hull.

"Well, you will not have to do that today. I have informed him that he will not get the gift of your mouth at all. I am sure you are pleased."

I began to sit up, delicately, head bowed.

"Thank you, Joshua."

"Yes, quite. Though he tells me that you raised your hands to him? You do realize that such behavior is unacceptable on board? Of course you are new, so we will not require the use of the spikes, or indeed, the horse, until later."

I shuddered, staring, not knowing how to react.

"You will have your wrists chained to the oar however ... oh and another thing..."

He nodded at Jareth, a non-verbal communication which he had perhaps given thousands of times in the past, a message which imparted his order in combination with an indication of his power and influence.

Jareth, without mercy or warning, brought the lash down across my back. I fell forward as it slapped across my flesh, breath knocked out of me, a dry throated cry my only response, as I fell over the wet oar. Grunting, I moved my feet in the bilge water, creating ripples, and began to raise my head slowly.

"Call me Master, slave," he said.

* * * *

Whether by luck, or cruel design, the chaining of my wrists to the oar had added a vicious torment to the actions that I was required to undertake whilst rowing. During the pull, when my legs and feet pushed against the board in front of me, when my naked body stretched to its full extent to pull back on the oar, the chain from my wrists brushed against my breast, stroking the tag on each pass.

With each successive pull, the movement against my still swollen nipple was aggravating, causing ever-increasing pain and discomfort. I rowed hard, conscious that if the overseer decided to lash me across the breasts and strike the tag, the pain would be unbearable and I would lose all rhythm. I stared at the wooden horse, now empty, conscious that a loss of rhythm might cause me to be perched there. I closed my eyes, concentrating on remaining invisible – a good slave, gritting my teeth as the chain grated against the tag once more.

Unlike the fetters that I wore at my feet, the wrist fetters had been padlocked into place, the chain between them approximately forty centimeters long. A thick nail at the centre link secured them to the oar, meaning that if I had to pull the oar in, I had to move awkwardly along the bench with it. Such a simple change to my conditions made every action hellish. Even eating the hard biscuit that they fed us, drinking water from the ladle that came along the deck, were made more difficult, since my hands were no longer free.

Joshua had not stayed long below decks, though I realized that he must still be on board, since we had not docked anywhere. I neared the end of the third shift of rowing, though could not spare time for a glance through the narrow oar port to determine where we might be.

Jareth and Simon had swapped their responsibilities, in terms of the areas that they patrolled, perhaps through Joshua's intervention. Simon seemed less cruel, though no less efficient, using the whip only when required on his charges, and then, usually across their sweating backs. He too, watched me as I rowed.

I gasped for air as the shift ended, wasting no time in pulling in the oar, grunting as the steel manacles bit my wrists. I had no option but to sit close to the overseers' walkway as I pulled it in, my elbow upon it. Simon's whip handle rapped it sharply, as I moved quickly away.

"Stay off the walkway, slave. Wrist chains make it difficult, eh?"

I nodded. "Yes, Overseer. M-May I ask a question Overseer?" I stammered, fearing that he might welt me across the breast tag.

He nodded his assent.

"How might I have the wrist chains removed?"

"Good slaves are rewarded. Those who are pleasing are rewarded more quickly. You understand?"

I nodded, slowly raising my head. Turning to him and opening my mouth

in an O shape, as sweat dripped into my eyes from my hairless head.

Chapter 6

I had used my mouth to please men before. I could remember the athlete in Paris, and one of my coaches in London. The difference then, was that I had gained some modicum of satisfaction from them during the activity.

Moving my head backward and forward, while sucking the rough white skin of Simon's large erection, created stirrings in my own loins, as if he, or indeed I, should be pleasuring myself. There seemed little chance of that, even had I been able to overcome the humiliation that I felt, as a naked, chained and whipped, galley slave.

I glanced up at him; my mouth filled with his cock, gagging as it struck the back of my throat, his rough thrusting motion threatening to choke me. He tensed, moving uncontrollably as he began to reach climax. I gripped the thick oar, unable to move my chained hands very far, sitting awkwardly on the bench, in an attempt to give my head enough room to move. I could sense the movement of my breasts in time with the fluid motion as he pushed faster and faster, gripping my bald head, as he forced himself to cum. I could sense the stares of the two rowers above and behind me, watching, as I offered my mouth to the overseer.

I gagged as he pulled his member away, gripping it and grunting as he masturbated, the hot liquid erupting into my face and breasts, as he gasped in relief. I closed my eyes, and pulled back, my mouth numb from the exertion, as I was covered with the spray of his seed. I bowed my head as he continued to pump the last of it out. I winced as the thick droplets landed on my head. I turned slowly, gripping the oar as the liquid slowly dripped from my nipple into the bilge.

The desperate nature of my situation hit home once more. I was but a naked slave, destined to row amidst the stink and filth, while my wrists and ankles were chained, and my mouth was used merely to sate the lusts of the overseers.

"Here, you deserve it," he said, putting his cock away, back in his trousers.

He threw one of the hard biscuits that we were fed on into my sweating lap. With difficulty, I moved my body and legs amidst the rattle of heavy chains, so that I might grasp the food.

"That will be the first of many. Do you understand?"

I nodded slowly, tearing away at the food, as crumbs spilled onto the translucent fluid dripping down me. He moved to the side, lifting a deep steel ladle from the water trough that emerged during each break, and offered it to me. I drank deeply, wanting to use some of the water to wash the dried sweat from my body, but guessing that the overseer would frown upon such actions.

Instinctively, I tried to move my hands to support the ladle, as the chains rattled and I remembered how cruelly I had been tethered to the heavy oar. I grimaced. The inability to move freely, to remain bonded so closely to the oar, with my feet chained above the disgusting bilge, became maddening after a while and I longed for release, from the wrist chains, at least.

* * * *

As the days passed, I learned to become one with the rhythm of the oar and ignore the filth and stench of the captivity, and slavery I was forced to endure. My subconscious mind became fixated on one single objective; that of removing the vile, rusted, chains that held me to the oar.

Simon had used my mouth every few shifts for the first four days, even waking me from my fitful slumber across the bench at night, so much so, that I developed a painful, swollen sore on one side of my mouth. This, it appeared, made him choose another; a new prisoner further down the deck, and after the first week of toil, I had become little more than another galley slave to him. He had used the whip cruelly, and often, as he correctly interpreted that I was pulling too fast for the rhythm, in an attempt to impress him.

I welcomed the rest periods now as relief from the work, when drenched in sweat, I would fall across the oar. The days of constant toil, with the wrist chains continuing their tortuous brush against my tagged nipple, had desperately inflamed the area, and despite the generous coverage of

congealed sweat and dirt, I could see that my breast was sore and reddened. Indeed, the pain with each pull grew every day.

"No. WAIT! NO!" I heard the scream from behind me.

I turned my head slightly, having been fed during the rest period. The movement caused me a muscular pain in my back, the result, I guessed, of being unable to properly stretch, or warm down, between shifts of rowing.

One of the Europeans, who I had passed so many days ago in the upper tier, was having her ankle chain pulled through the rings on her fetters, even as Jareth, the cruel overseer who had formerly been in my area, begin to pull her from the wooden bench. The two women that sat behind me merely stared downward, both exhausted – locals who were obviously prisoners – probably wondering why these pale skinned women would ever volunteer for this hell.

"Please ... not the horse!"

I gasped, staring back now, as they pushed her up the deck, her filthy feet trying to stop the momentum of her movement on the slimy deck, as their strength overwhelmed her meager resistance. I reasoned that this might have been the first time she had walked in months. Her auburn red hair was growing back, but like the others, it was matted and dirty. She was tall, lithe and thin, with long legs. Had she been clean and well dressed, I might have guessed that she was a muscular model, or perhaps a fellow athlete. She was terrified as she stared at the terrible contraption that lay ahead of her.

I didn't see the lash snake out, until it was too late.

"Eyes FRONT slave!"

The whip curled around my upper body, lashing me cruelly, right across my tagged nipple. I screeched, writhing terribly, instinctively pulling at my wrist chains in an attempt to touch it, cover it. I cried out again, staring at my breast. The whip had caught the tag. I fell across the oar in agony.

They yoked her first, placing her wrists and neck in heavy wood, which

weighed against her collarbone. Tears had formed in my eyes from the lash, and I cried as they lifted her, screaming, into place, as they placed her legs across the apex. It didn't seem to hurt at first, but the fear in her eyes, as she realized how it would feel with the passing hours, was reason enough to pity her plight. Sweat and dirt covered her flesh, further graced by the criss-cross decorations of old and new lash welts, across her thighs and belly and breasts. Her tag jiggled with each movement of her muscled body.

I watched as they tied the thick string of the heavy wooden bucket to her big toes, hearing her grunt as they let it dangle, as she moved her feet to try and pull at the weight that dragged her down onto the apex. She said nothing, as if she was resigned to her fate, as if she knew that whatever she said, or did, now mattered little and would indeed only make matters worse.

She made no sound until they dropped the first piece of broken brick into the bucket. She yelped in agony as more and more hunks of loose masonry were dropped from the overseer's grasp. I blinked at the thud, as each piece dropped into place, seeming to drag her bodily, forcibly, further against the wooden horse, splitting her pussy lips. By the fifth drop, she screeched, eyes wide, as her long legs quivered with the weight, her shrill cry resounding throughout the dismal deck.

I looked away, down at my legs and feet, covered in the mire of the galley and my own sweat. They would keep her there for at least three hours – as she tried to balance, as the galley plied relentlessly through the waves, as the apex bit into her, every minute adding to the pain, as her own bodyweight, albeit reduced by the toil of the oar, weighed her down onto the agony of the horse. I tried not to watch her, but could only feel sorry for her, as we began to row again, as my body creaked into motion, as my eyes shut with the snap and slash nearby of the whip on some poor woman's back or legs.

* * * *

One of the local women behind me had collapsed during the shift. This misfortune had, however, helped the poor wretch on the horse, who, only halfway through her punishment, had been given a reprieve and been chained above and behind me. Despite the mistreatment she had suffered, a few lashes across her back were all it took to have her rowing again, even though

I could hear her weeping as she pulled, undoubtedly due to the ordeal that she had undergone.

Simon had been watching me since I had offered my mouth. The sore on my face that I could feel with my tongue seemed to have put him off, though I noted that he seemed to use the lash on me less and less as the shifts passed. I could see myself that I was fitter than most of the prisoners at least, I still carried a little more weight. Indeed, the only lashes that I had suffered in recent days were to inform me that I was rowing 'ahead' of the rhythm – too fast.

I rowed on, finding the rhythm easy now, stretching my sweating body with the pull, easing into the lifting of the oar and moving forward, always aware of how close the lash might be. I had learned that having my rear end hanging over the narrow bench was a godsend, allowing me to use the bilge as I rowed, while trying to keep my feet away from the woman doing the same, not far in front of me. I knew that objecting to it would simply earn me stripes, or worse.

Simon watched closely as I eased into the rhythm during the first hour of the next shift, as I tried to ignore the cries and moans of those who suffered the lash. I shuddered during the pull, as he closed, unfurling the whip.

"You were an athlete, slave?"

"Y...Uhhhh ... yes, Overseer," I grunted, pushing down with the movement of the oar.

"I can see that you were. Your body has adapted well to the labor. Your problem will be your feet and hands. They are unused to hard work and will blister in the coming days."

I nodded, afraid that such an eventuality would earn me the lash.

"Deal with that, and keep them as clean as possible. If you fail because of blistered soles, I'll have you stand on the spikes for two shifts."

He knelt beside me, breathing in the scent of my sweat.

"And if blistered hands mean that you let go of that oar. I'll see you perched on that horse, bitch. You understand?"

I gasped in terror as he rose, pulling back the whip and slashing it across my belly.

As I screeched, trying to hold the rhythm, he bellowed again.

"I said, understand?"

"Yes ... UGHhhhh ... Yes, Overseer..."

Chapter 7

After a few days, they used water, and even hoses, to clean the bilges and clean us down. Despite the cold, I was relieved that, at last, with the build up of sweat and dirt, I was being tended to. As I gasped at the water being cast and hosed about my flesh, I wondered if this happened weekly, or whenever the stench got too much for the overseers. Either way, this mild comfort was the first that I had experienced since my time on the wretched ship had started.

I tried not to dwell on thoughts of regret; regret that I had effectively sold myself as a slave, to be tagged at the breast and whipped like an animal, forced to offer my mouth to these vile men. I did not realize, however, that worse was to follow. I had wondered a few times at the statements made with regard to my not being 'touched'. I wanted to ask what that meant, to scream that they couldn't make us suffer these indignities, but I knew that I would earn further strokes of the whip and perhaps even time on that vicious horse. I had wondered what had happened to the woman that had been removed from the oar behind me, but did not dare ask.

At night, during the moments of silence, punctuated by moans or creaks of the anchored ship, I cried – distraught at the realization of what I had done, having condemned myself to a year of desperate labor as a filthy slave under the whip, subject to the whims of the overseers. Equally quickly, however, realization dawned with regard to my plight. I had little choice, chained as I was hand and foot.

My goal, I quickly realized, was to please them, my every action directed at having the manacles removed from my reddening wrists, to prevent further scraping and consequent pain to my breast. How simple the concerns of a galley slave were, I reasoned, simply to work with backbreaking effort, while striving to keep the overseer happy and remove the chains from my wrists.

Even removal of the ankle chains would have been a godsend, but that would not happen for a year. I had seen the bloated and wretched ankles of the longer term slaves, and the damage that the rusted steel had done to them.

I reasoned that the marks would stay with me forever. For years, I would be reminded of my labors when I wore sandals, or walked on the beach.

The redhead behind me seemed to have gathered some strength since her short ordeal and began to row powerfully. At night, during whispered conversations, I learned that she was a New Zealand athlete called Kim, who, in a similar manner to myself, had been convinced to join the galley for many thousands of dollars. I learned that the operation seemed to be a worldwide network. In fact, she was convinced that hidden cameras recorded most of the rowing on deck for the gratification of some mysterious owner who she was convinced 'got off' on watching us suffer.

Kim had suffered greatly during the ordeal of rowing here, yet held great hopes, since in a few short weeks she would be released, or so she believed. She had been keeping a tally of days in her head and figured that she did not have long to go. In the pale light before sleep, as we whispered to each other in hushed conversations, amidst the stares of the native women, I noted her thin muscled frame, the rough red flesh on her soles and hands, and the criss-cross welts across her body. I tried to picture how I would look in a year. I had no concept then, of what lay ahead.

The daily labor of rowing continued as I discovered two immediate disadvantages; I was fit and survived the first few weeks quite well, but it became obvious that rowing as a slave was completely unlike training of any sort. My training periods before had rest weeks built in, so that my body could undergo the physiological changes that were required as the hard running, swimming and cycling took their toll.

Here, my routine was the same each day, each week, and presumably, each month to come. There were no rest and recovery weeks, only the promise of the whip, if I decided to change my routine. My naked body was decorated with welts that I had received, while my breast, though not as swollen as before, now had a red mark, where the whip had struck hard days before.

Each day became the focus of backbreaking rowing, as I grunted and let the rhythm of the oar become second nature to me. With each stroke, I looked up at Kim's pushing feet and muscled legs above me, hearing her grunt with her new partner. I tried not to let the thoughts of panic engulf me, regarding

the fact that I would be chained here, and subject to such use, for the next year.

* * * *

As the days passed, I slowly realized that Simon had been right to warn me. The soles of my feet, subject to the daily pressure of pushing against filthy beams that formed the hull of the ship, had begun to blister. My hands had fared a little better; though blistered, they did not stop me rowing. The main issue seemed to be with the sole of my upper left foot. Pushing constantly against the dirty beam with each stroke, had blistered the skin and I raised my foot up, pushing instead with the heel, gasping desperately at times, when dripping sweat from the upper tier splashed against the raw skin.

The slight change in my rowing position brought additional problems, as over the next few days the degree of rhythm that I had begun to find, slipped. The whip made short work of my slack motions, as I screeched with the burning pain of the lash. Beneath the sweat, as I rowed now, I could see that weeks of rowing, with food enough only to provide sufficient fuel, were slowly taking their toll, as I became extremely lean and muscled. The constant brushing of the chain against my breasts, even, became a dull ache, rather than a repeated pain.

Was I becoming a true slave? I considered the dreadful thought, numb to the agonies, surviving just enough to pull the oar and feel the whip across my body. Ugly red welts crossed my thighs and belly, where the overseers had encouraged me during the pull, my gasp or cry their reward. It seemed that my aching, thinning body was now either covered in sweat, or shivering, during the rest periods, the ache of the labor and the lash ever present. The training that I had undergone for years helped, and I was fit enough to take the punishment, yet I wondered how long I could endure it.

As the weeks passed, and the sole of my left foot worsened, as it became swollen, I watched women ride the horse; its ever present threat a reminder of what might happen should I falter, or let the injury on my foot detract from the efficiency of my rowing. In each case, they struggled, trying in vain to defy the apex, their toes pulled agonizingly downward by the weight of the bucket, almost sucking their loins onto the aching wood. Some screamed

after an hour, others groaned agonizingly, barely conscious for much of the ordeal. All screeched in pain, as they were taken off and returned to the oar. I tried to keep my feet clean, though the task was impossible, chained as I was to the oar with my heels in the bilge.

* * * *

I reasoned that I had been at the oar for a period of around six weeks when we made port. I had no idea where in the world we were. My nights now were filled with nightmare. I dreamed that I was whipped, made to stand on the spikes, made to ride the horse, my screams of agony filling the deck. I dreamt it again and again, only to waken shivering and sweating in my awkward position on the bench, my chains rattling and pulling at my limbs.

In those moments, as I stared down at my thinning, filthy body in the pale light, I despaired, feelings of utter desperation threatening to overwhelm me. In those moments, I realized how terrible the life of a slave must have been in ancient times, and prayed that I might find a way through this ordeal, for which I had actually volunteered, for money.

I used the free time to rest, lying back as far as I could beneath the legs of the rowers above, moving my limbs to avoid the movements of others that took place around me. I had even gotten used to this myself, simply using the bilge when I needed to, cleanliness, or indeed privacy, a luxury of the free and unchained. I always yearned for the weekly washing – a necessity under the circumstances.

My attempts to get Simon to release my wrist chains had come to nothing. Indeed, my mouth had only been used twice in the last few weeks. I reasoned the painful sore that I still felt at the side of my mouth had something to do with it, but of course I could not be sure. Galley slaves did not normally ask the deck overseer why they did not use their mouth. Oh, what had I become? A deck whore? I closed my eyes, trying not to fall into despair.

I looked up, past the stretching legs and chained ankles of the slaves behind me, toward the deck. Someone was moving up there, I could hear footsteps and the distinctive click of heels ... a woman? The steps moved around, combined with laughing, as they moved to the steps that descended

down into the rowing deck. I could hear the heels click, as well as the footfalls of the overseers. I was terrified to look behind me, lest I might attract the attention of one of them and receive the lash.

"So where is Justine?"

My heart missed a beat. They were looking for me?

"Here."

The voices were close now. Joshua and a voice I recognized.

"Oh my God, look at the state of her back – the whip has taken its toll. I hardly recognize her; she has lost a lot of weight."

I gasped as I turned my head slightly.

"J-Jennifer?"

The whip landed squarely across my lower back, as I screeched and shook my head. The overseer had made the most of the room he had for the swing as I writhed in agony, the rattle of chains accompanying my movement.

"Oh ... you didn't have to do that," I could hear Jennifer say.

"She didn't have permission to speak," grunted Simon in return.

"Her back is a real mess. How does she row?"

"She is one of the best."

"I knew she would be. She is strong and fit. Not a prisoner, or in debt, like the others. I knew she would relish the challenge," Jennifer said.

I could hear Joshua laugh now.

"Yes. It would appear my little chat with her netted us a fine slave. Her price is worth the effort."

"I told you Joshua. She would volunteer. I told you."

I flashed a stare at Jennifer, unsure whether to speak. She was as I remembered her, still blonde, but now plastered with makeup, wearing a white dress and high heels, as she looked down at the naked, filthy, rowing slave beneath her.

"Yes, Justine. I'm afraid I know all about this ship. I recommended you to Joshua. How do you feel? You have my permission to answer."

"You ... knew?" I croaked. "You knew that I would be put in chains and whipped like this?" My voice cracked as I spoke, full of emotion and exhaustion.

"Yes, Justine; as did you. Did Joshua not explain?"

"Not ... how bad it would be."

I was angry and defiant, covered in lashes and filth, and Jennifer, who I thought had been a friend, was gloating.

Simon interrupted.

"She is a fine rower. In six months, if she doesn't break or rebel, we have the makings of a good slave, powerful at the oar. She was fit before she came here and will become stronger."

"And," he added as I glanced up. "She offers the mouth without question. The horse was enough to convince her."

"She has ridden?" Jennifer said, noting the look of shock on my face.

"Oh no, merely the threat has been enough."

"Oh, she must ride, and while I am here."

I looked at her. "Jennifer. No. Why would you say that?" My voice grated, my heart pounding. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"Can she be put on the horse, Joshua?" Jennifer repeated, staring at him in expectation.

I heard myself gasp, shaking my head as I stared at Joshua, saw Simon release his hold on the furred lash as the cruel leather dropped to the filthy deck. I could feel his evil smile as he considered adding further stripes to my raw back, should I protest too much.

I closed my eyes in anticipation of the agony to come, either the sharp swish and sting of the lash across my flesh, or the thought that I might have to sit astride the terrible wooden horse for an entire rowing shift. My hands, with wrists still chained to the oar, trembled as my heart pounded, expecting the response from Joshua to create more suffering.

Could he want to appease the wishes of Jennifer, who until now, I had thought was my friend, little realizing that, in fact, she must have been aware of the galley, and the whole slavery system, that her friend Joshua was involved with, even as she had watched me talk with him and become persuaded to join this vile corruption.

"No, Jennifer. She will not ride. I have no reason to have her horsed. Simon says that she is a fine rower, and I wish to reward that."

He paused. I opened my eyes, daring to release the breath that I had been holding. I looked down at my taut, sweating, belly, decorated with red welts and grime, as I began to breathe again, the ring at my swollen nipple rising and falling.

"Does she offer the mouth well?"

I swallowed nervously, even as I saw Simon smile as he moved in front of me.

"That she does sir, though I have not had her service me recently. As you can see, she is not the woman she was at the start."

The sound of their laughing made me want to spit and claw at them, to fight back against the terrible indignities that I had suffered, as I had slowly,

inexorably, been turned into a galley slave. As I looked up, for a brief instant, I could see that Jennifer, despite her attempts to laugh with the men, was disappointed that she had not got her wish to watch me suffer on the horse. I tried not to imagine the agony of sitting there, my toes and legs pulled by the weight of the bucket of rocks.

"Offer the mouth, slave!"

I shook and grunted as the flat of the coiled whip struck my breast lightly. Had it been the right, I would have screeched from the sweet pain of the nipple ring. As it was, the slap of the leather against my sweating bosom was enough to stir me to motion.

With practiced efficiency, garnered from the weeks of providing a vessel for Simon's seed, I turned slightly on the bench, opening my mouth, closing my eyes reflexively, in an attempt to avoid catching any sight of my own degradation; a sight that had become so commonplace on the galley deck during rest periods.

"Wider!"

The unfurled whip slapped across my thighs as I screamed.

"YIAHH! Yes...yes, Overseer."

I opened my mouth until my jaw ached and the sore at the side threatened to burst with the effort. With practiced efficiency, I felt him place his cock inside my mouth, as I clamped my lips around it, starting to rhythmically move my head back and forth. My eyes still closed, I could hear Jennifer's moan of pleasure at seeing me this way, seeing the animal that I had become.

The chains rattled in time to my movements, as Simon moaned and Jennifer squealed with delight. As I continued, feeling the tip of his member probe the back of my throat, urging me to gag (a reflex which the whip had taught me to avoid), I wondered at the Jennifer that I had thought I knew, and the woman who now stood on a galley deck, breathing in the stink, watching a filthy, underfed, slave bring an overseer to orgasm.

I moved with a start, as I heard the whip swing lightly again, yet I felt the leather wrap around the back of my head, rather than strike my body. Simon grabbed the leather lash, using it to pull my head toward him as he pushed his cock into my mouth, before pulling back in response to my movements.

"Uuuuh. There ... uuhhh ... you see how good she is!"

His cock was large, certainly bigger than anything I had teased, or even sucked, when I had been a free woman, an athlete. Those days seemed so far away to me now. Had I once been a triathlete? Had I once competed through running, cycling and swimming? Now, I was simply a slave, pleasing an overseer.

I grunted as he forced the motion harder and harder. I could feel that he was about to cum. I had felt it before, and knew instinctively how his body worked. He surged and continued, moaning now, as I opened my eyes.

Jennifer looked gleeful in the pale light; happy it seemed, to see her erstwhile friend being treated thus. Joshua, however, had a thoughtful look on his face. I wondered at what he might be thinking. Was he disappointed? Had I given in too easily? Was I supposed to rebel and ride the horse countless times, before being broken? I was happy to disappoint him, if indeed, those were his thoughts.

I gagged, reflexively spitting back the penis from my throat. Knowing the punishments that others had suffered for displeasing an overseer, I continued, filling my mouth again, using my head to manipulate the organ, my blistered hands still remaining chained at the oar.

"I think she enjoys it, Joshua," Jennifer barked, as I slowed down, my jaws aching, Simon moving his hips less forcibly.

"I never thought I would see her pleasing a man this way. I always did try to set her up with nice men."

Despite her laughter, Joshua did not seem pleased. It was as if he was sizing me up, gauging my obedience, or talent, in some way. I stared at him. I was surprised to see him nod.

"Finish, Simon!"

"Wh-uhh ... what?"

"I said, finish!"

"Sir ... I..."

Despite Simons protests, I could feel his urge to come was taking him now, feel the teasing hot liquid in my throat, as, without warning, it exploded against my tongue, spilling out of my mouth, as he pulled his cock away. I closed my eyes and swallowed as much as I could, swallowing again, watching the viscous droplets cascade down my breasts and belly, and thighs.

"Get them hosed down and ready, we leave soon."

Simon fiddled with the zipper on his pants.

"Yes ... Sir."

Jennifer looked puzzled as I looked away, concentrating on the oar in front of me. My heels made ripples in the water as they walked back toward the steps. I was panting, tired from the relatively small exertion. My jaws ached. I spat in the bilge when I was sure they were out of earshot.

Simon seemed to have become infuriated by the affair. As we rowed for the next three hours, he punished me with the whip at every opportunity. Although each of the rowers in his section suffered, it seemed that I received lashes when I needed none. I grunted and yelped as the lash struck my back on the push forward. As I stretched, my naked body revealed, legs pushing against the timbers, he dropped the lash across me, welting belly or thighs. I wanted to scream at him. I had done what I was asked to do. Why was I being blamed for Joshua's order to him, if that was what had prompted further ill treatment?

By the end of the shift, I was exhausted, hanging over the oar, completely spent, my body on fire. I felt him near me, pushing the whip handle under my chin, pushing my head up as the movement forced me to sit back, head

raised, not daring to look him in the eye.

"Looks like Joshua likes you, bitch. But, I wouldn't get too comfortable with that thought. He's had plenty of slaves in his time. Plenty, you hear me?"

He stood sharply, pulling the handle away as I fell forward, bringing the lash down across my back.

"AYAHHH!" I yelped again, pulling my wrists back, feeling the steel bite my raw flesh there, as the chains stopped the movement.

"Y ... yes...Overseer."

* * * *

In the desperate days that followed, Simon learned to curb his anger, resolving to take it out on the other slaves. I hoped that this was because he realized, that if he continued in the same vein with me, he would either face Joshua's wrath, or incur punishment due to the fact that he had whipped me too much. If I perceived the situation correctly, I was still seen as strong, certainly fitter than some of the prisoners, who in some cases found it hard even to keep the rhythm.

These women were mostly locals, their dark skinned backs laced with the whitening stripes of the whip. I saw that some had great endurance, able to row for hours, when they looked like they had very little strength, though some, who perhaps had languished in prison for years, found the efforts very difficult.

I had found myself wondering at the fact that some of the prisoners were routinely unchained, and taken away. Sometimes these periods lasted for minutes, in other cases for hours. Despite my inclination not to think of where they might be taken, my curiosity, nevertheless, was piqued. The drudgery of the oar and the backbreaking work had the combined effect of making me want to know what happened to them, yet made me paranoid through the fact that I believed that they were used by the overseers, or even Joshua. In my darkest hours however, mostly at night, when my limbs ached from the day's exertions, I found myself yearning for the touch of a man. I

quickly dismissed the thoughts, realizing that some of them perhaps had little choice.

The thoughts, however, would not go away. One night, I woke up moaning. In my exhausted state, I had risen from the oar, so that one of my chained hands might have access to my loins, my fingers, filthy from the oar, had found their way to the lips of my pussy, exploring and rubbing, in the manner that my lovers of the past had done for me. I woke in a sweat. While most of the women slept, Kim, the New Zealand woman, looked down at me from her bench above. I gasped, staring, then looked away, lying on my side on the bench.

"Take care they don't catch you," she whispered, smiling behind a grimy face and short tendrils of matted auburn hair, which was slowly growing back.

"I-I will. I have no wish to ride the horse."

"It is terrible," she replied in a whisper, nodding. "I have been on it. Thought my damned pussy would split and my toes would break."

I watched, twisting awkwardly on the bench, as she shuddered at the memory. I had watched her suffer there.

"I-I just wish they would take the chains off, that's all," I murmured, perhaps a little too loudly. Several women stirred in their exhausted sleep.

She put a filthy finger in front of her lips in response.

"Keep it down, or we'll both ride the wood."

I found myself writhing without reason as she said it, and then turned away.

"Ask for an interview," she whispered. I was about to respond, as I heard the sound of feet echoing loudly as someone thundered down the catwalk toward us.

"Who is talking here?"

It was an overseer from one of the other sections, a squat man, foreign and ungainly. I recognized his voice even as he shouted. The women nearby woke up, shaking their heads, as one of the older locals stared at the redhead. He moved without warning, without recourse, to check that he had got the right person. I heard the whip before I saw it. As I turned, I saw the leather slash out, heard the slap across Kim's flesh as it caught her across the belly. I saw a flash of her red hair as she doubled over, gasping, even as he reeled back, the whip slashing across her back. I moved forward, eager to escape the wrath of the overseer.

"NO TALKING! IS THAT CLEAR?"

Kim gasped, nodded her head.

"Yes, uhh, Overseer. Sh-she wanted an interview, that's all..."

"Who?"

"That one."

I winced as she pointed at me, turning around to grasp the oar.

Again, as so often with Simon, the handle of the vicious whip was placed under my chin as I shuddered.

"Explain," he said slowly, deliberately.

"I-I wanted a chance to speak. A chance to have the wrist chains removed, overseer."

He grunted.

"I see," he said slowly, removing the lash and bringing it down across my lower back in one motion.

I cried out loudly, but remained sitting, writhing as the movement made my chains rattle.

"Well, I'll mention it to Joshua. Now, no more talking. Sleep!"

I nodded slowly as I fell to the bench again.

Chapter 8

It was several days before anything was mentioned in relation to the mysterious interview. I reveled, now, in the hosing down that we received, as it was the only chance that I got to wash. The effect was limited, however, by the wrist chains. Others were able to wash their bodies, at least to a small extent, with the water that cascaded down them into the bilge, as the hose passed. The close proximity, and the limiting effect of my wrist chains, meant that I could not.

My body was covered with both lashes and the marks of where my lack of access had allowed filthy grime to cake around my body, in areas where I could not wipe it away. I could see that my thighs bore such marks, and even my chest and what I could see of my torso, had become covered with dirt. As a slave, chained as I was, I had no choice but to let the dirt collect, just as I had little option when it came to keeping myself clean.

I could see the woman in front of me, her back laced with marks, and both she and the bench, clotted with dirt. I tried not to think of what I looked like from the rear. I had learned to set my feet either side of her in fact, even though my heels, now shriveled and dirty, were constantly dipped in the bilge water.

The days passed without event, bar that I was a slave, whipped when I could not keep rhythm, forced to offer my mouth when the overseer got bored, and made to labor like an animal in chains.

During the nights, Kim dared not break the silence and risked being whipped, as she had a few days previously. I, in turn, dared not bring up the issue that she had mentioned on my behalf. The fact that she had suffered the lash, in effect for me, made me feel guilty. I marveled that I might feel such an emotion in a place like this, amidst the dirt soaked timbers, and the misery of prisoners and the volunteers who made up the rowing slaves on board.

Stranger still then, when I was awoken one morning by the lash across my side. Even as I screamed, I heard the command to Simon and the overseers

that accompanied him.

"Unchain her. And that other one, the new prisoner up the deck. Bring them to Joshua."

A thousand thoughts flooded my mind. Was I to be released? Was I to be further punished for even daring to talk to another prisoner? No, I reminded myself; I was no prisoner like these locals, I had volunteered for this. Even though my mind still questioned my sanity at agreeing to become a naked, chained and whipped slave, I had still made my own decision.

I winced as they unlocked rusted metal manacles from my chapped wrists. I instinctively rubbed them, as they were released for the first time in weeks, months? I no longer knew. The overseer that leant down to open my ankle chains wanted to wretch. I could tell by the look on his face and the heaving that he was holding back. Whether his face was close to the bilge, or he was repelled by the state of my feet and ankles, I could not tell.

I gasped, and held his shoulders, as he unlocked the ankle chain, pulling it through the loops in my fetters, which had been locked in place ... so many weeks before. They seemed to pull at my flesh, as the chain came loose and the fetters rattled. I winced as I moved my legs, unchained now, feet dropping in the vile bilge water.

"Get up," the nearest overseer grunted.

I lifted one foot up onto the deck, gasping at the movement which my muscles, stilted and used to the motions of rowing, had not felt in so long. My legs felt fatigued and sore as I tried to stand, my numb behind leaving the bench upon which I had sat, or lay on, for so long. As I placed weight on my feet, I almost fell, feeling dizzy, until the overseer, still wincing from the state of me, caught my arm.

I looked at him, breaking into a stilted smile with cracked lips at his kindness, as I stood up on the catwalk. My back ached from so long in a rowing position as I stood, bowed like an old woman.

"Th-thank you," I croaked, whispering to him

"Just get moving, so I don't have to whip you," he said, his French accent clear this time.

I saw him look at my back and behind, and wince. I wondered again at what state they must be in. I started to walk, using muscles that had recently seen little use in this application. As I moved, limping slowly up the deck, I could see that another painfully thin woman had also been released further up. Her skin was darker than mine, and her black hair had started to grow back now, from when it had been shaved like mine.

She was heading toward the steps at the stern – past the drum and the wooden horse. I noted that she, even though she had started rowing after me, was bowed, finding it difficult to climb the stairs. Though, she had been cruelly whipped, if her back were anything to go by. As I reached the steps, I started to climb myself, my back creaking, as my muscles found new ways to torment me through misuse. I wondered, painfully, if I would not be broken and bent like an old woman after a year at the oar.

Until I shuffled slowly along the deck on blistered feet, I hadn't truly appreciated the size of the ship. The cabins at the stern, where I assumed we now were, seemed riddled with corridors and offices. I watched as the other slave that had been unchained was pushed in front of me, rather more roughly than I had been treated. The Frenchman who was with me, perhaps realizing that I was a volunteer, actually treated me with some care, apparently ignorant of the guidelines that the other overseers seemed to live by.

We were both led into an office, our filthy feet leaving marks on the wooden floor and rough carpet that coated part of the room. The overseers stood near us. Behind a rough table in front of us sat Joshua, another overseer, and to his left, Jennifer, who smiled as she saw me enter.

The woman that had come in with me was pushed forward, her wrists bound tightly behind her with a length of leather thong, as she was presented to the table. She held her head high, apparently still defiant, despite the treatment that she had received. The tag at her breast flopped as she moved. I tried to read the release date, but found I could not, being only able to see her back.

The rough overseer beside her lifted a cane and promptly welted her across the backs of the legs as she screeched, dancing wildly in reaction to the burning pain. I gasped, looked to the French overseer at my side and backed away a little.

Joshua spoke first, opening a file and reading, as Jennifer, by his side, looked down at the details.

"So, Maria. That is your name, yes?"

The woman paused, grimacing from the pain. I could see the myriad lashes on her back, the filth on her, and the rising welt on her dark legs. She began to raise her head, as the cane struck again.

"AHHHHIAhh"

She almost fell, the pain doubling her over. She slowly stood erect. I could see the defiance in her.

"Y-Yes. That is my name."

"Your father was French, your Mother Algerian, yes?"

"Yes," she grunted, looking up. "But I don't see what that has to do with ... YAHHHHH!"

I winced as the cane fell with a swish and welted the backs of her thighs again. She surged forward, before being pulled back by the overseer.

"Yes. Well, you were sent here after completing three months of a twenty year term in prison. Your sentence was halved since you opted for galley service. And your crime...", Joshua shuffled through the papers. "Attempted robbery in a museum. You're quite the burglar, eh? It seems the police have been after you for many years. Well, you have another ten years at the oar to complete. How have you found it so far?"

Maria looked up, unsure as to whether she could answer or not. The cane swished lightly across her welts again as she gasped.

"I... I have found it very hard."

Jennifer laughed, as Joshua raised his hand. I could now see that Jennifer was in deep with these people. What exactly the nature of her involvement was, I could not say. Yet, while I toiled as a galley slave, she spoke freely with Joshua.

Maria spoke with an accent, Middle Eastern, as bespoke her apparent heritage, though it was hard to ascertain this, because her head had been cruelly shaven and her lithe body lashed.

"Hard, you say? Yet it is better than the prison you came from?"

I thought I detected a slight gasp as she looked up. There was a catch in her voice as she spoke. Her head fell again.

"Yes. Yes, it is better than prison."

"I thought so. Now, what aspects disturb you most?"

Jennifer laughed at the question, as the incredulous woman stared at them.

"Disturb me most?" she grunted, almost with disdain.

As Joshua nodded, the cane came swishing down across the backs of her calves, which were caked with dirt from the bilge water, as she screeched and writhed, almost falling down. She gritted her teeth and remained standing, as I watched, wishing the pain away before answering.

"There is no need to repeat the question, slave!" Jennifer said, her voice stern and authoritarian.

That evil bitch, I thought.

Maria, who I was fast developing some sympathy for, nodded slowly.

"I-I dislike the dirt, the...the bilge, offering my mouth and the whip."

She stood defiant, despite the lashes that criss crossed her dark skinned

back, despite the welts that she had taken across her legs. A woman, I realized, who had nearly another ten years to serve here, if she could last that long.

I watched as Joshua nodded, smiling.

"I see. Unfortunately for you, that is much of the life here. Your sentence has been halved. You should feel privileged that we have let you labor aboard our glorious ship, rather than rot in prison, at the mercy of the authorities. You should be happy here. Are you not?"

Maria swallowed nervously, aware that the stinging pain of the cane was behind her somewhere. I hoped that I would not suffer as she did.

"I ... am, yes." she moaned, head bowed.

"You are, what?" Even as he said it, I knew what would happen. He nodded his head again, as the muscled overseer brought the cane slapping against her buttocks. She twisted and screeched once more in an attempt to get away. But there was no escape.

"Gnnnn ... I ... I am happy to be here, Sir" She looked up, still proud, but clearly less defiant.

"Good. Now remember that, or I'll see you ride the horse for a shift. I'm sure you can imagine how the weight of countless rocks in a bucket tied to your toes, would make you feel while you ride. So row, and row well, and survive."

She nodded, wrinkling her toes, as if imagining the agony as he spoke.

"Take her away. Put her back to work."

The overseer grabbed her arm, still bound, and dragged her away. She stared at me as she passed, seeing my face full of fear, perhaps. Hers was full of anguish, yet still defiant. I could tell that she would suffer terribly in this place.

As the sound of her feet padding away along the wooden deck passed, I

was pushed forward, my own hands tied behind me with a similar length of leather thong. I was unsure how to stand. My behavior had been controlled in recent weeks, to the extent that, with judicious use of their whips, I had become a trained animal, made to row, told when to eat and made to offer my mouth when they required it.

Jennifer smiled at me, as if we had just gone out for a run. Reflexively, I started to smile back, but caught myself, turning my gaze to Joshua, hoping to stand as defiantly as Maria had done, as I was pushed forward and their eyes fell upon my wretched body.

Joshua took full view of me, his eyes running from my shoulders, across my breasts to my belly, and down my legs to my feet and the wretched iron fetters that I wore.

"So, Justine," he began, clearly enjoying the sight of me as a galley slave. "How are you finding it?"

I could not help but glance around to the overseer, noting that he too had lifted up the same thick cane that his friend had used. I had thought the Frenchman might have showed me some kindness, but I realized that he had orders to follow, and would not hesitate to bring the cane across the backs of my legs, should my behavior, or my answers, warrant it.

"The work ... is hard," I said quietly, drawing a breath, lest I should encourage a nod from Joshua and a strike of the rod.

"Of course it is. That is what you signed on for, isn't it?"

I nodded, then realizing that this might encourage the cane, I spoke.

"Yes. Yes it is, Sir."

"There. You see Jennifer. She has changed. This once rebellious woman is now...a galley slave." As he finished the sentence, he looked into my eyes. I hoped he still saw defiance, yet I was not sure myself that he did, or could.

"So. Let's be frank for a moment, yes? I can't really speak frankly to the

prisoners, you see. What did you think of the last slave?"

"Maria?" I croaked, realizing immediately that it was a stupid question. In any other walk of life, the repetition of the name, or question, would not have signaled the swish of the cane and the thick impact of it across my legs or ass. I felt that he was about to nod, through habit perhaps. He stopped himself, even as I heard the Frenchman behind me raise the cane.

"Yes, of course, Maria."

I glanced at Jennifer, who, it seemed by her face, had been watching, waiting for me to make a mistake so that I would receive a stroke.

"She remains defiant, I think."

"You think?"

"Yes. She is used to living in a higher profile criminal world. Not used to the rigors of these lower criminals, that you seem to use on board."

Joshua nodded in admiration of my observation, while Jennifer looked askance at him.

"Good. And so, how will she fare here?"

I stared back at him. I wanted to know why the hell I was being asked about a prisoner. What did it matter what I thought of her? I was here to earn money. I had to remind myself of that. I wondered why, in fact, I had remembered it now, of all times. I opened my mouth to answer, as Joshua nodded.

The Frenchman might have shown me kindness because I had been a volunteer. He might even have found me attractive. None of this seemed to deter him from welting me across the backs of my thighs, hard, with the cane. I could feel the sting as it struck solid muscle. I yelped at first from the blow, but the fire, the intense agony of the blow followed soon, after as my legs began to crumple.

"Eeeahh HAIHHHHH!"

"Justine ... Justine," Joshua intoned, shaking his head in disappointment. "I showed you Maria, so that you would know how to answer, how to react. We must have discipline. I have mentioned this before."

"Have her horsed Joshua. It's the only way," Jennifer said, as I stood again, gasping, forcing back the tears that were coming. Instead, I found myself responding, nodding my head.

"She ... gnnnn ... will find it hard here. She is lithe, but not fit. No endurance. She must have been a good burglar, but her lack of lean muscle mass and strength will mean that she cannot row for long periods, and her body is not developed for this work. She would need training. A year, maybe two, and then she could be chained at the bench," I croaked.

"Good. There you see, Jennifer. Justine is a valuable asset to our team. She can spot those who will fail easily. I take your comments on board, Justine, I really do. I fear that Maria will not make ten years at the oar. What are your feelings on the subject?"

I couldn't believe that we were having this conversation. Standing as I was, naked, filthy, in heavy ankle fetters, I was having a discourse related to the suitability, or otherwise, of a woman who had been effectively condemned to galley slavery for ten years. Was I to condemn her further to misery? I had no time to think.

"She might make it, yes. If she..."

"If she what, Justine?" I felt him pause, ready to nod his head.

"If she is well treated," I said, staring at the wall behind them.

They began laughing; Joshua in a thick roar, while Jennifer giggled.

"No chance of that, my dear. She is a serving prisoner. We have been given full authority over her."

"And if she dies at the oar?" I retorted, suddenly aware of my place and bowing my head.

He stopped laughing. I waited for the cane, my eyes closed.

"Then so be it, Justine. You understand that, don't you?"

I stood aghast. Was he prepared to let women, these so called prisoners, die here?

"Don't you, Justine?"

"I..."

His nod was almost imperceptible, yet the Frenchman responded immediately, bringing the cane across the same welt as before, or so it felt, my thighs stinging, then aching, as I screeched and jumped, moving toward the table in front of me with the force of it, until the overseer grabbed my arm with his free hand. I hoped that they could smell me as I drew near.

"Gnn ahhh ... yes ... YES ... dammit!"

"That's a nasty sore you have there on your mouth. Too much offering to satisfy the overseers, eh? Oh well. And your breasts? Oh, that is nasty, though I'm sure it will get better."

They watched me move in pain as I regained my composure, shuddering and gasping, pulling on the leather thong that bound my hands behind my back.

"You want to fight back, Justine. I can understand that. In a way, that fight is what drives you on. Tell me, if there is one thing I could do, one wish, what would it be? I will give you time to think on this occasion."

I could almost hear the man behind me lower his arms, as he realized that I would be given some leeway. Was he disappointed? I prayed that he was not.

What would I ask for? My freedom? Freedom from the chains and the whip? Something simple, such as removing the wrist chains. I imagined my raw wrists behind me, moved my arms reflexively.

"Ah, the wrist chains. A popular choice," He said. Jennifer giggled to herself.

I made up my mind, slowly raising my head.

"I want..."

Yes, Justine? Tell us."

"I want ... to see Jennifer at the oar."

There was an uncanny silence when I said it. She was dumbfounded, unable to speak, merely staring at her former friend, the tall, wretched, galley slave in front of her, not believing that she had uttered such words. The French overseer behind me waited for the nod which never came; a nod that would indicate that he should, once more, thrash me across the backs of the legs, or upon my buttocks. I stood defiant, confident in what I had said, and meaning every word of it. Joshua seemed most perplexed by my statement.

"You wish to see Jennifer at the oar?"

Before I could answer, Jennifer, in apparent panic, responded for him.

"Joshua. Have her horsed and tit-whipped for such talk. How dare she even suggest it? Take her away...two shifts on the horse and one-hundred...no...Two hundred strokes, of your finest cane. I want to see her tits striped with marks! And make sure the bucket is weighed down with..."

"Wait, Jennifer!" Joshua interrupted, even as I drew breath sharply as Pierre seemed to respond to her wishes, grabbing me by the arm, as if her word carried some weight aboard this horrible ship.

Joshua's words were stern and commanding, however, as he raised a hand in order to stop her mouth from speaking. Her response surprised me, as I stood there, naked and bound, shivering from the cold air in the room.

"But, Joshua," she almost wept. "I did my time at the oar!"

My eyes narrowed. Somehow, the statement had not surprised me. She had

known Joshua, known about the ship and had even 'found' me for him. I knew that she had to be more intimately involved with the workings of the ship than just a simple relationship with the bastard that ran things.

Joshua smiled slightly, a facial movement that seemed more evil than jovial, before looking at me again.

"Why do you want to see Jennifer suffer, Justine?"

I shuddered before responding, moved my numb limbs against the bonds, as he stared at my breasts.

"Why wouldn't I? She just announced how she'd like to see my breasts beaten! She wanted to see me on that damned horse before. I'd like to see her row. That's all."

I closed my eyes, aware that the nod for Pierre might come at any moment.

It didn't.

Joshua turned to Jennifer.

"It has been a few years since you rowed, has it not? Do you fear so much that you would not show Justine what a good slave you were?"

For the first time in my life, I saw fear on the, so far confident, Jennifer's face.

"Joshua. I ... I served. I did my year. Now it is her turn. Have her horsed and caned. Please."

"I do not understand quite why you want her to suffer so," he replied looking back at me for a moment. "You'll row for a few days, Jennifer, naked and chained."

As Jennifer gasped, almost pleading, he turned to Pierre.

"Put this one back on the oar."

He paused before continuing.

"And you may dispense with the wrist manacles. They have served their purpose."

"Thank you," I murmured. "Thank you, Master," I repeated more strongly.

Joshua nodded.

"Take her away." He paused as the Frenchman took my arm. "No, wait." He glanced at the still shocked Jennifer, who now fawned over him in pleading fashion. "I do appreciate the irony of your choice, Justine, but you do realize of course, that your request is somewhat unorthodox, and you should pay a price, at least."

I drew breath, my heart pounding, was he going to make me ride the sharp agony of the horse after all, its sweet agony pressing upon my womanhood?

"Put her on the spikes for a shift. She might even enjoy the rest, though I imagine those filthy, blistered, soles will suffer some," he said, pointing at my feet.

"Joshua, wait ... I ... YAIIEEEEE..." I almost crumpled as the rod welted the back of my legs again.

"Move it wench ... you are to stand on the spikes a while," Pierre grunted, the pity that I thought that he might have shown all but forgotten, as I limped away, my legs aching.

* * * *

I tried to move my feet again without grunting in pain. I had seen the wooden spiked section of the floor as I was brought on board, but had not realized the terrible predicament that a rower punished in this way would face. The weight of the heavy wooden yoke that I wore, similar to that worn by the poor women that rode the horse, bore heavily across my shoulders and on my neck. It was chained to the rafters above my head, preventing my movement.

I could move my feet, though dull wooden spikes covered the floor and any movement caused renewed agony, especially on my blistered soles. The constant pressure of my own weight and the yoke, through onto my soles, threatened to engulf me, make me howl, and cry out for release, though I refused to let these bastards reap some satisfaction from seeing my tears at the dull agony which I suffered.

I had been tethered by the yoke, and its height adjusted so that I was forced to stand with my feet planted mainly in one spot. To move too far would have meant standing on tip toe, which, upon the dull wood, would have meant sheer agony for my toes and joints. The size of the yoke prevented me looking downward at my suffering feet. I had to stand, moving as little as possible.

The spiked section was uncomfortable at first, as I wrinkled my toes in an effort to lessen the feeling against blistered and raw skin. Over time however, it became maddening, especially so as the rowing did not stop and the steady rocking of the ship meant that I had to gently sway my body, and shift my weight from toe to heel, in an effort to avoid the worst excesses of the pressure.

I closed my eyes in a vain attempt to wish away the pain. The yoke ground into my shoulders, forcing me downward, its weight adding impetus to the terrible torment that was being inflicted upon the soles of my feet, even via the dulled wooden spikes. I moaned, my head lolling to one side.

Despite it all, however, I wanted to smile, for a few rows up the deck, I could see the squat form of Jennifer, toiling under the whip. Her pale skin seemed so out of place in the lower tier, as she worked hard. Despite the fact that her back was fresh, and the lashes stood out across her flesh, I could see, even from my uncomfortable position, that she bore many old marks. Pink now with age, her back betrayed the fact that she had suffered under the lash before. Her comments during my interview had suggested it.

Despite the weight of my wooden burden, and the agony that I felt if I dared move, I had watched joyfully as she was led naked by the overseers to my former bench, her feet finding purchase on the wet wooden board, her heels in the foul water of the bilge.

I gasped as a rough hand ran across my buttocks, a French accent audible at my ear.

"You did well, slave. In your interview, I mean."

It was Pierre. His hand roamed over my hips and descended across my mound to my pussy, his fingers probing, in search of my clit. At this I tried to move. A mistake, as daring to move my feet proved costly.

"AAh ... leave me be!"

His hand did not stop, instead rising toward my breasts, toward the ring that held my slave tag. I screamed as he pulled it. I could feel his hot breath against my neck and ear.

"Ah, Slave. Admit it. You loved my cane, did you not?"

I tried in vain to look around, to do anything to stop him.

"Pierre!"

The voice was one that I recognized. Simon shouted from the section where Jennifer rowed, coiling the whip that had so recently tasted the flesh of her back.

Pierre halted the movement of his hand.

"Stay out of this Englishman. I can do what I like in my section of the boat. She may have been your rower, but she is just another slave on the spikes now."

I shivered, my eyes pleading with Simon, the man who had used my mouth to satisfy his cock, the man who had lashed my flesh without remorse. Yet now, I longed for him to save me? The heavy steel fetters at my ankles ground together as I tried to move away, in vain, without bringing more pressure to my aching soles. Despite my predicament, I now began to realize how effective the punishment was. The victim could not move, and had to endure, yet would remain relatively unscathed by the experience.

I stared at Simon, willing him to do something, even as Pierre's hand, cupping my breast, was now joined by his other as it grasped my waist.

"You should look to your slaves, Pierre, and leave Joshua's favorites alone."

He stared at Pierre now, getting closer to him, with me, a punished slave, forced to stand in between. Pierre ran both his hands across the grimy front of my body, sniffing my neck as he did so, as I stood, mouth agape at the shock of his touch. With that he withdrew, as Simon nodded in front of me, finally acknowledging my presence.

"I'll not forget the debt you owe me, slave. You'll taste me again soon."

My body tensed and my heart pounded, still in apparent shock with regard to the incident. I tried to remember why I had even agreed to this. Even small mercies, Simon's apparent rescue of me, and Jennifer's condemnation to the oar, no matter how short a time it might be for, convinced me that such minor acts were laced with evil and hate, and slowly, I was becoming as bad as the people that ran this stinking ship.

* * * *

I limped as I was led to another rowing position, closer to the bow of the galley, farther from the horse, and Jennifer's position at my filthy rowing bench. I could make out Kim as I was moved and hoped that she would not be singled out for further attention because of my interview. My blistered foot had suffered particularly badly during the three hour ordeal of the spikes, and I almost fell as I put weight upon it, marching across the slimy timbers of the deck, past more wretched women.

The lower tier was at rest, and the time had come for me to be removed and repositioned. This time, however, I was moved to another section. I could see another spiked area. The thought of more hours standing on such a thing filled me with dread now. At least, I was further from the wretched horse.

I stood uneasily, shaking, as the overseers that had brought me here left. A few feet away, an old woman was being dragged away, toward the barred

doors, and the stinking hold that lay below. I wondered still what foul horrors lay in wait down there. A large, ebony skinned, man, wearing only tight shorts and sandals approached in the gloom. I stood, waiting to be told what to do. He was massive, muscular and powerful looking, towering over me as he looked down.

"You were an athlete, before being condemned to the oar?"

"Yes. Yes, I was."

The coiled whip flashed out, the tongue biting my thigh.

"Yes...UGNnnn ... Overseer..." I replied, body arching in response to the whip. Despite all that I had been through, all of my trials, the bite of the lash caused such stinging pain, even when used lightly to coerce.

"Good. Unlike these others, I stick to the rules. You should do it too. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Overseer," I said quickly, my head bowing in response. I closed my eyes, in fear of the vile creature that I had become once more.

"You will sit here. The woman that you replace is old, and a vile criminal."

I winced as I stared at the rough narrow bench, soiled as it was with dirt. I nodded.

I grunted, and moved forward in response to his grasping my tag.

"You are a volunteer?"

"Yes ... Overseer."

The pain lanced through my breast. It was still swollen and enflamed, but seemed to have become a little numb to the constant pulling, as if I was getting used to it.

"Then you are foolish, slave. At least these other women are punished for their crimes. They choose this life to reduce prison sentences in terrible jails.

You gave up your life for a year of this?"

"Yes, Overseer."

I found myself staring defiantly at him.

"Good," he finally said, staring, as if he was sizing me up. "Row well, and avoid my whip. Row poorly ... and..."

He pointed to a gaunt, thin, woman, with skin the color of dry fruit. The woman from the interview – Maria, the thief, I realized quickly. She panted, having fallen across the oar. Her back was laced and crisscrossed with hard welts, which had lifted lumps across her flesh. This man plainly knew how to use the lash to maximum effectiveness, and this poor woman had suffered terribly. I could also see light scarring across her thighs. I reasoned that the treatment had not stopped there.

I learned, later, that the name of this new overseer was Sula, and indeed, that he was a stickler for the rules. Unlike Simon, whose attention appeared to be on those whose mouth he might fill with his cock, Sula was more concerned with ensuring that the deck, rowing and rhythm were run with efficiency, at least in the section that he was responsible for.

To this end, each woman quickly understood, through judicious application of the whip, that she was part of a machine. The prisoners of course, of which group all those who surrounded me seemed to be drawn from, may have tried to laugh, remain aloof, or pretend that they were too tough to think that they should provide maximum effort. Sula's eye, and indeed his whip, remained there to convince them of the error of their ways.

Maria, the thief who had suffered greatly, had, it seemed, decided that she was too proud (or too stupid) to listen. Even now, as she sat in front of me, she showed weaknesses in her stroke, or she was too weak in general, to row well. Sula's lash was never far away.

As the days passed, I surprised myself by feeling a grudging respect for him. I must have pleased him, for he lashed me rarely, and seemed to nod as my stroke, timing and consistency of effort improved. He was always first to

insist on benches and rowers being well cleaned. Despite the filth under my finger and toenails, and the ever present fetid stench of the bilge, I felt that he had ensured that I, and those around who rowed well, were cleaner than we had been in weeks.

The thief, Maria, however, had not made up for her earlier mistakes and Sula, who in the days that had passed had seemed to be firm, but even tempered, had grabbed her hair at the end of the shift, opening his shorts and forcing his large penis toward her mouth. I had thought for a few seconds that she was going to refuse, and sat back on my bench, thereby to avoid the tirade of fury that I knew was coming.

In the end, however, she succumbed, as we all inevitably did. I watched, almost fascinated as he pushed and pulled her head on his cock. At times, she almost choked due to its size. I found my legs writhing together, imagining, in my darkest thoughts, what Sula might feel like inside me. I looked down, noticing, to my horror, that beneath the grime and filth that had collected in the last few days since hosing, that I was becoming moist. Despite the tribulations of the weeks that I had sat in chains at the oar, I was embarrassed. I closed my eyes, hearing only the grunting of the thief in front of me as Sula used her mouth.

That night, our shift ended. The upper tier was made to row on as the lower took rest. I had wanted to try and speak with the thief, but the presence of Sula on the catwalk, urging the upper tier on with rowing, meant that I would not have an opportunity.

* * * *

Despite my wishes, and perhaps my cruelest intentions, Jennifer was released two days later. I was unsure whether she had made promises to certain overseers. I was sure that I had seen her sucking cock at least once, yet she did not seem to have been badly whipped. Her body looked strong as they led her toward the steps. She glanced at me briefly as she was marched past, naked, her leg fetters padlocked on temporarily so that they could easily be removed, unlike my own.

"I'll see you later, bitch," she whispered icily as she passed me.

I was exhausted, bathed in sweat and grime, and offered no response, not least because I was still chained and vulnerable to the overseer's thick lash. I wondered afterward how she might 'see me later', fearing that some new torment might face me later in the year.

We rowed hard for the next two days. The drumbeat increased significantly at times, to the extent that we were given extra water to compensate for the sweat we lost. The pace was so high on other occasions that the women grunted in unison with the pull, flaccid breasts swaying to and fro with the speed of the return from the stroke. We were bathed in sweat and grime, though I was proud of my performance.

Even as Sula brought the whip hard across my upper back as I pushed forward, grunting with the oar and screeching with the slap of the leather, I found myself wanting to apologize for my error in rhythm. My mind told me that I was a fit and proficient rower, a good slave. I almost shook my head to clear my thoughts, despite the hell that I was putting my body through at this pace. Did I want to please him? Had I reached the point where I wanted to be a good slave? We rowed on.

As Sula left me and walked forward, I knew his destination. Maria's back was wretched with stripes and welts, and again she felt the slap of the lash. Each blow seemed to hit her like a hammer, her muscles not designed for this labor. Her technique, too, was terrible, her legs bent awkwardly. As I grunted and stretched with the pull, my long legs pushing against the board, I could see that her rhythm was off, that she did not even pull correctly, at times, pulling the oar with both hands in an underarm fashion and thus achieving no purchase against the water. Again the lash fell, this time across her thighs, as Sula spoke.

"I will have no option, but to see you on the horse." He stared at her. "Do you understand this?"

"UGHH w-wait UGHH I'll try harder, dammit!"

And so it went on, for what seemed like hours, but what must only have been twenty minutes or so. We slowed as we neared land. I could see both a coastline and seagulls through the oar port, as we neared an isolated harbor of

some nature. I again had little idea where we were, but by the heat, sensed that we were still in the Mediterranean.

As we slowed, and ultimately stopped, Sula reached for his keys, to unlock Maria from her bench.

"You'll ride the horse, until you learn rhythm," he said in a matter of fact tone, as she struggled on the bench.

"Please ... no ... LOOK, I'll try harder ... NO!"

He gripped her arm, pulling and holding her, as he reached down with the keys to where her feet splashed in the stinking water.

My heart pounded, and I spoke without thinking. "Please, Overseer. Let me help her?"

The stare that I received from Sula could have burned through me and made a hole in the hull, yet I remained looking at him, attempting to convey that I wanted to help the poor wretch, who had come here in the hope that she would no longer suffer the vile rigors of whatever hellish prison she had been condemned to.

With a flick of his wrist, the lash reached out to me, the whip striking my right breast on the tag. I screamed and reared back.

"You do not speak, slave, unless I tell you to."

I gasped, reflexively bringing my hands up to the welt, hands that had only a few days before been chained to an oar.

"Yes, Overseer," I gasped. "But I can help her..."

I looked down; bit my lip, knowing that I was going too far. I watched his sandaled feet approach me, as he lowered the whip to my chin and pushed my head up.

"And how would you do that?"

I hesitated, unsure whether I could speak. He reached for the tag and yanked.

"Speak!"

"YAHHHHHH..." My hands flew up again, though I resisted the urge to grab his wrist, as he held me in agonizing perpetuity, by my breast.

"I-I can show her how to row, more effectively, Overseer..."

Despite my worst fears, I saw Sula nod.

* * * *

There were clear advantages to being in the upper tier. The most succinct of these was that I was no longer required to offer my mouth to the overseers. Our heads were at a level with the height of the tallest man, and so it was more difficult for them to reach our mouths with their cocks, if even possible, due to the narrow confines of the upper deck above our heads.

The second advantage was that my feet were now free of the bilge water. I pushed the hardened soles of my bare feet against a wooden board now, and could not feel the water and sludge slapping at my heels as I pulled, could not see the ripples as I moved. These two, insignificant facts, might well have meant nothing to those who had not rowed as a slave in chains, as I now had. To me, however, they were one step short of complete freedom; a revival of hope against the damnation and despair that I had felt in recent weeks.

Unlike me, Maria was no athlete. It even seemed that she had designed her body to be lithe and lacking in upper body strength, perhaps, I considered, to help her in her task with regard to being a thief, or cat burglar. Such skills would be of little use on the galley, unless she found a way to unlock her chains and somehow escape.

I soon also discovered that being moved to the upper tier was, in fact, no life of luxury amidst the naked, chained, hell of galley service. Two rowers were required in the upper tier, simply due to the length of the upper oar and relative increase in power required. It was not only longer, but required an

entirely different technique. Where the lower oar, operated by a single slave, had simply required to be pulled, lifted and pushed forward again, the rowers on the upper levels were pulling at a different angle, one further from the oar, when compared with the other. I was placed closest to the walkway, while Maria was closest to the hull.

Despite my feeling that this arrangement would make it easier to row for me, further from the pivot in the opening, I was concerned to find that the high angle of the oar during the pull, necessitated that I almost stand off the bench in order to pull properly. The continued movement in this manner, which I was completely unused to, meant that I rapidly became tired and suffered the slapping agony of Sula's whip across my back and the tops of my thighs. I gasped and cried out with each lash, knowing that, unlike Simon's attentions, Sula's lashes were designed to get me used to the rigors of the new style of rowing. I noted that Maria however, sheltered to an extent, and her efforts on the long heavy oar helped by mine, was growing stronger, even as I grew weaker, and sore with the motion.

* * * *

It seemed that it took weeks for me to become used to the movement of the heavy oar, though I did get significantly better. By this time however, my back felt raw and the multitude of welts across my thighs and belly, administered by Sula during the pull, was considerable, and I looked now like many of the older, more decrepit, dark-skinned prisoners, that had little choice but to serve on this vile ship.

By now, despite the welcome cleanliness of the weekly hose, I remained filthy in places, ashamed of what I had become. Even my pubic hair, which I had trimmed regularly before coming aboard, was thick and matted, damp and encrusted, like the bench I was forced to sit upon while I labored.

Sula seemed now, despite the heavy degree of whipping that I had received to get to this point on the upper oar, to hold me in some regard, welcoming my new found prowess as he would that of a horse in the field. To him, perhaps that was all that I was, a workhorse, bending to the task at hand under his tutelage and whip. In all my time, he had used the mouths of very few slaves and I began to wonder if he had rigid self-control, or was himself

disgusted at the terrible conditions.

He never spared his use of the whip, however. I whined and cried out now, whenever my back was lashed, guessing that it was raw and well striped, like those of the poor wretches I had seen over the weeks, the months, that I had labored in this hell. Sula's attentions were, however, diverted as I slowly learned to adapt to the rigors of my new position. I watched as other poor women in the section bore the brunt of his lash. Maria soon learned to pull strongly, with my tuition as guidance.

During the breaks, I would show her how to position her feet at the board in front of us, to use the balls of them to gain leverage, anchoring her toes about the board if necessary, and using her legs to push backward. This seemed to help, for as she gained confidence, her technique improved too, so much so, that Sula's attentions barely focused on her back. In the earlier weeks that had passed since I had been moved to the upper tier, she had suffered the lash, but being positioned closer to the outer hull, it was easier to strike me than her, hence seeing that she was in fact improving, and that his decision perhaps had borne fruit in terms of improving the new slave, Sula lashed her infrequently.

I lost count of the days, aware only of mildly changing climates and temperatures, as the ship travelled around the Mediterranean. Were we a novelty? Were we spotted by tourists in the various isolated ports that we stopped at infrequently – a stench in the wind?

I did not know. I only knew that each morning, with few breaks and even less sleep, my body and the bodies of the other poor wretches aboard the vile ship, were subjected to the horrors of rowing, the whip and for the lower tiers, the threat of being forced to offer the mouth.

As the weeks passed, Maria and I learned to become strong rowers. My technique, combined with her eagerness to learn, kept us apart from the punishments meted out to the local prisoners. My volunteer status, and Maria's proximity to the outer hull, meant that we were left alone, for the most part. We had exchanged few words. Indeed, there was little opportunity to. With constant labor, few hours' sleep, and the threat of punishment, already administered to some of the local women, we had no wish to become

fodder for the horse, or worse.

We had already seen one poor woman, who was not only horsed for what seemed like six hours, but was subsequently beaten on the soles of her feet with the same rods that Pierre had used to thrash the backs of our legs during the interview. Even that seemed so long ago, as day after day, we hardened to the oar.

I considered my state during one rest period, when the angle of the setting sun lit my now muscled and lithe frame through the oar port. My legs looked strong, yet the powerful effect was diluted by the myriad welts, old and new, that patterned the flesh. My thighs, especially, due in no small part to the propensity of the overseers to whip the upper legs as the rower pulled, had seen many strokes. It seemed that I had become used to, much though the realization shocked me, the constant abrasions of lash against my flesh. Our backs received most strikes, though each of us who had spent more than a few weeks on board, routinely received strikes on our thighs and bellies during the long, exhausting, pull.

Maria became stronger and was lashed less. The learning curve had been harsh, however, and even now, the dark flesh of her back was welted and raw. Her position on the outside of the bench had also been disadvantageous to me, since a random flick of Sula's lash at her thigh, as she pulled, invariably ended up also striking me. Whether Sula intended this, hoping to instill me with a sense of purpose, and thus intensify the fact that I was responsible for Maria's training, I remained unsure.

Maria learned quickly, gaining strength in her legs, using those, rather than her weak arm muscles, to gain leverage and force the oar backward against the pressure of the water with each stroke.

I helped as much as I could, having to leave the bench to gain leverage, closer to the catwalk as I was. With each stroke, I helped Maria push the oar forward, by my position however, I was still forced to lean forwards to such an extent that my buttocks left the bench, before dropping and pulling back during the pull.

Maria did not suffer this additional effort, a nightmare which I had not

foreseen when I had been placed on the upper oar, and which after a number of weeks had left bruising across my buttocks.

In the early days of this additional torment upon my body, I had suffered greatly, having to relearn how to row, while having to bear the constant abuse of the lash, and firm landing of my rear end upon a grime covered bench. I noted with satisfaction, however, how strong Maria was becoming, her squeals of anguish from Sula's lash, rapidly becoming simple grunts, her mind and body realizing that the lash was but a part of the labor. I tried not to dwell on the fact that she would have to endure this torment for ten long years, if she survived.

I consoled myself, between bouts of exhaustive labor, with the fact that I only had a year to do, and each day brought the end of my contract, and my riches, closer.

Despite the cleaning that we received, the fact that I moved so much on the bench now seemed to remind me of the squalor that I suffered through. I soon grew used to the renewed efforts, however, used to Sula's patterns with the lash, knowing when I went too slow, or even too fast, and would thus earn his enmity and the fiery sting from his whip. At times I even whispered an apology for having let him down. I almost smiled when he used it, when I regained the stroke. I berated myself, wondering at what manner of animal I had become. A draft beast made to work, given tidbits of appreciation when I did well, and lashed when I did poorly, almost wanting to be patted like some good dog.

The rest periods, and nights, became much colder. I had seen two local women put on the horse for having pleased each other in the night, which made Maria's next act all the more foolish. Sleep came easily at the best of times for the slaves. The flesh around my ankles had hardened and toughened over the intervening weeks. Now, when the chains rattled and the steel moved, my flesh was less tender.

They still, however, clanked, as I felt a hand against my thigh as I neared sleep that evening. I shuddered a little, thinking at first that Sula had finally found his ardor and I would be forced to offer the mouth. I almost smiled. I had begun to respect, almost admire, Sula for the fair treatment he had given,

for the way he had dealt with Maria, when he could just as easily have had her whipped and horsed to death.

As I slowly opened my eyes that night, however, hoping somewhere inside that Sula had indeed deigned to have me pleasure him, I discovered that Maria's foul hand was rubbing my thigh. In the pale light from the electric lights on the deck above, shining through the barred hatches on deck, I could see the dirt under her finger nails as she rubbed two hands now, roughened by weeks of hard slavery, along my lean muscled thighs.

I shuddered involuntarily, shaking my head, not wanting to say anything, lest it should attract the attentions of Sula, Pierre or the lash. I had no wish to be punished, or to see Maria punished. I knew that this small show of affection could see us both whipped, horsed, or worse.

"Maria ... I. No, it is forbidden," I whispered. I could already hear movement of the slaves beneath us, disturbed, despite their exhaustion.

"You ... helped me, Justine," I could hear her heavily accented voice whisper, though I felt that it must have echoed across the deck, I was so fearful of being discovered.

Without warning, her fingers crossed between my legs and teased my clit. I writhed despite myself, my feet rattling the chains. Had I still been chained below, I would have sloshed my feet in the filthy bilge. But then, had I been chained on the lower tier, Maria would not be there to tease my sex in such a manner.

I tried to control my reaction to her attentions, but part of me told myself that it had been so long since I had received such treatment; At times, I even longed for the overseers to touch me, to please me. I shook my head, as if wanting to see the dark thoughts disappear. I moaned quietly as her fingers searched, teased and finally, entered, flicking, moving quickly, as they probed and pleased.

"We ... we can't, Maria," I gasped, begged, starting as I heard movement of chains somewhere behind me.

I bit hard on my lower lip as she moved her lips to my neck, kissing it gently, as I tensed and tried not to cry out. Simultaneously, she pushed two fingers into me, her thumb teasing my clit, as I clenched my thighs about her hand.

"Please, Maria!"

It seemed that she had lost control of herself, and put good sense aside in the terrible situation that we faced, as she nuzzled my neck, moving her other hand across my chest and teasing my breasts. I closed my eyes, felt my head fall backward. I had completely forgotten about the most tender area of my breast – where these foul slavers had pierced me with the breast tag.

I yelped as Maria's hand brushed the steel, feeling almost as if she was pulling the tag. The weeks had seen the infection reduced considerably, but the area was still sore – more so, since Maria's rough touch was so unexpected. I yelped despite myself, immediately raising a filthy, blistered, hand to cover my mouth. Maria was unsure of what she had done. I gasped and writhed again, as she pulled her pleasuring hand away. Different overseers were on duty at night. It was unfortunate that this night was Simon's shift.

"What's going on there?"

I heard his footsteps, his gruff voice, as he stormed down the deck. My heart pounded in fear. Maria moved back to her position near the hull, the movement causing new stench as she slid over the bench.

Shuddering, legs quivering, I gripped the oar, not knowing what else to do. Though Simon had heard the sound, he could not easily locate which slave had yelped in the night. But I had acted poorly. As he shone a torch across the slaves, dark and pale skinned, only I had not had the insight to even pretend to fall asleep, gripped as I was by the threat of illicit pleasure and fear of being caught.

I could see Simon's evil grin by the light of the deck lanterns and his torch.

"You..." he said gruffly, gripping me by the chin, as I gasped.

I stared forward, unsure of what to say, too afraid to respond to him. I could smell his breath as he got closer.

"You made a sound, slave?"

"No, Overseer," I grunted.

I swallowed nervously, as his free hand moved to his trousers, unzipping them and fumbling for his cock. On the higher tier, my face was level with his, and it took me seconds to realize what he was doing, as he slapped the head of the native woman beneath my feet.

She moaned as she woke, staring at the pale cock that now stood erect in front of her face. Had she been new to the oar, her reaction might have been more based on complete surprise. As it was, her grey eyes quickly perceived that an overseer wished her to offer the mouth. That was all that she required to know.

I watched, as slowly, almost mechanically, she opened her mouth, lips parched and cracked, and wrapped them about Simon's large cock. I watched him as her head began to move forward slowly, indicating that she had learnt her trade long ago. I wrinkled my toes as she moved her body below me, moaning softly, as if her only role was to please the overseer. Simon closed his eyes, still gripping my chin.

Even as he writhed at her touch, he shone the torch in my eyes. I turned my head away, blinded by the sudden brightness, though I could see the beam being shone down my body. Instinctively, I closed my legs, thighs brushing each other.

"What's this, bitch? You been playing with yourself?"

My eyes widened. It seemed so difficult to lie, so foreign to want to make a pretence since I had become a naked slave, a rower working with condemned prisoners under the whip, and at the whim of sadistic overseers. He swayed slightly, as the woman beneath my feet continued, bringing him closer to orgasm. His voice quivered slightly as he spoke again, in a matter-of-fact fashion.

"You'll ride the horse, woman."

I stuttered as I spoke. "Simon, Overseer. No, wait, I don't have to do that."

I was scarcely aware; my fear blinding me, that Maria had leant across out of the darkness of the corner of the bench. She spoke loudly.

"It was me ... It was ME!" she shouted loudly, as Simon forced his cock against the woman's throat, her gagging punctuating Maria's confession.

As she leant across me, I could feel Maria's hips against mine, her ribs across my thighs, as she sought to deflate Simon's anger. I watched helplessly as Maria destroyed all the work, the goodwill with Sula, everything that we had done in the weeks that had passed, where we had been free of the bilge at our feet, even free of the whip, as she had learned to row like a good slave.

I had sucked cock, been whipped, chained and humiliated in front of Jennifer, and now, as I trembled, with Maria trying to take punishment for me, I could feel it all slipping away; all the effort, all the degradation, the giving up of my freedom for money and my defiance in the face of these bastards.

Simon grunted with satisfaction, perhaps from the fact that he was ejaculating into the mouth of the woman at my feet, combined with his now being able to punish two women who had not been at the oar long. I closed my eyes, afraid as he pulled away from her dripping lips, opening my eyes to look down, as she swallowed, and lay back across her bench.

His cock still hanging from the trousers he wore, Simon shouted, "Sula ... SULA! Get down here!"

* * * *

I had tried not to look at Sula as he had us unchained, even as Simon looked on, confident in the fact that he had caught two of Sula's disobedient slaves. The chain rattled as it slid through the rusted link in the fetter, causing it to move awkwardly against my flesh. I cried out loudly as it moved. I had noticed that some of the women, who had been here for long periods, showed

movement around the ankle wound at night. It had taken me some time to realize that maggots had taken up residence beneath some of the fetters; easily done amidst the constant presence of flies on the deck. Each night I had checked my own fetters and tried to keep my ankles clean, though it seemed a waste of time.

I had feared the worst as we hobbled up the deck, naked slaves to be punished. I did not want to beg, to plead with them, that I could not ride the horse, but I tried to remain brave, calm. Maria, however, seemed resigned to the fact that she would suffer, touching my arm as we were separated. I had little concept of what would happen next.

As I watched dawn start to break through the oar ports, Sula's hands pulled me to stand mid deck. I felt something rough, painful, underfoot, the blisters and scabs on my soles rubbing against raised wood, as I watch Simon push Maria forward, away from me, toward the horse. I was to stand on the spikes again.

"I'm ... sorry, Sula," I whispered, as he leant down to lift the massive wooden yoke from the lower deck.

"Too late, slave!" he grunted back. "Put your arms up."

"Sula, please!"

"It's Overseer!"

I didn't see the lash he still held until it slapped across my belly. I crumpled and gasped at the first stroke, then felt the second across my legs. He dropped the lash and pulled me up by the tag, as I screeched, the echoes rebounding across the deck.

"Raise arms," he boomed, as I slowly raised my shaking limbs.

The heavy yoke pinioned my wrists and neck in its cruel embrace. Its weight bore down on my shoulders and collarbone, driving my feet against the rough surface of the deck. I could not look down, but realized that I was to suffer again. I watched as Sula hooked a thick chain into the ceiling of the

deck, attaching it to the back of the yoke. I had little scope for movement. I lifted a foot, padding gently, but in vain, for an area where the wooden floor had not been covered in spikes. I knew only too well how it would feel after an hour.

In the distance, I could see Maria being pushed onto the wooden horse.

"Wait, Overseer. Don't punish both of us. Take me, let Maria go. Let her row!" I moaned desperately, as Sula locked the yoke and chain in place, positioning cruelly, so that I was forced to not only stand, but could not hope to either see, or move away from, the spiked area.

My soles were uncomfortable as the dulled points bit into my blistered feet. I knew that slight discomfort would soon be the least of my concerns. Sula remained silent as he locked me in place. I tensed as he slowly lifted the whip again, and then yelped as he lashed my belly, breasts and legs.

"You could have been a good rower, could have earned your place in my esteem, slave!"

I watched, wide eyed, seeing his temper starting to emerge, even as he bit hard upon it.

"I-I'm sorry, Sula, I..."

"OVERSEER!" he shrieked as the whip fell again...

Sula had taken out his sense of failure, or whatever it was that he actually felt, with his lash on my tormented flesh. I had almost passed out, as he welted my breasts and belly as I stood on the spiked floor, the heavy yoke bearing down upon my frame. I swayed as he finished, moving my feet to gain purchase, realizing that the dry screams that I had heard had been coming from my own throat in my dazed condition. Far up the deck though, as he moved out of sight, I could see poor Maria, trying in vain to adjust her position on the horse, trying not to cry out and show them how much agony she was in, as a heavy yoke bore down on her frail shoulders.

END OF PART ONE