



Sisters of The Chain

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two*

*Escape
From The Oar*
Clare Seven

Sisters of the Chain – Book 2

Escape from the Oar

by Clare Seven

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Chapter 1

Meline Talvallin curled her toes around the wide wooden handrail as she stood upon it, her hand gripping the rung of the rope ladder above, balancing precariously as she stared down at the thick wooden oars being moved back and forth along the length of the wooden galley beneath her. The ship was longer than most, a massive hulk powered by hundreds of slaves. Her thick auburn hair was tied back and the sea wind tugged at it. It had been a hot day and most of the sailors, men and women, who worked the sails and the deck, had stripped down to loincloths. Meline wore one, now rimed with sweat, and a halter top to cover her breasts. She had been subjected to enough taunts and jibes about her figure without wishing to encourage the men (and even women) who might seek to take their relationship one step further with her. She stared down again, as the heavy oars made contact with the water and the ship lurched forward. She adjusted her bodyweight on the edge of the handrail, her bare soles flexing to allow her to balance. She could hear the moans of the slaves who pulled those oars, a collective sound of exhausted women in chains, forced to pull heavy wooden oars. She closed her eyes as she heard the inevitable sound of whip slapping against flesh, designed to encourage those naked wretches who were not keeping rhythm, or who were so exhausted that they had little option but to falter and thus suffer the agony of the whip.

Worse than all of this, however, was the fact that Tria, her former friend on board the *Raven*, now suffered down there. This ship had formerly been her evil sister Alia's flagship. It had seen both male and female compliments in terms of its oar slaves. It seemed, in fact, that Alia liked to change depending on what mission, or indeed, act of cruelty, she sought to perpetrate.

Since boarding the *Dominator* in Irulan, the massive galley upon which she now stood, she had sought an excuse to at least visit the slaves. Captain Darnech, however, would have none of it. He was an old man, apparently with northern barbarian blood in him, missing many teeth and one eye. The eye socket could be covered with a patch, the awful teeth and the

accompanying stench of his fetid breath, could not be so easily disguised. He had spent the early part of the journey ridding himself of another ‘officer’ who held sway below, on the galley deck, having him stripped and stabbed in front of the crew as a lesson in discipline.

“Captain Constano here, is from the east, and one of our former mistress’s spies, so he has no place on my ship...”

Constano had died poorly, though, Meline reasoned, if he had been closer to Alia than any other members of the crew, then good riddance to him. This act, more than any other, had actually convinced her that Darmech might actually be a reasonable man.

“You have no need to see the slaves, unless I choose to make you one...” Darmech had grunted at her. He had tried to embarrass her in front of the crew, squeezing her breast. She had not backed away, merely faced him grimacing. “...or perhaps I should have these pretty titties well striped with the cane if you keep insisting on seeing below, eh?”

She had backed down, predictably perhaps, as the last thing she (or Tria) needed was to have her tied naked to the mast and caned in front of the crew. She was also painfully aware of how bad the rigours of slave labour at the oar could be.

Since that incident, which had occurred within a week of setting sail from Irulan, she had said little to the Captain, keeping her head down and working. She swabbed, cleaned, tended to sails and ropes and carried out the various tasks required of the sailing deck. She had seen one woman caned by the Deckmaster, stripped and dragged to the mast for spilling a bucket of water as she swabbed the deck timbers. It had not even been her fault, as one of the men, drunk on wine, had tumbled into her. Nevertheless, she had been stripped and bound hand and foot to the mast, standing, her back against the solid wood, her breasts revealed as the Deckmaster, a small hairy man known only as Ballo, had taken great relish in leaving stripes across her bosom with a thick cane. Her shrieks had been terrible. She had been left below the barred door of the cargo hold in chains. At least she had avoided the depredations of the oar, Meline considered, something she had not been spared on the *Raven* when she had displeased the Captain there. She closed her eyes, envisioning

her own brief time as a galley slave as punishment, but a few weeks ago. She would never be able to erase the screams of the dying slaves, still chained to the hull as that ship had gone down, as they tore and scrambled in frantic attempts to free themselves from drowning. She remembered that day so vividly. Then there was Tria her friend, and Ritix and Portia, the two fiendish overseers from the galley deck. Though she had hated those last two, even she would not have wished galley slavery upon them, especially with the conditions below. The *Dominator* operated an eastern style deck, where the rowers were chained to the bench via rings, which pierced the lips of their womanhood, their heads shaved, foreheads branded. She shuddered as she thought about it. She had to free Tria. She had to.

She realised that she had been holding her breath, eyes closed, reliving the nightmare, even as she stood delicately poised above the oars and the crashing water below her. She looked down, eyes wide open, breathing in the salty air even as it mingled with the stench of the rowers, as the slash of the whip from the oar deck beneath her woke her from her dark thoughts.

“Meline! Get back to work!”

She recognised Ballo’s whining voice from the deck behind her.

“I said get back to work, wench, or do you want to feel the cane too?”

She wanted to turn around, jump off the wooden railing and strike him, teach the little worm that he was little more than a bully and a coward. She had to think of Tria, however. She was on this damned ship for one reason only. She had arranged this passage in order to free her. She turned.

“Yes, Deckmaster,” she said curtly, jumping off the railing and getting back to the mop with which she had been swabbing the deck.

Ballo nodded, before approaching her, whispering so that only she could hear.

“Have a care Meline. My arm yearns ever to feel that cane against your ample bosom. Keep taunting me with your misbehaviour, and I’ll see you tethered naked to the mast under beating welts of that arm, eh?”

Meline winced, wanting to spit fury at him and beat him with her fists, but she thought of Tria.

“Yes, Deckmaster,” she grunted, starting to push the wet mop over the salty boards.

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Tria looked down as she leant forward with the oar. Her pussy lips were red and raw, thanks to the thick metal ring that pierced her, linking her to the stinking wooden bench beneath her. She had to make the rowing action one swift movement, moving in concert with the other women, the other slaves, moving smoothly to avoid the risk of tearing at herself due to the cruel positioning of the pussy ring. She pulled hard on the oar, adding to the collective moan of the women as they pressed bare, filthy feet against the wooden boards in front of their legs in an effort to add purchase to the movement of the heavy oar against the waves outside. She felt the cold filthy water of the muddy bilge at her heels, as she pushed forward again, the stinging pain of the ring at her lips making anything but rowing awkward.

“Keep to the drum bitch!” a heavily accented voice grunted as the heavy whip fell across her back.

“YAIIE!” Her cry was torn from a dried throat.

“Maybe you want to ride the horse again, eh?”

“Uhhh... no Overseer... sir...” she gasped in response, pulling again on the heavy oar, the effort of speaking making her lose the cadence of her breathing as she sought to keep the rhythm and avoid the whip.

She dared to look up toward the stern, and the large wooden instrument of pain that sat there. The wooden horse was a triangular seat of agony, upon which the unfortunate slave would be punished by riding the apex, usually in a yoke to keep her arms from gaining some attempt at stalling the inevitable agony that would be felt.

Weeks ago, maybe even months now, she had still retained her hair – now she had a shaven head, her forehead marked with a slave brand. She had been free. Now, her pussy lips, red and raw, were pierced with a ring that was in turn linked to a chain holding her to the oar bench.

She had become resigned to her lot since being removed from the wooden horse. She had been put there for refusing to offer her mouth to satiate the lusts and cock of one of the foul eastern overseers. Now, she had sucked their cocks so often that her mouth and lips were covered with terrible sores. Ritix and Portia, the other survivors from the *Raven*, which had been sunk by the very ship she now rowed in, sat a few filthy benches up from her. She could see the filth and mess at their rear ends, the welts across their backs. She imagined how bad she must look herself. She held back tears as she considered that men had once held her as attractive. Now, she was simply another oar slave, chained by her sex lips to a sodden bench, rattling with each pull of the oar, filthy feet pressed against the board in front of her, each awkward movement reminding her that her sex had been pierced and linked to the foul smelling timber, reminding her that she was no more than a slave.

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Ballo watched as Meline tightened the ropes on the cargo on deck. She was a fine looking woman, had perhaps seen thirty or more summers. A woman like her should have been married to a man who would take care of her, a man who she would grace with many sons; a man such as him, he considered.

“How come you never married, wench? Aren’t you too old still to be plying the seas as a sailor?”

Meline paused as she heard his words. Just who in the nine hells did he think he was, speaking to her like that? She had left her family years ago to make her own way in this world, and had recently been imprisoned, whipped and almost tortured, before having her family’s merchant business snatched away from her not to mention having to bear witness to the machinations of her evil sister.

“And what business is it of yours, Ballo?”

He smirked. The heat had forced her to strip off her halter top and she wore only the grimy loincloth as she worked. Even though her dark auburn hair was shorter than some women's, she had tied the length that reached her shoulders with a thin thong of leather, revealing her fine features. He could see from her bare back that she had been whipped, perhaps some weeks ago.

“You were punished? Did that happen at the last port you were in?”

“Aye,” she replied, not looking him in the eye, concentrating instead on fixing the knot that had come loose in the cargo mooring. He approached her now. He could smell the sweat from her body.

“How many lashes?”

She stopped and turned to him, sweat trickling down her large breasts from her exertions. She caught his stare.

“Eighty... why?”

He wanted to raise a hand to her breasts, feel how soft they were. He could feel the hot stirrings within his loins already.

“And what did you do to deserve that?” he grunted.

“I was accused of brawling with a nobleman. I was found innocent after I had been whipped,” she replied slowly, deliberately, as if to remind even herself that she not been guilty.

“I see. That must have hurt.”

“It did, aye.” Meline glanced down at his crotch. It was clear that he wanted her. She approached him slowly.

“So, Ballo. You could have your choice of any of the women aboard this ship, and you want me eh? The old maid who isn't married?”

He smiled at that, as she returned his gaze. She moved a hand to his,

gripping it tightly.

“Is this your whip hand, Ballo?” she whispered, lips close to his ear. She could feel his breath, heavy against her head.

“Yes,” he said softly, his voice cracking slightly.

“I’ve often wondered what it’s like below, with the slaves. They suffer under the whip, eh?”

“Yes... yes they do.” Ballo was shaking now.

Meline moved her hand to his crotch, fondling, probing.

“Would you let me see the galley deck tonight?”

He moaned, nodding rapidly.

“I bet you would have loved to have been the one who whipped me all those weeks ago, eh Ballo?” She heard his sharp intake of breath as he reached for her, grabbing her breast roughly as she gasped.

“Maybe we could make love on the galley deck tonight, eh Ballo?”

The stern voice surprised them both.

“There won’t be any of that with this wench, Ballo,” Captain Darnech boomed, his voice echoing from the deck above, near his cabin.

“Sir, I...” Ballo moved backward, his erection proud and sprouting amidst the folds of his trews.

“There won’t be any of that – because she’ll be in the stocks. Two days! See to it, Ballo!”

* * * * *

The stocks were heavy and wooden. She had been in stocks before of course. Those back in Irulan had spread her legs much wider than these, and she had been forced to offer her mouth to men who wanted their lusts sated. The Captain had, however, added his own little touch to this contraption. She had been stripped completely naked, her hands bound with tight ropes behind her as she sat on the bench. Her legs had then been spread and locked into the wooden stocks in front of her. She could just see her toes poking above the line of the upper timber. She writhed again.

It was not normal to writhe on the verge of ecstasy in the stocks. They were supposed to be used to punish on board a ship. Two days suffering, legs clamped awkwardly apart, set out in the boiling sun with very little water, was supposed to be used to instruct the wayward and make them think twice before straying from the path of discipline again.

The good captain Darmech had, however, elected to position a slightly angled wooden phallus on the deck in front of her pussy lips, nailed to the deck. Meline found that she could not move her lips from it, and, as she writhed, the angle of the bend was positioned such that it played with her sex and made her want more. Of course, it was positioned so that it would only tease and torment, not satisfy, and so her torture had begun.

She had tried to remain still, her legs pulled sharply to each side, revealing the folds of her womanhood to the sharply canted phallus that teased and probed, promising pleasure yet delivering only a sweet torment as she struggled – her ankles and long, taut legs against the thick timbers and her bound wrists behind her. As she inevitably moved, and as the ship was rocked by both the waves and the motions of hundreds of galley slaves, caught in their own chained torment against harsh labour and harsher overseers, her condition worsened. She began to sweat, burned by the hot sun and tormented by her predicament. Through the haze, she could see the Captain approaching her.

“It’s maddening for your cunt, eh wench? A woman like you must be used to being satisfied, and yet you have only the torment of the wooden cock to warm you. Why, I’ve known women to suffer these stocks for days and seek satisfaction amongst half the men on the crew afterward.”

Meline looked up, her lips dried and parched. She could hardly see now, the sun having almost blinded her with its glare during the hot day.

“So... that... that’s what you expect of me, Captain, is it?” she croaked, one foot twisting instinctively as her wracked body sought some solace from its cramped position. The involuntary movement caused her moist pussy lips to rub against the wooden device, as she moaned and threw her head back. The captain laughed in response, moving a hand to her muscled thigh as she tensed. He began to slide his hand up her inner part of her leg toward the phallus.

“You want me to finger you, wench? Give you some relief from your lusts?”

Meline stared at him, gasping, licking her cracked lips, eyes squinting in the glare of the sun. She nodded without thinking.

“Yes... yes, please,” she whispered, writhing against the phallus. She heard the words, but could scarcely believe she had spoken them as he moved his fingers closer, ever closer to her clit. Each movement of his rough hands along her thigh caused her to writhe helplessly, her body and mind now in his control, her fate dictated by the angled wooden device that promised so much pleasure yet denied her again and again.

His fingers were beginning to touch her pubic hairs, beginning to invade the folds of her sex as she gasped, throwing her head back as her body screamed against the bonds and containment. He played with her soft flesh, pulling and teasing at the sweating hairs around her sex, then, slowly, he began to withdraw his hand. Meline moved her head forward, thirsty and baking in the sun, her legs stretched awkwardly in her confinement.

“Wh... what are you doing?”

“You’re here to be punished wench, and that is what will happen,” he said slowly, deliberately.

He smiled weakly. She could see his erection underneath the thin trousers he wore.

“You can’t leave me like this! Stop!” she was screaming at him as he walked away, her hoarse voice rasping against the sound of the oars striking the waves below.

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Baron Hardor had been in the Tower of Despair before. It had not always been used as part of Hellgate Prison, of course. In fact, he could remember when it had been built, amidst the hopes and dreams of an island nation at peace. Wars, piracy, the threat of invasion from the east; all of these fears had been avoided, because he had helped make Ferloss a strong nation, a proud nation. He focused on where he was walking across the damp cobbles of the dungeon floor. He had to remember that this place was no longer a simple guard tower along the west wall, as it had been in the old days. Now it was a prison, a cruel threat for the weak and a bastion of what some called evil. He pulled callused fingers across his greying beard as he walked, passing the steel barred doors of the dungeons now. Inside, he knew that enemies of the state lay in chains, naked, awaiting the questions of his inquisitors. He stifled a shudder then quelled thoughts of fear. Was he not here to find the facts? Was he not here to determine the fidelity of his own wife? Aye, that he was, and he would determine the truth.

A muffled scream could be heard as he reached the black wooden door of the chamber. He swallowed and beat it with his heavy fist. He could hear panting, exhausted cries, then a pause. The door slowly creaked open, as if pulled by a wizened arm. He expected the woman’s face, hooded as it was. He had not expected to see how decrepit it had become. His gasp was plain, though he tried to stifle it. Only rigid self-control stopping him from raising a hand to his mouth.

It would have been a sign of weakness in front of her, if in fact a woman she was. White hair fell across the pallid wrinkled flesh of her face. Her features were accentuated by the prominent points of her skull – as if they threatened to puncture the puckered skin that covered it. Deep set eyes, dark and sinister in the poor light from the torches, lent her a visage of evil, perhaps even un-death, as she stared back at the Baron. A narrow pink tongue

slowly licked pencil thin lips, as a snake would taste the air.

Hardor cleared his throat, determined not to be intimidated as he had been the previous day.

“Lady... Demos.”

She smiled. Her features cracked, wrinkles punctuating the already cracked, pockmarked flesh of her face.

“Baron Hardor. How good to see you again, and how good of you to address me as a ‘lady’, when plainly you disagree with the assertion.” He looked away, her wheezing croak sounding as though it came from hell itself.

“My... you are interested in these charges of mine, are you not? You have been here every day,” she continued. Her voice rasped, a whispery silk accompanied by a click in the back of her throat.

He nodded reflexively.

“Yes. Yes, what news do you have for me?” he stammered.

“Come in, Baron. See and listen.”

The smell from the dungeons had been vile, but Hardor had expected it. The olfactory onslaught of heat, the smell of sweat, and worse, assaulted him now, and he raised a hand to his mouth even as he heard the hissing laugh of the bent old woman behind him. Her black cloak swished as she walked into the dimly lit chamber.

The gasp of the man to his left attracted his attentions first. He was completely naked and suspended by his ankles upside down.

“A new client,” she wheezed. “A spy in Captain Fallon’s guard it would seem, but he will soon be singing for me.”

The man opened his eyes and shuddered, staring at both of them as they passed.

“Where is Narissa?” Hardor grunted, trying to maintain his composure.

“Why, she is clamped in the position that I left her in yesterday, although I have tightened the device significantly. I was about to add some coals to the steel under her feet when you arrived.”

Hardor nodded, swallowing nervously. He had watched the woman’s guards strip Narissa naked yesterday, even as she had struggled desperately, having seen the demonic chamber and been told of the instruments to which she would be subjected. The woman had been his wife’s bodyguard for five years and had saved her life more than once. She was the fastest, most agile fighter Hardor had ever seen – surpassing any man of the guard. In fact, his conscience reminded him, Narissa had saved his life too, by deflecting an assassin’s poisoned dagger last year, and now he had ordered that she be put to vile question by this demonic monster. He could see her now, held by the jaws of the breast press, her face displaying the cruel agony that her position demanded from her body. He swallowed again, reminding himself that torturers’ guilds in other states rarely brought women into their ranks, as they were seen as being far too cruel.

He summoned his courage, raising his head as he got closer to the devilish contraption. Narissa was tall and very muscular, as befitted a warrior of her northern barbarian heritage. Well, he assumed that she was a barbarian. No other race of peoples could produce these strong women. Her dark hair was matted with the sweat that she had produced while standing as part of the instrument. Her large blue eyes stared at him as he approached.

“By the gods...” he gasped. Demos was right. Narissa’s ordeal had indeed been made worse. Last night he had watched as her hands were bound behind her and she was made to stand on dull steel spikes, her weight pushing her soles hard in between the raised cones. Her ankles were chained in position, though that mattered little, since her large globe-like breasts had then been offered to the jaws of the breast press, and sandwiched painfully between the boards as the contraption was tightened. The insides of the wooden jaws were also coated with dull steel spikes. As he had left the previous evening, not wishing to see more as Narissa screamed vile curses at him, they had secured her breasts, closing the jaws until they had been

squeezed in place. But now...

Clearly Madame Demos had been working the mechanism, inch by inch through the night, each turn of the sensitive apparatus generating a twist and further closing of the vile contrivance. Narissa's breasts were now clamped and enormous, swollen by the clasp of the jaws on her body. Purplish red, they prevented her moving even slightly, as she stood, hands bound behind her, breasts exposed and raw, and feet chained to a painful spiked steel floor. Her savage warrior face stared death at Hardor as she tried to hold back the tears of agony that were but an inevitable consequence of her brutal ordeal.

"You bastard, Hardor," she croaked, wincing as if even giving voice to thought were enough to twist her tortured body further.

Hardor could only stare in response as Demos bent to shovel heated coals from a brazier into the pit beneath the steel spiked panel upon which Narissa stood. Her back creaked as she shovelled, the coals still bearing fiery orange embers as they tumbled into the pit, which sat inches beneath Narissa's hard floor.

"What are you doing?" Hardor asked, his voice catching with the fear he felt watching the horrific scene. Narissa turned to try and watch as Demos worked, but cried out in a gasp of agony as the movement tore at her swollen chest.

Demos's voice grated. "I fill the pit with coals, yes? The steel heats beneath her feet soon and the steel spikes become warm, then warmer, then intensely hot."

Her back creaked as she stood up, dusting off her hands. Narissa licked dry lips, looking down as much as she could, flexing her toes reflexively as she pulled at the restricting chains at her ankles that held her feet in position, realising what would happen as the steel began to heat.

"It usually has the desired effect." She smiled with her thin lips.

Hardor stared at her. This agony, this ritual of pain, was but part of

her job. Narissa was but another victim, a ‘client’ that she would make speak during another day in her routine. He had seen people put to torment before, in other countries, but clearly those practitioners that he had witnessed had been amateurs who wanted a confession quickly with branding irons or less subtle mechanisms. Demos took pleasure in the stretching out of the torment, in the agony that was etched on the victim’s face and soul by her practice of her ‘art’.

Narissa gritted her teeth. She had stood there all night. Her legs were in agony, her body bathed in sweat, her ordeal far from over.

“Release me... Hardor... You have no right to do this!” she gasped, struggling for breath, every slight movement a painful trial now.

Hardor regained his composure, getting used to the sights and smells of the chamber, remembering his determination and why he was here.

“No Narissa. You know why you suffer. You know what you must say.”

“I have been told nothing. What... gnnnn... am I to say?” Narissa gasped, trying to hold her body steady against the torment, trying in vain. Hardor shot a glance at Demos. She nodded, her whisper cutting the air like a blade of ice.

“It is always best to torment the subject well prior to asking the first direct question. The subject will then be apprised of the depth of agony and keen to see its end through answering a question, which will seem less daunting when her position is...” she moved the tightening wheel of the jaws slightly as Narissa screeched like an animal and the breast press creaked, “... so desperate”.

Hardor licked his lips as the jaws moved slightly, imperceptibly, closer together, yet the globes of Narissa’s breasts looked as if they might rupture at any moment.

“My wife,” he began, speaking quickly. “Her lover. Who is her lover? This man who has been seen in my estate at night, a thief and a cheat, no

doubt. Who is he? You must know, Narissa!”

Narissa’s jaw was clamped tight.

“You... You mean that is why I am being put to torment. B... because you want to know who your wife is fucking? You pathetic worm!” Narissa grunted gasping quickly as the pressure of the device made it difficult to speak, difficult to breathe even. As Hardor watched, Demos picked up a thin wooden cane from a rack and approached.

“You should speak, barbarian. It will only get worse if you do not. The steel will heat soon and there is always the cane.”

Narissa stared at her, finally understanding that what she had felt until now was but an *entrée*. This devil woman had not even begun to inflict the rigours of her dark art. Demos began to swish the cane in the air. Hardor wanted to be sick.

“Answer Lord Hardor quickly. The steel will heat and roast the soles soon, but before that, each breast will feel twenty strokes. Is that really something that you want?”

Hardor heard a whimper somewhere behind him. Clearly, the man who had been hanging upside down watching the entire scene was now understanding what might happen to him in the longer term, if he did not speak. If this female Torturer had little respect for a woman’s body, what might she do to him?

Narissa could only stare, yet this did little to placate Demos as the cane came hissing down, hard across her breast. By the fifth stroke, the screeching was so fierce that Hardor backed away, covering his ears. He could not tear his eyes from the clamped breast, now swiftly beaten by the old woman in front of him.

By the fifteenth stroke, Narissa was screaming a name. This did not stop Demos, who continued to administer all twenty strokes as promised, until welts covered the clamped orb in front of her.

“Trask! Trask! AIIIIIE!”

She turned slowly to Hardor. “You know the man of whom she speaks?”

Hardor slowly shook his head, wide eyed as he watched the scene. Part of him was glad that Narissa had spoken, while part of him, a dark part, had wanted Demos to continue.

“Then we shall determine all that she knows.”

Demos raised the cane again as Narissa shrieked in terror.

* * * * *

Meline almost fell on the wet deck as she was manhandled toward the steps to the captain’s cabin. The man and woman that assisted her had been told not to give her any relief from the sexual torment that she had suffered while in the stocks, yet to prevent her touching herself they had also been ordered to bind her hands behind her. Her naked, sunburnt body, her face freckled with lips blistered by the heat of the days, was forced along. It was hard to walk. Her legs and feet were still numb and the only feeling she could find seemed to be pain as her thighs and calves started to remember the position that they should naturally be in. She moved at a crawl, barely able to put one swollen foot in front of the other. It felt like her thighs were going to fall away over her knees somehow.

“Why am I still bound?” she whispered to the male sailor.

“So you don’t play wi’ yerself, wench,” he sighed. “We ain’t even allowed to give ye relief.”

As Meline considered her pussy lips, she felt them moisten, felt herself want to satisfy the lusts that she had been denied while stocked. The captain was a bastard who knew how to tease and torment, that much was clear.

It seemed to take hours for her to make it up the narrow wooden steps, made worse by the swaying of the large ship as the oars pulled it toward port. By the gods, Tria was still down there, a chained galley slave under the whip of those eastern bastards. Even Ritix and Portia did not deserve what they faced on the stinking rowing deck.

Eventually she stood in front of Captain Darmech, the man who had teased and tormented her, apparently without satisfying either of them. He wrote in the log as she stood, stinking and sweating in front of him, the two sailors either side of her.

“The wench from the stocks, Captain,” the woman spoke up.

Darmech simply nodded, continuing to write in his book, not even looking up.

“Put her to work swabbing the deck,” he said gruffly.

Meline gasped.

“She... she can barely stand sir?”

“Aye... if she does a good job, she can wield a whip down below. Let’s see how she pleases me.”

The sailors grabbed Meline by the arms, beginning to turn her as Darmech finally looked up.

“And one more thing,” he said slowly. “If she plays with herself, put her back in the stocks.”

Meline closed her eyes and shuddered.

Chapter 2

Hardor had made sure that he had been away from his country house when his wife had been arrested. He remembered that Captain Fallon had told him she would be treated with respect. He could remember what he had ordered, that she should be treated like any other prisoner. Fallon had balked at the thought that his Lord would want his wife treated in this way, had pleaded with him to at least have her placed in chastity chains to prevent the attentions of the jailers. Hardor had finally agreed to this. Yet now, as he imagined Marie lying naked in a filthy dungeon but for the steel around her loins and body, he held back the tears that he knew must eventually come. Oh, what had he done? He had reacted with anger when he had been told of the man who had been his wife's lover. He had been determined to punish her, without speaking to her. He had engaged upon ordering a manhunt, without knowing really who he had been looking for.

Since Narissa had revealed the name 'Trask' to him, Madame Demos had spent a further hour working on her to determine what further information she might know. She had little more, save that the man was a sailor down on his luck who Marie had apparently taken pity on. And now, Narissa lay in chains too, in one of the deepest prison cells, a broken remnant of the proud warrior she had been. He sipped his wine as he stood on the balcony of the palace chamber that he used as his town house whenever he was in the city. He hoped that given enough wine, he might forget his troubles, forget the fact that Marie would be punished for adultery now, even if they never found this 'Trask' person.

Punishment. By the gods. Ferloss had never looked kindly upon adultery. Given that they were an island nation, some might even say they were isolationist in their outlook, the solemnity of marriage was held as sacred and never-ending. For a wife to blight its sanctity with an affair? Was this not the province of men? A woman would never, could never, be allowed to do it, and with a sailor in the docks? Damn, this man had to be caught and suffer with Marie.

He tried not to think of what Fallon had reminded him. The punishment for adultery was savage. He could see the large triangular shaped wooden horse in the square from here. The guilty woman would be held naked in prison until her punishment. She would then have a steel helm fixed over her head, which would mean that she could not see. Her hands would be tied to the top of it, leaving her body exposed. She would be led to the horse and mounted on the savage triangular apex, her feet dangling as her full bodyweight rode the vile instrument. She would remain there from dawn until dusk, the agony in her loins a reminder of her crime. Yet, as Fallon had continued, that would not be all. The masked punishers would add to the hell of riding by administering the birch rods across the back and buttocks, and across the breasts and belly and thighs, a man at front and rear, each to deliver one hundred strokes. Fallon had wanted him to understand what would happen to Marie, had begged him to reconsider. He was a good officer, it seemed, ever keen to assuage his Lord's emotions.

No, he reminded himself, he had done what he must. He held back tears. He would soon forget Marie, would he not, as he had forgotten his other wives? His thoughts were interrupted. He almost dropped the wine goblet as the door was knocked heavily by a fist.

"My Lord Hardor?" shouted a deep voice from the corridor outside.

"Fallon?" he gasped in response. What in the nine hells was Captain Fallon doing at his door at this time of night?

"What is it, Captain?" he replied, his voice a little more secure in its intent this time.

"My Lord," the muffled voice behind the door barked. "I may have a solution for your recent great... concerns."

Hardor stared at the door. What was he talking about? Was this some final joke that the city had decided to play upon his wretched despair?

He set the goblet on the rough oak table with a thud and crossed the creaking floor, opening the door slowly. He narrowed his eyes at what he saw. Fallon was recognisable by his dark eyes, though he had opted to wear a

partially closed helmet and cloak. A woman stood beside him. She too was cloaked and also hooded, though he could plainly see the finer features of her figure.

“What is this Fallon? You bring me a woman while my wife rots in prison chains?”

“After a fashion, my Lord, yes.” Fallon’s whispering voice grated as he glanced up and down the corridor of the villa, apparently afraid that his scheme, whatever it might be, could be discovered unless Hardor let him inside the room. Sensing his wariness, he backed down and indicated that both should enter.

The woman entered first, followed by Fallon, as Hardor closed the door behind them.

“Now, what is this about?”

Both visitors now took the opportunity to remove their headgear.

“And why, dare I ask, do you choose to go about the city in this weak disguise Captain?”

Fallon cleared his throat, as the woman revealed her blonde hair. Hardor looked her up and down. She was of average height, clearly not the size of the barbarian women of the north, but sturdy. The shortsword at her hip and light segments of armour indicated that she was a mercenary of sorts. A pity, Hardor considered. She would have borne strong children had she belonged to him. Perhaps she might yet stand naked on the slave block in heavy chains. He smiled. Was that why Fallon had brought her here? She was not overly pretty. In fact, her face seemed hardened by the rigours of war that she had undoubtedly seen. She seemed around thirty summers, but perhaps the harshness of mercenary life had made her seem older than she was. Her hair was blonde, partially tied back and fell to her shoulder, a little unkempt, certainly in comparison with the ladies of the city and... Hardor tried not to think upon his wife. She too was blonde.

“My Lord, this is Kirian.”

The woman stared at him, nodding in response to her name being revealed to the nobleman.

“I see. Fallon, I appreciate your efforts, but I am in little mood to have a woman, warrior or no, this night. I hope you can...”

“That was not my intent, my Lord,” Fallon replied, bowing slightly.

Kirian licked her lips and spoke now.

“I am no slave slut, Lord Hardor. I am here because of a proposition your man here has made of me.”

Hardor stared. “You impertinent wench. I’ll have you whipped bloody at the post then crucified!” he cried, his hands becoming fists.

“My Lord, please.” Fallon interjected. “I have made these arrangements only so that we might spare your wife the pain of punishment.”

“What?”

“My Lord. I knew that you would not wish to see Marie in pain, to see her suffer on the horse.”

“She... abused my trust Fallon,” Hardor said, calming slightly.

“My Lord, it is indeed admirable that you would seek to bring the city’s justice to bear upon her for her crime, to have her publicly punished by helm, horse and birch, but I would suggest that prison might be punishment enough for her.”

“What do you mean?” Hardor’s gaze shifted from Fallon to the roguish woman he had brought to his chambers.

“I had found Kirian after interviewing a number of women in my Lord’s mercenary command. Kirian is a scout with the ‘Blood Eagles’, the soldiers formerly recruited from your ally, Milord Gorus of Irulan.”

Hardor nodded, remembering. Gorus had been a temperamental and

untrustworthy ally on the western coast, but an ally nevertheless. He approached the woman now. Her unkempt blond hair lay across her brow and nestled untidily on her shoulders, which were clad with the fastenings of the leather hauberk she wore under the cloak.

“You are part of the light cavalry scouts, woman?”

“I am... my Lord,” she responded, making no pretence of a bow, merely staring forward.

Hardor noticed that his title had been spoken with some reticence. Clearly this woman had a problem with authority. Fallon, perhaps sensing that Kirian’s continued communication might infuriate his Lord, cleared his throat and interrupted.

“My Lord. Kirian would seek to aid your dilemma.”

“I see. And how exactly might she do that. As she has stated, she is not some pleasure slave.” He raised a hand toward the curvature of her hip, smiling. “Though it might be interesting to explore her.”

Kirian glared in response, twisting away from his movement.

Fallon interjected. “My Lord. You might recall that your wife has a distinctive birthmark upon her back, and thus could be recognised as she endures her public punishment, by those who might have seen it, those who may recall the mark from state visits or her time in court with those revealing eastern fashions that you enjoy seeing her wear?”

“Yes, yes. What of it Fallon? I don’t understand what this has to do with anything.”

“I... had considered that you might allow another to undergo the torments, rather than your beloved Marie my Lord,” Fallon said slowly.

“Another?” he said, suddenly interested. “You mean...?”

Kirian nodded, trying to suppress a shudder, as if appreciating the fact that Lord Hardor finally understood, and that there was no turning back now.

“I will take your wife’s place on the wooden horse, my Lord, and suffer the birch and the agony of the wood,” she said, her head raising as if in defiance, as if being capable of undergoing such an ordeal would earn her his respect. Fallon smiled, bowing his head as the answer to Hardor’s questions finally presented itself.

“What? Why would you do such a thing?” Hardor exclaimed, his eyes narrowing.

Kirian seemed about to answer when Fallon interrupted.

“This woman’s sister was condemned to the oar two years ago – one of our cargo galleys. I have informed her that we could have the condemned woman released and have the charges removed, were she to help you out of your predicament.”

“I don’t understand, why her?” Hardor has still having trouble.

“Remove your robes, Kirian,” Fallon said, moving his hand in a motion that suggested that she should do it quickly.

The woman began slowly to remove her clothing. The cloak was dropped as she began to unstrap the leather armour she wore, in turn dropping belt and harness. She revealed the ragged tunic, which, it seemed, had seen better days. She untied the tether and pulled it over her head, revealing a halter that covered her full breasts. She paused, unsure whether to continue, as Fallon began to turn her.

“Here, my Lord, you see?”

As the woman was turned around, Hardor saw, on her upper back, a red winestain-like mark. He reached for it. She flinched as he touched it.

“Where did this come from?”

“It’s an old wound,” she said, her voice quaking slightly. “It never healed properly.”

“Remarkable, so like my wife’s mark. And so, Fallon, you believe that this will fool those nobles who would be looking for such evidence that this is Marie?”

“Yes, my Lord. We could not easily mimic such a mark. Those who might guess that you would dare attempt such trickery would see that the mark is real and, as you must admit, bears a remarkable resemblance to your wife’s mark.

Hardor pawed at the mark again as Kirian winced.

“Indeed, and so, woman, you agree to be horsed and beaten in exchange only for your sister’s freedom?”

Kirian nodded.

“Perhaps you will have to pay more of a price than this?”

Instinctively, Fallon backed away slightly as Hardor gripped the knot that held the woman’s halter top tight against her bosom and loosened it. She moved her hands to grasp the falling clothing.

“Let it fall,” Hardor barked. “Or perhaps we should let your sister rot in shit and chains at the oar?”

Kirian closed her eyes, letting the halter fall, feeling the cool air of the chamber on her bare breasts, realising now the full implications of the fate she had chosen. She began to turn around, her head held high, as both men stared at the naked top half of her body.

Hardor smiled.

“I am changing the bargain. You will languish in chains alongside my wife before suffering her terrible punishment, but that will happen tomorrow. Tonight, you will spend with me.”

“And my sister?”

“You know which ship she serves on, Fallon?”

Kirian winced. ‘Serves on?’ the concept of being a condemned woman in leg irons, rowing naked in horrible conditions of depravity, under the whip of male overseers who could force the women to suck cock whenever they required it, could hardly be called ‘service’. It was sexual slavery, plain and simple.

“Yes Milord. She rows upon one of the supply ships.”

“I see. What did she do to be condemned?” Hardor asked, moving forward and slowly running his hand along the line of Kirian’s breast as she shuddered and continued to stare forward.

“I understand that she had a misunderstanding with a nobleman’s son,” she said, gasping slightly at his touch.

“I see. So she refused his advances, is that it?” Hardor laughed.

“My Lord, I do not...”

“I was speaking to Kirian, Captain...”

The woman winced as Hardor’s hands traced the line of her nipple, then kneaded and lifted her breast.

“Yes...” she gasped, biting her lip. “She arrived here a while before I did.”

“We must remove the rest of your clothing, my dear,” Hardor said. “You may leave us, Captain. Have the woman taken to prison this evening, when I am finished.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Kirian stared at Hardor as he reached forward and pulled gently at the bindings that secured her treads. She had known there would be more than just the price of punishment to pay. Instinctively, her hand dropped to Hardor’s probing fingers.

“Wait. I have your word that my sister will be released from the

galley?”

She squeezed his hand, even as she sensed his excitement mingled with the anger of being denied what he assumed now belonged to him.

“You... You do, of course. Yes,” he whispered, his tongue licking the side of her face. Kirian winced.

“You promise, on your soul?”

He stopped. “On my soul?”

“Aye,” she whispered, suppressing a shudder.

“Yes, of course. On my soul,” he grunted, almost mockingly.

She ended her resistance, nodding her head, as his hand pulled at the trews, loosened them, pulling the garment from her hips and pushing his hand inside, fingers probing at her mound and delving toward her sex. She gasped as he found her clit. Instinctively, she parted her legs for him, even as his free hand pulled the leather trews downward, while his lips brushed her breasts, tenderly biting at one. Perhaps Lord Hardor was a lover of some experience, she thought idly, comparing his approach with some of the mercenaries she had had relations with in the past.

She eased her legs out of the trews now, watching as Fallon reached the door and began to leave. He stared, perhaps jealous that he had missed out on some of the pleasures that Kirian had to offer.

“Goodbye, Captain,” Hardor said, aware that Fallon had still not left. “You may return to have her put in chains.”

“Yes, my Lord,” he replied, opening the door and exiting. Closing the door behind him, he heard a last gasp from the woman as Hardor continued to strip and explore her body.

* * * * *

Meline had walked the deck in agony at first, though she found now, after a full day with the dirty mop, that most of the feeling was returning to her legs. She had been given a filthy loincloth to wear and Ballo had been told to watch her. She had wanted him so much, wanted to feel his cock inside her, and indeed it was clear that Ballo had wanted her, but Darnech's cruellest torture had been to deny her any form of fulfilment. Clearly he had punished women like this before, women who had been used to their sexual freedom. On board his ship, however, that would not happen. Ballo too was being evilly punished by being forced to watch her, almost naked, yet not being permitted to do anything to satiate his lust, no matter how much Meline wanted him to. It was a cruel and wicked punishment, and Meline quickly realised just how shrewd the Captain was. It was no surprise, of course. Her evil sister Alia had always chosen her lieutenants with care and perhaps, despite his apparent abandonment of loyalty to her, Darnech had been a trusted one. Possibly, she reasoned, he knew who she was and he blamed her for the arrest and ultimate torture and imprisonment of Lady Alia.

She tried not to think of what horrors her sister faced. It had been Alia's own fault. Had she not tried to kill her? Had she not, perhaps, killed their own father? Had she not indeed killed many innocent galley slaves and crew when she ordered the *Raven* sunk, and then condemned Tria, Ritix and Portia to the horrors of the oar? She boiled with anger at the thoughts. She reminded herself to stay calm and accept this punishment. Darnech had intimated that she would be allowed below as an overseer when her time swabbing the decks was done. She hoped it would be soon. She mopped another portion of the wooden deck, her feet soaked.

"So where are we headed, Ballo?" she grunted as she worked, aware that he watched her from his perch on the handrail. She was desperate to talk, to remove dark thoughts and darker urges. She turned slightly, hearing no answer.

"I said..."

"I heard you," he grunted.

"Oh I see, you were watching me," she whispered with a smile.

“It’s hard not to, wench. It’s even harder to know that if I try to have you, I’ll be whipped.”

She smiled again, leaning her chin on the mop.

“So... you didn’t answer me,” she said.

He slipped from the rail, but stopped short of approaching.

“You’d best get on with your work there. We’re heading for the Isles. Ferloss, I hear. The Captain wants to sell those spices and lumber we have. He reckons we’ll get the best price in the island kingdom.”

“I see,” Meline said. She had never been to Ferloss. She knew most of the coasts of the western kingdoms, yet her father’s merchant fleet had normally stayed away from the island kingdoms. They were divided between rogue city states that bordered on piracy and flourishing dictatorships, where it was easy to have your crews fall into trouble at port.

“So how far away are we?”

“You ask a lot of questions for a woman under punishment,” Ballo replied.

“Aye. That I do.”

“Two days out, if you must know.”

“So, I’m to be put on overseer duty for two days?” she said slowly.

“Ha. You should be so lucky.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that the Captain will see you down below longer than two days. You seemed to want to experience it, did you not?” Ballo grunted, folding his arms as he stared at her buttocks in the loincloth, trying not to think of what he wanted to do.

Meline stopped the endless mopping and looked up sharply.

“What do you mean Ballo? Am I to be made a slave at the oar?”

He laughed in response.

“No, wench, much as I would love to see you naked, in chains and under the lash, you’ll be an overseer, though being a woman down there, even wielding a lash, is but a short step above being a slave.”

Meline nodded, returning to her work. No matter how bad it might be, she would have only one chance to free Tria. If conditions were as bad as Ballo was suggesting, she might even have to free her former rivals, Ritix and Portia, rather than leave them to a horrible fate in the stinking chained underworld below. She had seen galley decks many times on many merchant ships. She had even been locked in chains herself at the oar, during her last trip on the *Raven*, as punishment for annoying Captain Patronis there. She seemed to have a knack for such things, it seemed. Though, from what she could hear and smell from the hellish conditions below, she would have to act quickly.

* * * * *

Tria moaned as she pulled hard on the oar, pushing her filthy, blistered feet against the wood in front of her, even as her heels disturbed the horrid sludge of the bilge water. Her body ached, not least because of the lashes of the whip that she had received. She had lost count of the welts across thighs and body, and dared not think about how her back looked. She stared at the other backs in front of her as she strained at the pull of the oar, silently praying to the goddess that she did not look as bad as they did. Her hands and feet were blistered and raw, her body ached from the severe labour and her muscles felt like they were on fire most of the time; even though she had seen some slaves, poor half blind old women mostly, thrown overboard for the sharks because they could not row any more, there were worse depredations on the vile galley deck.

The aching sores on Tria's mouth had been caused by the number of times she had had to serve the feared overseers, had to suck their cocks dry during the rowing breaks. She had refused at first. It seemed so long ago now, and she had ridden the wooden horse for hours until she had no feeling left in her sex. Her toes had almost broken under the weight of a bucket of chains that had been tied to further exacerbate her plight as she rode. She had screamed and pleaded to be freed in the end, and promised that she would serve any of them, howling like an animal. They had laughed, welted her with canes until her will finally broke.

‘Offering the mouth’, as the overseers called it was no choice, since the wooden horse awaited those who refused. It was all that the overseers were permitted. Indeed, the fact that each slave was tethered to her oar bench via a ring that pierced her pussy lips, meant that the overseers could do little else. They knew that to remove the ring meant crucifixion, and so they obeyed, even as they forced each slave to offer her swollen, blistered lips to their hungry cocks.

After seeing what had happened to Tria, Portia and even the mighty barbarian Ritix, who had both sailed with Tria aboard the *Raven* had succumbed without resistance to the massive male members that were thrust in their faces during breaks, moving their heads to taste and satiate the filthy erect cocks of the men with the whips. Tria sensed that Ritix still held some sense of rebellion. The guards sensed it too, perhaps – she had been soundly whipped, even though she was the strongest, most able rower on board. On another galley, another merchant ship, Ritix might have been spared the whip for the most part, shown as an example of a strong, reliable slave, even though she was a condemned woman. The overseers on a civilised vessel would have told the others how ‘they should be strong, like the barbarian, if they wanted to live’. Here, the hatred and perversity of the vile men from the east, made overseers on this hellship, meant that strong women were whipped and humiliated even more so than the rest.

Alia had put her here after destroying the *Raven*. The memories came flooding back to Tria. First prison, chains, then galley service and the horse. She bit her lip, feeling the pain once more between her legs. She wanted to scream for her freedom, though the ring that tethered her to the ship made

that impossible. Alia... her sister Meline. It seemed that they had been caught up in some vile plot between the sisters. She did not know now if Meline were alive or dead, only that she had been chained to an oar aboard the Raven when the ship went down. She remembered telling Trask, the first mate, to go and free her, before... before...

“YAUGHHHH!”

The whip exploded across Tria’s back as she lurched and twisted, trying desperately to keep rhythm as she pulled hard and stretched her naked, filthy body, wide eyed from pain. The hunched overseer welted the many-tailed lash hard across her muscled thighs as she screeched again.

“You lose rhythm, wench!” he whined, lowering his face as she rowed in the bowels of the deck, licking a vile dark tongue across his stubbled chin. “Row hard or I put you back on the horse, eh?”

Tria nodded her head, tears in her eyes as the chain from her pussy ring rattled as she righted herself on the bench. She rasped a dry throated cry as he whipped her back again before walking away laughing.

* * * * *

Kirian had suffered indignities before. As a mercenary, she had been punished many times over the years. Sometimes it had been prison or the whip. On one occasion she had even suffered the bastinado. She could remember the savage beating she had received to the soles of her feet with a cane, wielded by the master at arms in front of the other warriors. She had been allowed to wear a loincloth then, even though she had been locked into wooden stocks to secure her feet as the man who had framed her for a crime that she had not committed, had proceeded to welt her feet until she was screaming with agony. She had been punished for not being at her post – even though the master at arms had made sure that she could not be, a deed that had been a result of her not agreeing to let him have her body. She had not walked properly for days afterward, yet an arrow in the back of her accuser during the confusion at the siege of Boras had seemed fitting at the

time. It seemed that she had matured, or had grown to care less, as her current predicament reminded her of the respect she had had for her body then, and yet seemed to lack now.

Hardor, convinced now that Kirian might become his new plaything, had reminded her a number of times now that he had the power to release her sister from the galley, though the price would be higher than simply taking the punishment that had been destined for his wife. He had told her while he had loosened her trews and pulled them down her thighs, that he would like to sample her body, of how she so resembled his lovely wife who even now languished in chains in prison. He thanked her for what she was about to do for him, even as his tongue flicked slowly around her clit. He removed her trews and boots, untying her hair and running his hands across her body, staring, kissing and nibbling at her breasts. She had become aroused, she could not deny it, and it had been a while since she had been with any man, so she did not resist.

She protested only mildly as he pushed her toward his four posted bed and spread her legs to each post, pushing her waist over the end. He continued to tease her clit, making her moisten and grow wet, eager at the thought of his cock entering her. She thought back to when she had refused the master at arms, a few years ago, and suffered at the stocks. This seemed different, only she sensed that it was different only because it was a price to be paid.

He tied her ankles to the posts, forcing her legs wide apart. She gasped in consternation as he then tied her wrists pulling them toward the other end of the bed and securing her, so that she was helpless, spread, naked and wet, her hair and breasts dangling as she writhed a little. As Hardor moved in her peripheral vision, she saw his erection, felt his eagerness to draw this scene out, and sensed his deviant mind thinking up the ways in which he might torment her.

He teased her for what seemed like hours with fingers and hands until she moaned and writhed, gushing her juices until she could feel them flowing down her thighs. He brushed his loins against her and she writhed back in response, her body telling him that she wanted more, that she wanted him.

“So Kirian, is it me you want? You want me inside you, is that it?”

“Yes,” she gasped longingly.

She heard him loosen his trews, felt the heat of his member across her buttocks. He began to tease her with it. How did he have this self-control, she thought, her body wanting him, longing for him now.

“There’ll be little need for you to dress when I am finished, wench. You’ll be going to prison chains. Prisoners are kept naked, did you know that?”

“No... please... I need you...”

“I need you ‘My Lord’, wench.”

“I need you, My Lord!”

“Good...”

He plunged his cock into her as she cried out, writhing as much as she could against his jerkings. He tried to slow himself, in time with her movements, her needs. She was disappointed that he could not, and gasped as he jerked and pumped, grunting like an old man. Kirian gritted her teeth. It was little wonder that this man’s wife had sought an affair. He might be good with his hands but he made love like a man possessed, with little care for the requirements of the woman that he made love to.

She jerked and tried to gain further satisfaction from both his cock and his movement. All too soon she could hear his whines, his involuntary shunts inside her. Was he going to cum so soon? She writhed in her bonds, glad that he had at least teased her before entering. This was going to be a disappointment. She felt herself slump as he finished off, still eager to be satiated, still needing something. She said the words before she even realised what she had uttered.

“Finish me... please...”

“What?” he shouted.

“I...”

“You are not satisfied, woman?”

She let her head fall. She winced as he wiped his cock on her buttocks.

“You bitch,” he screamed, wetting her backside with his hand. “I’ll see you suffer for that.”

“Wait no,” Kirian gasped, still writhing, still seeking satisfaction.

“Fallon! Captain Fallon!”

Fallon had been waiting outside the door and had listened intently to the sounds of lovemaking. He knew that Hardor would not satisfy the mercenary scout, but hoped that he would not realise his own failings, hoped that he would not be so disappointing, as he had been with Marie. It had taken him days to arrange this woman, to even find someone who looked like Marie to any crowd – so long as she bore a mask or helm. He could not let Hardor mess this up now.

“My Lord, yes!” Fallon replied, bursting through the heavy oak door.

“Have this bitch taken to prison now. She’ll take Marie’s punishment at dawn.”

Fallon gasped as he saw Kirian’s latest predicament, spread and tied as she was. He could also sense her disappointment.

“Kirian?”

“Untie her and get her from my sight!” Hardor began to rebutton his treads and flatten what clothing remained on him, staring at the woman who he had just had.

“My Lord. My sister, you promised. Your bond!” she groaned, struggling in the bonds.

Hardor paused, tying his trews back in place.

“Aye, wench, I’ll have her released, when the bargain is complete, after you have suffered.”

Fallon began to untie her ankles, his face at the level of her still wet pussy. Kirian writhed as he approached. He could smell her lack of satisfaction, smell her needs. It was all he could do not place his probing tongue between those inviting lips and attempt to satisfy the poor woman, though he knew that would never be allowed. Hardor stared as Fallon untied Kirian, helping her to stand. She was sweating, and angrily made sure that she did not look the nobleman in the eye.

“Take the wench, away captain, and have her spend the night in a punishment cell. I don’t want her near my wife. She’ll have an ordeal to face in the morning and I don’t want her even speaking to Marie, my lovely Marie.”

Hardor stared into space, away from Fallon and Kirian. Fallon nodded, throwing Kirian’s former cloak around her as he gathered the remnants of her things.

“No, Fallon, leave them here.”

Kirian made an attempt to protest that her clothes and armour would be left here, and then thought better of it. Plainly the man was upset, if not completely mad, and she did not want him to change his mind or course of action with regard to her condemned sister. She pulled the cloak around her as she walked, otherwise naked, across the tiled floor, letting Fallon guide her.

Chapter 3

The heat of the galley deck was stifling. The design of the openings along port and starboard for the oars allowed for at least some attempt at ventilation. Those same openings and viewports could never dilute or hope to accommodate the vile and disgusting stench, however. Meline gasped and coughed as she descended the creaking steps. Even the very timbers were soiled and slick with filth as she tried to avoid the worst patches of dark moisture with her bare feet. She wore the same loincloth, her hair tied back, as she accompanied Ballo to the rowing deck. Though the light was dim, the familiar smells, sounds of the lash being welted on some poor woman's body, and sight of the rowers moving in near perfect unison, made her think back to her many years at sea and her more recent rowing experience aboard the *Raven*. She shuddered as she remembered the faces and screams of dying slaves as the ship was sucked beneath the sea. She closed her eyes. She had had nightmares about that day ever since, when Trask had given her the key to her chains and she had freed herself, yet had been unable to do anything about the other women who had been chained in place as the galley went down. She had run away, swam away, but the memories would not leave her. She could see their faces as they looked at her, pleading, screaming and clawing at their chained ankles in a vain struggle to be free from the dying ship.

"Meline, stop daydreaming," Ballo barked. She was startled, shaking herself from her dark thoughts.

Ballo stood in front of her, holding a whip handle out to her. The handle was long, bound with leather, designed to more ably direct the savage cords at its end. There were nine long tails at the bottom, each plaited cords of leather, carefully weaved and dried to inflict maximum pain upon the victim. She placed her hand slowly about the thick whip handle, remembering how similar instruments had been used on her own back. A smaller hunched man stood beside Ballo, framed against the movement of the filthy slaves behind him.

“This is Gamir. He runs the deck. You will obey his commands.”

Meline nodded gruffly. Gamir had not taken his eyes from her breasts since they had been introduced, a twisted, toothless smile playing upon his lips as he stared. Both he and the other overseers that she could see were eastern barbarians, from the lands of the Desert Overlords. Brought up in the harsh sands and even harsher empire of the east, they had turned cruelty into a fine art form. Ballo waved a hand in front of Gamir’s eyes.

“Gamir. The Captain charges you with using Meline as an overseer. See to it that you accept the responsibility, eh?”

Gamir nodded, still fixated with Meline’s body.

“These eastern types, they understand nothing,” Ballo intoned.

“Oh we understand you very well,” the hunched man finally said, tearing his gaze away from Meline at last, rubbing a massive hand over the cropped hairs on his dirty head.

“She will make a fine overseer. Keep us entertained,” he said, his language heavily accented, at last looking Meline in the eye.

“There will be none of that, Gamir, less you want to be nailed to a cross. You understand?” Ballo grunted.

The vile overseer laughed, a horrible rasping sound.

“Gamir’s little joke...”

He returned his attentions to Meline, smiling a broken-toothed smile.

* * * * *

Kirian had not fully understood the concept of a ‘punishment cell’ when Hardor had first mentioned it. She had been marched straight to prison. Given her lack of satisfaction with Lord Hardor, she had yearned to tell

Fallon to take her, to give her some satisfaction, but the silent Captain had remained stoic, grasping her tightly by the arm and presenting her to the guards who would introduce her to the depths of the stinking jail.

The main prison in Ferloss was known as Hellgate, and with good reason. The place had been designed to strike terror into the local population, strengthened through the stories of the men and women who had suffered and rotted in chains there. It was situated near the city walls, incorporating a number of dungeons and towers so that it became a veritable maze of despair. All prisoners were required to be naked at all times, as Kirian was soon reminded as her paltry cloak was torn from her. Heavy leg chains were also worn, unless removed so that the victim could be interrogated. A heavy set jailer watched as Kirian was systematically stripped and placed in chains. He also insisted that her hands were tied behind her when Captain Fallon informed him that she was to be placed in a punishment cell for the night.

She had been marched past open fronted cells, with only the thick iron bars separating the prisoners from the guards. Kirian noted that the prisoners were fastened to the wall via steel collars, as if leg irons and bars were not enough, she considered. She also noticed that she was being led to a lower level, the small, barred window that some of the prisoners had high in their cells would not be available to her, it seemed. The lower level offered another corridor of cells. On this occasion, however, there were no open-fronted bars. Each cell had a solid wooden door, with a viewport that could be opened or closed. A sign on the door to her left had a crudely etched diagram of a hanging neck collar.

“The punishment cells, wench. Your room for the night,” the jailer said, signalling them to stop as he reached for a large, jangling ring of keys. There were four of the doors with the crude sign on them. She wondered naively what the symbol meant that she would suffer.

She coughed as the stench hit her. The room was completely black inside. No light at all, until the jailer grabbed a torch from a nearby sconce and shone it inside. Kirian gasped, watching as something large scurried away from the light inside the room.

“You must have really pissed someone off, wench, to earn a place in

this hole,” the jailer snorted.

Without warning, he gripped her by the right breast and pulled her forward. Kirian instinctively resisted, whining in pain. The torch had illuminated a number of facts, in addition to the scurrying rat, which had remained a mystery.

The floor, rather than being stone, had been covered with steel plates. These were crude, but were nevertheless made up from dull steel spikes. Not sharp enough to puncture the sole if walked upon, but clearly hard and persistent enough to cause discomfort over any extended period of time. Worse than that, however, she noted that the room was dominated by collars that hung via chains from the stone ceiling – perhaps fifteen or more in the small cell. These could not be adjusted, which meant that whoever was collared here was forced to stand on the steel spikes.

A guard pushed her from behind as she was forced inside, her bare soles walking warily on the steel, even as the jailer pulled her by her breast.

“GNNN, I... I am to be placed here?” she gasped.

“Aye, wench. Like I say, you must have pissed someone off.”

One of the guards laughed in response, the men starting to position her near a dangling, rusted steel collar near the centre of the room, pulling on her arms even as her bare soles were forced to try and balance her weight on the dull steel spikes. Although they were rounded, the hardness of the steel made the footing uncomfortable, forcing the toes and soles awkwardly into the recesses between raised portions. Kirian winced as she tried to stand upright, feeling the rusted collar being fastened about her neck, unable to resist due to her wrists still being bound. Her ankles too were still in heavy chains.

“How... long do you expect me to stay here?”

The jailer smiled.

“Only until tomorrow, wench. Then, I understand, you face the

comfort of the wooden horse, riding in heavy steel helm as you are thrashed raw with the birches?”

He moved his face close to hers. She could smell his foetid breath; almost feel the stubble on his chin. He moved a rough hand slowly down her belly.

“They say the birches are soaked in brine for an hour or two before they use ’em, keeps ’em nice and supple.”

He ran the hand down her thigh, a thumb brushing against her pubic hairs as she writhed against his touch. She could feel the other guards watching the scene now.

“You’re a strong one. Put up quite a fight, did you? Before you were arrested?”

As if on cue the guards laughed, a chorus for the man’s arrogance.

“Go to hell!” she barked, trying to twist away from him, even as she winced at the movement, as the steel floor made her soles ache. There was no escape for her, standing on the cold twisted metal, bound and collared.

“What are you doing, jailer?” The voice came from the doorway as she looked up, relieved despite her fear, glad to see the man that had brought her to this vile place.

“Having my fun, Sir...” the jailer mumbled, his hand moving to her backside.

“She is under my protection, Sirus... get out of here!” Fallon answered.

“She is a prisoner... Sir,” Sirus responded, not even turning, displaying his contempt in his addressing of the officer, though he widened his eyes as he heard the sword hiss from its scabbard behind him.

“I said leave, Sirus, while you still retain your ears.”

Fallon's voice was cool, steady as he spoke the order. By now, the guards, who knew him of old, were beginning to back away from the group, toward the door. They did not want to share the room with the wench, and knew that Fallon could punish them much more severely if he wished.

Kirian watched as Sirius, the jailer, grunted and gritted his teeth. She gasped as he moved one vile finger between her pussy lips and pulled away, before he began to slouch toward the door, eyeing the point of the sword, tasting his finger.

"I see, Cap'n. Ye want her for yerself, is that it?"

"Just get out. And lock her up as ordered."

Kirian gasped. The rusted steel of the collar grated on her collarbone. It was heavier than it had looked when she saw it, and the others dangling from the ceiling of the walled chamber. Her legs trembled as she tried to get her balance and she pulled at the bonds that held her wrists.

"Please... Fallon. At least untie my wrists."

He stared at her for a long moment as the other men left, looking her impressive body up and down as the jailer stared from the corridor, hoping that he might change his mind and let him have her. Fallon turned on his heel and walked awkwardly back along the undulating steel floor.

"Jailer, remove the chains from her feet, they'll make little difference now, then lock her up."

The Jailer smiled as he re-entered, taking great care in removing the heavy fetters from her ankles and lifting the chains as she tried desperately not to move. She watched as the last of the torchlight disappeared, as the door was slammed shut and she was left to struggle, the discomfort in her feet becoming more maddening with each passing moment. She was engulfed by the dark. Only the light of the torch the jailer held as he locked her in illuminated the outline of the door, but even that began to disappear as she was left in complete darkness. She felt the rat scamper across her feet.

* * * * *

Meline was given a section near the bow, which meant that the sea of lashed backs stretched out in front of her as she monitored her charges. The women were in awful condition. All, of course, had had their heads shaved in the eastern slave style, and by establishing which of those had hair that had grown back to a degree, Meline could determine which women had been there longest. There was little need for repeat shavings, as most of the slaves did not last long in conditions like these. Worse was the horrific manner in which they had each been tethered to the deck – the awful brass rings that pierced their sex lips and tethered them to their benches via a short length of chain. It was difficult for her to whip them, but Gamir’s insistence that she would be savagely whipped herself if she faltered, was enough to convince her to obey him. She winced as she brought the lash down upon a young woman’s back. She was strong still, perhaps a mercenary by the look of her. She grunted in despair and rowed harder to keep up rhythm.

“That’s it,” Gamir grunted from behind her. She could tell that he had been staring at her body as she leaned to lash the woman. She was sweating in the heat of the deck, though not as much as the slaves, who required frequent watering to keep them going in the heat.

“I see you have felt the whip yourself, Meline, and recently. It was a punishment?”

Meline whipped the woman’s back again as she pushed the oar forward, generating a frustrated cry in return.

“Move with the rhythm and avoid the lash,” she grunted, ignoring Gamir. The woman nodded her head, pulling madly to get back in rhythm with the dull thud of the drumbeat from the stern. Sensing her avoidance, he moved forward, running a greasy hand across her buttock as she turned in fury.

“Do not touch me!” she hissed.

Gamir laughed, spreading his hands in innocence.

“Then answer. You were whipped?”

“Aye. I was punished for brawling.” She began to move up the deck, her bare feet mired with the filth of the catwalk as she turned her attentions to the rowers in the upper tier. They were lucky, in a sense, their heels out of the filthy bilge and free from any rowers above them, and thus not hit by spray, or worse, from above.

“I see, so you have a taste for the whip?” he said slowly, licking his large lips.

Meline raised her whip arm as she watched the woman. Her body was muscled and lithe, fat eaten away by the aching labour of the galley. Her hair was auburn, matted against her head, probably thick with lice. Her sex was matted too, caked with dirt. Combining this with the length of her long black toenails, Meline reasoned that she was a ‘veteran’ of this ship. She had little reason, therefore, to lose rhythm. She brought the lash down savagely across her thighs as she pulled. The woman’s high pitched whine stood in stark contrast to the other slave she had taken to task. The younger woman was strong still, defiant even, despite the sure knowledge that there was only one escape from this hell. She grunted and tried to improve, perhaps to spare herself the foul cords of the whip. The auburn haired woman had gone beyond that. She was in the upper tier, perhaps due to experience, but more likely due to the fact that her mouth had developed such sores that even the overseers would not place their cocks in it. She adjusted herself on the bench, trying to gain rhythm again, her pussy chain rattling as Meline saw the redness of her piercing. She looked away.

“You could say that, aye,” Meline croaked back at him. “I’ve felt enough of it in recent weeks.”

“Hmm,” Gamir responded, watching her closely.

“You will make a fine overseer.” He walked on down the deck past her, toward the stern, laughing even as he struck a woman across the lower back with the lash and she yelped.

Meline watched him go. It was difficult not to think about strangling

the little bastard, but she had other concerns. She could not see Tria at this end of the deck, nor could she see any of the other survivors of the *Raven*. She would have to convince Gamir to let her take charge of an area closer to the stern, or find another way.

* * * * *

Marie shuddered as she heard another distant scream from somewhere. She had never thought, in her wildest nightmare, that she would ever end up naked and in chains in Hellgate prison, so close to the dreaded Tower of Despair. She turned her face to the wall. The chain that held her heavy collar to the link rattled. They had given her a bucket, which she had not been permitted to empty yet. She learned from the jailer that this was not normally granted to prisoners unless they were nobles. She had also been made to wear chastity chains around her loins, which the jailer also informed her, to her horror, meant that she would not be toyed with by the guards.

She put her hands on her long blonde hair again. By the gods, this place was revolting; bad enough that she had been forced to strip naked in front of these lecherous men, than she should be held in these horrible conditions. She had not even been given a chance to speak with her husband as she had been arrested. Did he know of her plight? Did he know what was happening to her? She had tried to stay clean by staying out of the worst areas of the cobbled floor. The bucket helped, of course, but there was so little clean straw. She was told that straw, even the wet horrible kind that she had been given, was also a privilege in Hellgate prison. She shuddered when the jailer told her that normally those women who are kind to him get these things. She was getting them because of who she was. She was afraid to ask what was required of those who might be kind.

She had been here for one... maybe two days. With the high barred window, admitting very little light, it was hard indeed to reckon on the time of day. She still could not get used to the smell. Spending so much time in the equivalent of an open sewer was not something she felt she would get used to. She changed her position, moving her wet buttocks away from the area in which she sat, trying to find a drier patch. The fading light from the bars cast

shadows across her flesh. The heavy steel fetters on the chains at her ankles were also starting to abrade her skin. Oh how long was she to be kept like this? What had she done? Had her husband found out about... no... she had been careful.

She was filthy, dirtier than she had ever been. Oh why had she not been allowed to keep her clothing? At the very least they could have given her a bed, even a blanket to keep the cold from her flesh. Oh, where was her husband. And where was Captain Fallon?

Chapter 4

Fallon moved slowly down the stone steps. He had wanted to visit Marie. He had wanted to tell her that everything would be all right, but he could not. There were too many ears in Hellgate Prison for him to risk being caught. Hardor would have him crucified if he knew that he had been fucking his wife for these past three months. He loved Marie, did he not? Yes, surely he did, so why was he heading back to the lower levels of the prison? He owed Marie a visit, surely. Damn, he had become a fool. How many women could he fuck without expecting to gain trouble by it? He had even had that woman Narissa, Marie's bodyguard, before she had been arrested, but something had angered her deeply. When he had fucked her it had felt like *he* was being taken in order to satiate her needs. It had been a feeling that he did not like. He had not been in control as he normally would have been, and it irked him at the time. Yet, she had been a wonderful woman to have (or to be had by). Part of him wanted to bed both Marie and Narissa at the same time, yet the opportunity had not arisen. With Narissa tortured half to death and Marie in chains, he reasoned now that it would not. He shook his head to remove the thoughts.

By the gods, he was being controlled by his own fear and paranoia. Could he not just tell Hardor the truth and be done with it? Aye, he considered, if he wanted to watch his own cock and balls roasted over Lady Demos's fires, have his skin flayed off and then be nailed to a cross. He had to be cautious, he assured himself.

Gripping the torch more tightly, he moved past the closed cell doors before finding the one he wanted. He moved the key in his sweating hands as he pushed it into the lock and turned. He heard the lock click, and almost sensed that he heard a gasp from the occupant inside. The door opened easily despite its weight as he leaned against it and shone the torch inside.

Kirian tried to turn her head away from the sudden light that after the hours of standing in agony in the darkness of the dungeon, blinded her. She gasped, her senses confused by the sudden appearance of a lit torch in the

darkness and the figure that held it. In the time that she had been forced to stand, collared and bound, her feet being forced onto the discomfort of the steel spikes by her own weight, she had tried to minimise her movements, discovering rapidly, as the cell door closed, that movement would cause agony. She was exhausted now, forced to stand, and forced to focus on remaining still. She realised why these cells were known as rooms of punishment. Hours and hours of standing would create a prisoner who would do anything so as not to have to repeat the dreaded experience.

“Kirian,” she heard Fallon whisper.

“Y... You. Is it time? Am I to be horsed now?”

“No. Not yet. That will happen tomorrow,” he said quietly, approaching her, watching as she moved uncomfortably in her predicament. She winced in the flame of the torch, trying in vain not to move her feet against the spikes that grated against her soles, to shift her weight despite the difficulty of moving at all with the confining collar and her hands bound behind her. She watched as he placed the lit torch in a sconce on the wall.

Fallon moved close to her now, raising his hand to her breast, teasing it as she gasped. Kirian did not pull away from him. Part of her was almost glad that he was not causing her any additional pain.

“What is it you want, Captain?” she murmured.

She gasped again as he ran his hand down her breast onto her belly, moving slowly to her pussy. The move was so unexpected that she shifted uneasily on the floor, causing her to yelp wildly like a wounded animal.

“Easy now,” he said, moving his hand between her legs. She stared forward as he moved behind her now and began to untie her hands.

“What are you doing?” she asked quietly. “Am I to be punished further?”

She wrung her hands together in an attempt to bring some feeling back. The thong had abraded her wrists.

“I thought we might enjoy each other’s company,” he said, his hot breath on her shoulder.

“And if I say no?”

He paused.

“Then I will leave you.”

She nodded, considering, reaching a hand behind her to grip near the area where his cock might be, feeling a hardness from his treads as she did so. She hobbled awkwardly on the spikes, trying to twist in the collar, but at least her hands were free now.

He moved his hands over her back, buttocks and thighs as he moved back in front of her, releasing his treads now, so that his erection might fall free.

“I have never had a woman in the punishment cell,” he said, his breathing rapid as he leant forward and kissed her deeply. The collar chain rattled as Kirian gripped his arms for balance, wincing as she moved her feet forward slightly.

“Can... Can you take me off the spikes... even for a moment?” she asked, almost pleadingly.

“In time, be patient,” he replied. He moved in front of her, touching one hand to her inviting pussy lips. Kirian gripped the chain at her neck to steady herself, trying to lift her weight from the pain in her feet. She could not stand it. She moved one foot away, so that her legs would be wide, crying out at the movement and the new pain as her foot fell, as Fallon massaged and tugged at her clit and the folds of her pussy.

“You... bastard, Fallon,” she grunted.

“Aye...”

His practiced hands teased and tormented her until she knew that she wanted him. Gripping his shoulder with one hand, she raised one leg around

him, gritting her teeth as her weight was supported on one foot. As she gripped him, she began to raise her other leg, hoping that he would support her and knowing that the collar tugged at her in response to any movement. The chain at her neck rattled loudly as she straddled him, though his muscular frame carried her weight easily. She could feel his erection beneath her pussy, though she also felt great relief that her feet were off the spikes. Her legs hurt too, though Fallon would, she hoped, take some of the pain away. As he gripped her with one arm, he moved his hand to his cock, slowly pushing toward her inviting pussy lips.

She was in a position where she could see his face, in the light of the torch that he had placed nearby. He kissed her again, deeply, passionately, moving his cock inside her. She moaned softly, her own weight forcing her slowly down onto it as she writhed, bucking slowly.

“So... th.. this UGHH... is why you had the chains removed from my feet?”

He did not answer, though his body responded quickly, thrusting upward, his legs spread wide to support her as she began to fall down onto his cock, being split and penetrated so deep, his thick boots protecting him from the dull spikes that had caused pain to her own bare feet.

She began to writhe and grind against his cock now, as he lurched and thrust, standing awkwardly on the uneven steel floor. Kirian was glad that the weight could be taken off her aching soles and, as she began to feel Fallon's engorged cock entering and stretching her wide, took pleasure in his need for her. She shuddered as he thrust, and responded like a beast when he kissed her neck or lips.

They became like animals, each dependent on the other in some savage manner: Kirian, who wanted to remain off the spikes and would pay this price to do so, and Fallon, who had a need for a woman when he could not have his true love.

Both were moaning and gasping now, as their rhythmic motion threatened to unbalance Fallon. With one hand gripping the chain at her collar and the other holding Fallon by the shoulder, with her legs wrapped

around him, Kirian took all that Fallon could offer, moving herself up and down against his erection as best she could. It would be enough. She could feel that he wanted to cum, felt the shudders of his body's early signs of release. She adjusted her position slightly, barely able to control her own counter thrusts against his motions.

“Not... yet...” she moaned instinctively, as he writhed, moving his feet further apart to gain better balance. He grunted in response, unsure whether his body would even obey his thoughts, though he tried to hold back so that he might allow her some modicum of satisfaction.

Almost as if reading his mind, Kirian leaned back slightly, letting his erect member move inside her as she dug her heels into his back. The chain rattled as he leaned as far as it would allow, her hand covered with rust and dirt as she gripped it tightly, the collar pulling at her neck as she did so. She bucked against him now, faster and faster, gasping, screaming loudly as the throes of orgasm began to take her.

She screeched, almost thought that she heard a similar sound from somewhere in the vile prison, though that poor wretch was probably suffering some horrible torture rather than feeling the pleasure that was exploding throughout her body... as Fallon came.

They both shuddered and cried out, bodies clasped against each other, moving like a single entity as they found pleasure amidst her pain.

* * * * *

Gamir stared at Meline as she marched on down the catwalk, clad only in her sweat soaked loincloth. He could feel the stirrings inside him, knowing that he wanted the wench badly. He had warned the other overseers to stay away from her, knowing that they too, despite their willingness to gratify their needs in the mouths of the galley slaves, would also want a free woman. He had to be careful though. The Captain himself had stated that she was a member of his crew, and he knew that she had been punished for being overly familiar with that bastard Ballo on the upper deck.

He watched as she brought the whip down upon the thighs of a stretched slave in the pull. The woman yelped and threw her head back in agony. Aye, this Meline made a fine overseer, knew where to strike the slave for maximum effect. Yet, he had also noted that after encouraging some of them, and telling them where they were going wrong with their technique, the slave had improved. In some cases, the women in chains had even begun to row better, almost, it seemed, for reasons other than to simply avoid the whip. He had heard Meline speak with them, convince them that they had little option but to row well, and live. It seemed that some of them, those women who still remained strong at least, had listened to her advice and improved their technique and performance. Meline, unlike the other overseers under his command, had to use the lash very little. Who was this damned woman? How did she do this? Was it simply that she did not use their mouths as the men did. He wondered idly if she might ask them to use their tongues on her. He smiled to himself, watching the line of her buttocks as she leaned over to speak to another of the slaves, who nodded in return, grunting as she pulled hard on the oar. It was the barbarian woman – the strong one in the lower tier. Aye, she had improved distinctly since Meline had first whipped her. He began to walk down the walkway toward her, his thoughts disturbed only by the shout further up the deck that a break was called for on the lower tier. He smiled.

“You have... how would you say it...? A way with these slaves, Meline,” he said, beginning to untether his trews as he approached the barbarian rower.

Meline turned, startled. She nodded, watching as his thick cock fell from his filthy clothing. The slave, who had just finished rowing and was sweating and exhausted, had collapsed across her oar, her thick arm muscles providing a pillow for her swaying head. Gamir slapped his cock against her shaved head, while still talking to Meline.

“You inspire and motivate them, eh?” he said, watching her.

The barbarian raised her head, eyes wide at the cock in her face. Instinctively she looked at Meline. Gamir was furious.

“Slave! You do not look to the overseer when cock is offered. You

suck... is that clear?”

He fumbled as he tried to loosen his own whip from the tether at his belt. Again the slave looked at Meline, who nodded, approaching Gamir.

“Gamir, wait.” She moved for his hand before it could touch the lash. At this, he seemed to regain composure, even as the slave wrapped dry and cracked lips about his member, slowly beginning to move her mouth up the shaft.

“Good,” he responded, closing his eyes.

“Now, Meline. Give her twenty lashes as she... gnnn... pleases me. And if I feel her teeth, she’ll be crucified on deck.”

“What?”

“Do it, wench, or I might see that you take her place,” Gamir said, gasping as he felt the slave’s lips take his cock.

The slave’s eyes widened as he spoke, but even she did not dare stop what she had been commanded to do. She glanced at Meline, who responded with a look of sorrow.

“Now!”

Meline moved slowly behind the slave, as the sound of the upper tier of rowers continued as they laboured on, even while the lower tier, who had begun to recover from their efforts, watched the unfolding nightmare that was about to occur. The barbarian slave was slowly, deliberately moving her mouth up and down Gamir’s long shaft, striving to please him or at least deflect his attentions. Though her actions would be to no avail, since now, even as she pleased him, she would feel the whip across her back.

Meline struck, watching as the woman writhed and whined. Gamir shuddered too in response to her movements.

“Be careful not to bite, slave, or I’ll see you crucified... and Meline, harder strokes, if you please.”

Meline stopped, staring with hatred at the little man who was making her do this.

“She is a good rower...”

“Continue!” he barked.

The lash fell again, as the barbarian cried out behind the cock that filled her mouth.

“She does well, no teeth felt yet,” he smiled, writhing now against the woman’s face.

Meline lashed again and again, holding back the tears in her eyes as the barbarian tried to pleasure the overseer, while remaining stoic against the stinging fire of her whip.

“Ahhh... she continues to do well. Whip harder,” Gamir muttered, his eyes closed.

Meline set her jaw, wanting to whip him for his arrogance, wanting to kill him and cast his foul smelling body over the side of the ship, though she knew, deep down, that she could not help Tria if she were further punished.

The barbarian breathed deeply now, sucking Gamir’s cock as if in a trance, moving her head back and forth in rhythmic fashion, trying to escape to some distant place in her mind and ignore the fire of the whip as it struck heavily across her back. Her large breasts swayed and flopped with her body’s response to each slap from Meline as Gamir put his head back and gasped, shuddering and thrusting deeply as he came in her mouth.

“Twenty,” Meline gasped at last, as Gamir’s seed exploded into the slave’s mouth. She dutifully swallowed as much as she could, finally releasing her aching lips from his cock as he pulled away. She fell across the oar, her back on fire, as the last drops of Gamir’s foul fluid fell from her face. Meline stared at him with venom as he tied his trews back in place. He unsheathed his whip now, addressing the barbarian slave.

“Never seek to undermine my authority, slave. Never!”

He brought the whip down hard across her raw back as she yelped and screeched, and twice more before pausing.

“Do you understand?”

“Y... yes... overseer.”

“Good,” he said, turning to Meline. “Water the slaves at the stern.”

“But these are my charges.”

“At the stern, I said,” moving to her and staring, as she slowly, reluctantly nodded.

“We will be in Ferloss by midnight. I want the slaves ready to leave again in a few days. You may have a day’s shore leave while we are at port,” he grunted, walking away at last.

Meline walked slowly past the barbarian now, kneeling slightly.

“I am sorry,” she whispered.

“N... Not your fault...” she whined, collapsing against the oar.

Meline moved slowly forward, taking the buckets and ladles that were being provided now, walking toward the area indicated as she began to water the slaves at the stern, near where the fearsome looking wooden horse was positioned. Gamir’s actions had not only angered her greatly but had also reminded her that she had to remain composed if she were to have any hope of getting Tria out of this foul place.

She motioned the ladle toward an exhausted woman, who gripped it eagerly and drank deeply. It would not be enough for her, Meline could tell, and she would suffer during the next shift. She moved on dispassionately, mechanically, to the next thirsty slave, moving on down the row of helpless chained wenches, parts of a larger rowing machine.

“M... Meline, is that you?” a hoarse voice said.

She looked down, stirred from her thoughts.

“Portia?” she gasped, dropping the ladle into the filthy bilge at the slave’s feet in her surprise.

Portia had been an overseer on the *Raven*. She had been portly while still strong. Indeed, it had only been a few weeks since they had last met before the ship had been sunk, and before she had been condemned to chains and the depredations of the filthy oar. Yet, it had also been Portia who had taken a dislike to her aboard, and had seen that she was forced to punish Tria for something she had not done. She remembered it vividly, caning Tria’s feet as she sat writhing and naked in the stocks on deck. She grimaced at the memory.

She looked ghastly now, having lost much of her weight, had her head shaven, and bearing the mark of the oar upon her forehead. She was sweating and dirty.

“Portia. But if you are here, then...”

“Ritix... Ritix is behind me...”

Meline looked up. The massive blond barbarian who had been Portia’s partner on the rowing deck aboard the *Raven*, whipping the slaves as Meline now did, sat a few benches back, looking strong and powerful despite her shaved head, the mark and the foul ring that pierced her pussy lips and chained her to the deck.

“But if you are here, then...”

“What is going on there?” a large bald overseer barked at her, even as she stared on down the deck in search of Tria.

She winced. “Nothing. I am watering the slaves.”

She stooped to lift the ladle from the sludge filled waters of the bilge.

“I... need a new ladle for the water.”

The man approached her.

“Why? You think the water they drink is any cleaner?” he laughed, his words heavily accented.

He struck out suddenly, striking Portia’s breasts with the savage whip he held, as she yelped helplessly, the chain at her pussy rattling noisily.

Meline cleaned the ladle as best she could as she moved on.

“Take heart,” she said, moving on to the next slave, getting closer to Ritix while trying to find Tria.

As she reached Ritix, she filled the filthy ladle and lowered it to the barbarian’s lips. She could see now that her back, breasts and thighs had been severely whipped. They had clearly wanted to make an example of her, though perhaps she had not yet been broken. Any other woman would have been dead by now.

“Hello, Meline,” she grunted, barely looking up.

Meline did not tarry, afraid that the knowledge that she knew at least two of the condemned women would be heard by the other slaves and offered up to the overseers in return for some better treatment.

She lifted the ladle to Ritix’s dry lips again as she drank deeply.

“Where is Tria?” she whispered nervously.

Ritix smiled, her tongue catching the slight drop of water that had escaped as she did so.

“You won’t gain us freedom, Meline,” she croaked, reaching a filthy hand to the foul ring at her pussy and yanking it painfully. “Unless you can cut this.”

“Where is she?” Meline repeated mournfully.

In response, Ritix threw her head back, indicating that Tria was somewhere behind her.

“Take heart,” she whispered again, moving on down the line of wretched women.

She moved on down the deck, scarcely aware that she spilled water for the slave whose turn it was to drink. The slave looked up as if to protest, then thought better of it. This overseer may have been a woman, but she still had a whip and appeared to be under the command of the men.

Meline paused. There. A slave with her head against the oar, still exhausted from her recent toil. Her head was shaven, and she could just make out the mark on her forehead as she approached. By the gods, this woman too had been badly whipped. Her breasts hung beneath her as she rested, apparently exhausted.

“Water,” Meline gasped as she approached. The woman raised her head slowly, swollen lips reaching for the ladle. Her mouth was covered in sores from having serviced the cocks of the foul overseers.

“Tria?” Meline gasped.

The woman who had been Tria, the sailor who Meline had developed affection for, looked up sharply at the sound of her name, a name that she had not heard spoken in weeks; so much so that she had begun to doubt that she really existed or had any form of attachment to her former name. She was now simply a condemned slave, tethered to a filthy bench by a chain at her pussy lips.

“Is that Meline? By the goddess, I must be in a dream,” Tria rasped.

Meline wanted to cry. Tria had sucked cocks, had her head shaved, been forced to labour under foul whips, and had the galley slave mark placed on her forehead. She put her hand on her cheek.

“Tria, I’m...”

“You... stop wasting time. Water those slaves!” the overseer barked at her from behind.

She grimaced. Damn him. Damn them all for what they had done. Her sister had placed these women here for no good reason. Though she now suffered at the hands of Lord Gorus’s torturers, or so part of her at least hoped. There was no need for Tria to suffer any longer. But she could not release her without help, she reminded herself.

“Take heart,” she whispered again. “I will be back.”

She moved on, even as Tria turned round to look at her, wanting to say more but unable to, remembering how her former behaviour had earned her a time of agony astride the wooden horse.

Take heart, she had told them, Meline reminded herself, moving from slave to slave, trying to get the image of Tria out of her mind. She had meant it, but she still had no idea quite how she was going to get her, and now, she determined, all the other slaves released from their foul pussy chains.

Chapter 5

Fallon was tired and sore. He had enjoyed Kirian immensely. He had seen many women put on the punishment floor before, listened to their gasps and whines as they tried to find comfort in their stance, even though it was impossible. He had even wanted to make love to some of them, but of course he had stopped himself. They were prisoners, who would undoubtedly be condemned to hard labour in the mines or galley.

Kirian had been different, though he slowly realised that his passion for her had been conceived through his wish to avoid visiting Marie as she lay naked in chains. He had wanted to console her, to tell her that she would not suffer the vile punishment that was her due, at least as far as her husband was concerned. But now, he felt differently. He could not quite describe it.

He realised that his initial approach to Kirian had been through his needs for Marie. But, even as he eased Kirian off him, his cock still dripping his seed onto the steel spiked floor, he wanted her more. She looked uncomfortable as she stood, collared and on the spikes, her pussy still red and open from their lovemaking. He kissed her shoulders as he was forced to re-tie her wrists.

As he looked at her, leaving the dungeon, closing her once more into darkness, he wanted to release her, wanted to make sure that she did not undergo the punishment and torment of the public horsing and birching. But he could not. He wanted to focus on Marie and her plight, but found, after he had made love to Kirian, that again he could not.

He sighed, offering a silent prayer to the gods to give him some sign of how he might yet deal with these great concerns that weighed heavily upon him. Two women that he wanted now lay (or stood) in agony in chains. Would he have to choose between them?

* * * * *

Meline had bathed with some of the other female crewmembers, hoping to wash the stench of the galley deck from her skin. In some ways, she almost wished she were a slave with Tria. Then, she could perhaps deflect some of the punishments that she must have suffered, let the lash find her back instead of Tria's. She had rowed before; it had been hell. The memory of the women dying aboard the *Raven* flooded her mind again. She closed her eyes. She would not let that happen to Tria, or even to Portia or Ritix.

She dressed in her shared cabin, swapping her filthy loincloth for a longer, more womanly piece. She borrowed sandals, a tunic and a cloak, secreting a dagger in the sash she wore around her waist. Ballo had wanted to accompany her, even offering a shortsword if he allowed her to go with him. She had declined, wanting to give the captain no further excuse to have her stocked or whipped. She had a mission, and that mission lay below decks, if only she could find some way of gaining help to release the slaves. Ballo would be of little aid, she considered, as the Captain clearly had too close an eye on each of them. In fact, the small crew aboard the *Dominator* could not be trusted at all. It seemed that they all lived in fear of the captain, and with good reason.

They had talked of revelry tonight. Meline had not wanted to join in, not while Tria languished in chains, sucking cock in the deck beneath her. The crew had told her that the Captain liked to smoke Pyra weed until he passed out on the first night in port, which gave most of the crew, bar those whose turn it was to stand guard, the opportunity to drink and whore. She reminded herself that she was clearly in no mood for such efforts. She expected that if she did return this evening, she would find most of the crew passed out, partially naked. She sighed, not regretting what she might miss. If she returned at all, she would need to have some sort of plan to free Tria. Perhaps the crew's lack of mobility or defence might earn her some chance – to free one slave and escape? No, this was an island and she would need to get to another ship. Damn it... she needed a drink.

She prayed silently to the goddess as she walked down the gangplank, the stink of the galley deck assaulting her nostrils as she reached the cobbles

of the stone pier. She did not pray to the goddess often, she considered, though perhaps in this case, with so many women in such peril, she would listen. She reasoned though, that she had not exactly been a pious woman, hardly a cleric of the order. She hoped that would not stand in her way. She would find a solution, she told herself, as dawn slowly began to creep toward the hills above Ferloss City.

* * * * *

Kirian had spent hours standing on the steel floor. At least, she told herself, it felt like hours. The torture of the punishment cell was devious, she reasoned. Being forced to stand, through the contrivance of the collar and its tension at the ceiling, meant that she not only had to constantly adjust her stance, but that she could not sleep and became increasingly tired. She had finally gained a position of stillness where she had tilted her head, the fact that her hands were tied making her position even more painful.

She had hoped that Fallon might leave her hands free at least after he had fucked her, yet the bastard had put her back in the punishment position. She presumed, in the black darkness of the cell, that the time that had passed would mean they soon would come for her, with the steel helm, lead her out in her exhausted state to the horse, where she would ride in agony while birched. But, she reasoned, it would be worth it. Lila would be freed from the galley. She told herself again that it would be worth it.

* * * * *

The city had been slow to wake up, yet there seemed to be a buzz in the air amidst the local populace. Meline reasoned that there might be a carnival or perhaps a circus in the city. For whatever reason, it seemed that many of the peddlers were starting to emerge and market stalls were opening early in the hope of finding a larger number of customers than usual. She decided it was best not to ask, especially if she were trying to find help with regard to her plight, or, to be more succinct, the plight of Tria.

She downed another ale, mopping the dregs from her mouth with the back of her hand. She had learned to drink while she was sailor amongst the western fleets; drunk, fought, caroused and even whored her way, when she had to. It had been a far cry from the life that she had been supposed to lead, a patient and proud younger daughter in her merchant family. The loss of her mother at an early age to plague had changed her, she thought, had made her want to get away from her father and older sister, experience the sea as it was meant to be experienced – wild and free from the shackles of some merchant coin and the business concerns of each vessel. No, she had wanted to feel the movement of the ship beneath her feet, smell the sea, even smell the foul stink of the condemned women at the oars beneath the deck; all that, and more. That was life. That was living. Thoughts of her father and the fact that her evil sister had killed him came flooding back to her. She hoped that Alia felt a little worse now, at the mercy of Gorus's torturer or wherever it was that he had chosen to place her. Perhaps she would fare much worse in the Riverwake Tower than she had done. She tried not to think back on her stay in that vile prison in the city of Irulan.

The tavern was empty, almost. A drunk had fallen asleep in his own vomit at the end of the bar. He was obviously a friend of the fat bearded Innkeep who tended the tables, since he did not seem the type to tolerate such behaviour otherwise. She guessed that whatever this dawn occasion in the city was, it had managed to keep the taverns empty. There was another occupant of the musty tavern though. She had not noticed the figure at first. The shadows that still remained in the eerie dawn light had kept one robed figure well hidden in a corner booth. She had seen movement in the reflection of a pewter tankard by the bar. He was tall, muscled and heavily robed, yet from what she had seen of his movement in the small, curved, reflective surface, he was lithe and very quiet. What was more, she was sure that he was watching her. Though she tried to convince herself that her paranoia was starting to get the better of her, or that she had been worrying too much about Tria, she could not shake the feeling.

Draining the mug, she turned on the rough wooden bench on which she sat and stared at the stranger in the corner. By the goddess, she could barely see him, even as strands of dawn light began to play across the entrance to the small wooden booth where he sat at a sword pocked round

table.

Her eyes narrowed and, feeling some force that threatened to engulf her, she turned away, despite the fact that she was telling herself to stare at him. It was no good.

As he slowly started to rise, she could see his reflection in the tankard and a feeling a terror began to overtake her. She was sweating. She sought liquid in the bottom of her cup, but could find none. She had never been so scared. Lying in chains in prison, being publicly whipped, toiling as a galley slave – nothing had made her fear so much. What was happening to her? The Innkeep seemed to have disappeared. There was no one here, except the half dead drunkard, her and this robed menace who was now... coming toward her.

She could hear his cloak move in the air. She could remember hearing sounds of shouting outside; hawkers and peddlers, getting ready for whatever large celebration was promised on this morning. All that seemed to disappear now as he moved, as if gliding on air, toward her. She shuddered. She could not move. She could feel him close to her, feel his breath as he opened his mouth to speak.

“Hello, Meline.”

* * * * *

Kirian swayed painfully. She had learned to try and balance against the agony at her feet, but her exhaustion meant that such acts were proving to be futile. She gritted her teeth, sweating in the darkness, against the pain and fatigue.

The blackness made every sound so clear. She could hear the rat that scuttled in the dungeon. It had scuttled across her feet a few times, making her jolt in agony provoking movements. She could hear distant screeches from a poor unfortunate under torture, and even distant conversations of guards. It was easy, therefore, to know that a group of men was approaching.

She gasped as the door was opened and myriad torches were shone in her face. Bedazzled by the sudden brightness, she looked away, closed her eyes, anything to stop even the light of fire from hurting her as much as this damned cell had. As her eyes adjusted, she noticed that one of the armoured men, the strongest of them, carried a round, rusted steel helmet. Thick horns of some kind protruded from the top, and the helm was a single sphere-like contraption. Only very small holes in the steel gave her any indication as to which face might be the front. She gasped as she saw it in detail, realising what it was for.

“It is time, wench. Time for you to pay for your crimes. Time for you to suffer.”

She felt them remove her collar, even as she tried not to move too much. She gasped in horror as the heavy metal helm was opened via a hatch at the back and offered up to her face. The weight of the thing pulled her head forward, the steel rim falling roughly onto her collarbone as she felt them fasten and lock the hatch. Panic threatened to engulf her, as she tried to raise her head and as the metal slipped still further against collar and shoulder. She could hear her breath, smell the sweat from her hair, hear her own whimpers as fear threatened to overcome her. She wanted to scream, to tell them that she had changed her mind, but she thought of her sister and considered that compared to her ordeal, this was nothing. Then they untied her hands.

Rather than leaving them free, however, they produced new binding fibres to tether her raw wrists and fastened them to rings at the end of the horns. She was helpless, hands tied away from her body so that it could be at the mercy of the birch twigs that the men would use as she rode the horse. She pulled against the steel horns as the heavy helmet rocked on her shoulders and she was pulled forward across the spikes. She screamed.

* * * * *

Meline was transfixed on the image in the pewter now. She could not turn her head to view the thing that sat beside her. She could feel his hot breath, yet she could not move. She forced down the panic. Sorcery, blackest

sorcery! This thing was using dark magic to keep her in one place. What was he going to do? Was she to be some sacrifice in a ritual to the dark gods? She tried to pray to the goddess, but found that it was even getting difficult to think now...

“Oh, the spell. Of course,” his voice grated.

With a wave of a long fingered hand at the end of a thick arm, the glamour fell away, and her head fell into her arms at the bar.

She slowly began to sit up.

“What? Who...?”

She could move, turn to face him, as he pushed away the cowl to reveal his thick, bald head.

“Trask!”

Was it really him? Meline tried to remember his face, his features. But he had been a Whipmaster aboard the *Raven*, keeping the overseers in line and certainly, in Portia and Ritix’s case, failing, in her opinion. Yet, he had also seen her freed from chains in the lower deck. She had been put to the oar to be punished. He had given her the key to her chains when he knew that the ship was going down.

“Just what in the nine hells are you doing here, and what did you just do to me?”

“Two things,” he responded in a whisper. “One, do not mention my name so loudly please. I’m a bit of a wanted man in this city. And two, it was a simple spell to keep me hidden.”

“You’re a sorcerer?”

He nodded slowly.

“But why the hell were you a Whipmaster on the *Raven*?” she said, confused now.

“I have need to hide my presence in certain... cities. The previous man was somewhat indisposed, and I presented myself to the Captain at a time when he was most in need,” Trask added.

“But how did you get here? After the Raven went down, I mean?”

“I am from here, my dear,” he said slowly, reaching a finger to her face to wipe away a tear that had formed during the strain from the spell. “I took passage on a fast ship from Arlos after the sinking. I see that you have survived too.”

She remembered Arlos. She had had to survive on the streets until she had been picked up, almost thrown into prison...

“Yes, I...” she paused. “Wait!” she looked around, hoping that the Innkeep would not now walk in upon them. Trask shook his head, intimating that his presence would not be an issue. She shuddered, hoping that he had not disposed of him simply so that he might reveal himself to her.

“You remember Tria?” she said, trembling now.

“Yes, lovely woman... a pity she died with the ship.”

“She didn’t. Ritix and Portia are also alive, barely,” she added, her look of certainty conveyed in the comment.

“What do you mean?”

“They are galley slaves, aboard... my sister’s old ship,” she said impatiently.

“Your sister? I don’t understand.”

Meline held back tears as she told Trask who she really was. Meline Talvallin, a woman who should have been one of the heirs to a massive fortune made by a merchant empire that spanned the great sea from the bright cities of the west to the tall towers of the east and most of the seas in between. Her sister Alia had benefited most from the enterprise when Meline had ran away to sea at the age of twenty. Alia, in turn, had become evil and

twisted, and had even killed their father, or so the evidence suggested. Alia had 'rescued' Tria, Ritix and Portia from the wreckage of the *Raven*, only to see them chained by their pussies to her vile galley ship, shaven and branded as slaves.

"But don't you see?" She was struggling with the words now. "You can help me set them free. Take the ship, if we have to. You're a damned sorcerer, Trask." She clapped him on the shoulder, feeling the muscles underneath, his dark eyes staring back at her.

"I am not what I seem," he intoned, looking downward.

"I don't understand. You don't want to help me?"

"Yes, I do, at least for Tria's sake. She had a good spirit."

"Has a good spirit, Trask. She's still alive, remember," she corrected him. "Then what?"

"I have troubles of my own," he replied.

"Wait. You just told me you were a sorcerer. How could you have problems?"

"And I just told you that I had to hide as a filthy Whipmaster on a ship that traversed the west coast, just to remain hidden. Sorcerous deeds always come with a price," he said, his voice low and monotonous.

"So tell me."

"What?"

"Perhaps we can help each other," Meline said, hoping that this random meeting might hold the answer to all their future fortunes.

Trask sighed, just as the Innkeep began to emerge from the rear storeroom. He looked at him, and raised his hand, as if to re-establish his glamour. From the other hand he blew a fine dust into the face of the man, who promptly, fell to the ground.

“Impressive,” Meline said. “Is he dead?”

“No, merely sleeping.”

“You have considerable power,” she jibed, trying to sound serious enough so that he would not walk away from what she was asking him to help with.

“It is mostly parlour tricks.”

“What you did to me was no mere trick. I have never been so scared,” Meline replied, still shuddering from the effort of not breaking down with fear,

“That ‘trick’ came with a price writ in blood. It hides me in this city while I...”

“While you what?”

He leaned back on the stool and reached for an empty cup, filling it with a nearby pitcher of water. He sipped slowly.

“I was involved with a woman in this city. An old acquaintance.”

Meline nodded. “A woman. Well, that explains why there is trouble,” she laughed.

“She is an Atlantean, like me.” He looked up and stared at her with his dark eyes.

Meline was dumbstruck. She was astounded. She had heard that the Atlantean race had died out eons ago. The legends of the islands told that once they had been a powerful nation, who held all the other lands around them in sway. Normal humans were mere slaves, hiding in the shadow of the mighty magic wielding Atlantean priests. They had deserted the gods in favour of science. Yet, as with so many powerful beings of legend, their greed and development of dark arts such as science and alchemy, had brought destruction upon them. They had been thought giants, both physically and metaphorically. Meline could see though, that if Trask spoke true then he was

indeed larger, stronger, more advanced than a mere human. It explained how she had seen him swim to shore so quickly when the *Raven* had been destroyed. It explained many things, including his abilities with the dark arts.

“So... let’s say I believe you, for now. Continue your story,” she exclaimed, trying to keep the excitement out of her voice.

He smiled.

“Narissa had once been my life mate. We had met,” he paused, “almost one hundred years ago.”

Meline almost laughed.

“You expect me to believe that, Trask?”

He stared at her, his dark eyes like pools of nothingness into which she might sink if she allowed herself to be swallowed up. Based on his previous spell, she was concerned that something of that nature might indeed happen. She turned away.

“Fine, so you’ve known her a long time.”

“Yes, and now she languishes in chains in prison,” he said, his gaze falling.

“What? What did you do?”

His voice lowered to a hissing whisper.

“We Atlanteans pair bond for life, though our lives tend to be extremely long.”

“So why is she in prison?”

He sighed, as if recalling some great pain.

“Our women tend to be jealous, violent, great warriors...”

“What in the nine hells did you do, Trask?” Meline said mournfully, realising that he must have been the cause of this.

“I betrayed her, with another woman, of course. A human, if you must know. I would like to say that Narissa thought of me as a life mate more than I thought that of her. But, I have realised, in the dark nights that followed her arrest, that I was wrong.”

“And she found out. She was arrested?”

“Yes. In fact, she found out at the worst possible time.”

“What do you mean?”

“She was a bodyguard for the Lady Marie, wife to Lord Hardor, the pathetic...” he paused, “I mean the rightful heir to the throne of Ferloss.”

“You hate him?”

“He is a malicious fool, quite possibly insane, with all the sense of a galley rat,” he muttered.

“I see. Go on.”

“Narissa saved their lives on countless occasions. A difficult job in itself, bearing in mind the number of enemies they have made over the years. Yet Lady Marie, inevitably perhaps, found another man, or he found her. It matters little. From what I can ascertain, Narissa was tortured in order to determine the name of Marie’s lover.”

Meline watched as he swallowed, trying to hold back tears.

“And now they are after you?”

“Yes. I cannot imagine what Narissa has told them. She was angry when we parted, beside herself with hatred, and I believe that she found a kindred spirit in Marie. And now, the city guard is looking for me.”

“So you want to free her?” Meline said, placing a comforting hand on

his massive shoulder.

“Yes. Well, even I could not accomplish that easily. The prison is a veritable fortress. In addition, I would have to locate her quickly. No, I have another idea.”

He stared at Meline.

“Perhaps you could help?” he said slowly.

“And just how would I be able to help you – break into a prison and free this Narissa woman?”

“Oh no, that would be impossible, even for a man such as me. My powers are strong against individuals, for a short time, though I grow weak quickly these days. I could not accomplish much in that foul prison where she rots.”

“Then what?”

He sighed, gathering his thoughts before speaking.

“Lord Hardor’s wife, Marie. She is to be punished for her transgressions with this man. A man other than her husband, that is.”

“And you had nothing to do with that?”

“No, truly I did not, though Narissa has been compelled,” he shuddered as he spoke, “most likely through vile torture, and somehow she has implicated me.

“Perhaps it was her anger at my refusal to stay with her, perhaps something more, yet even now the pathetic authorities of this place, a city which was once the centre of a great empire, hunt me.”

“I’m sorry for this trouble you’re having, Trask, but I don’t understand what you want me to help you with,” Meline said at last.

He nodded in response, regaining his composure.

“As I said, the Lady Marie is to be punished for her transgressions. Soon, she will be brought out to the wooden horse in the town square, wearing the helm of woe, her hands tied to it. She will be made to ride the horse, naked, and will be thrashed with birches until her muffled screeches resonate throughout the square, Lord Hardor is satisfied, and the crowd have their fill of her suffering – so that all might know that even he will not accept adultery in his pathetic little city.”

Meline shuddered. “Yes, that sounds horrible, but what of it? You have already implied that this bastard has had your Narissa tortured. Why do you care that his wife will suffer like this if you hold no regard for her?”

“I mean to kidnap her from the horse and hold her to ransom in exchange for my Narissa,” he said, staring at her as if wishing to assuage any modicum of doubt that she might have as to his intentions.

“You’re serious?”

“Of course”

“I see,” Meline said, sitting back.

“And if I do help you?” she continued softly. “What will you do for me in return?”

Trask seemed perturbed at first. Meline reasoned that he had expected a little more resistance to this ‘plan’ of his than she had actually shown. She, of course, had her own reasons behind agreeing to such a bargain.

“What sort of thing... do you want?” he replied, looking her lithe body up and down. “I do remember how you enjoyed pleasing Captain Patronus on the Raven.”

She smiled awkwardly. “Nothing like that, Trask. I want you to rescue Tria, and indeed all the galley slaves, from servitude in chains at the oar.”

He nodded, as if sizing up the magnitude of her request.

“I see. It would seem that we are bound by our own emotions and the requirements of those we... love.”

Meline considered what she was asking for. “You mean you can do it?”

“I can try, if it means you will help me Meline,” he said slowly.

“One more thing. I don’t want the crew killed. The Captain, the overseers – do as you wish, but the crew are innocent, simple sailors for the most part, in search of work.”

“It may prove difficult to discriminate...” He held up a hand as she made to protest, “...but of course I will try, as you have agreed to help me so readily.”

“I needed a plan, Trask. Perhaps our meeting is the work of the gods.”

He smiled ruefully. “I doubt it, Meline, though providence has ever been a distant and very capricious friend in my hours of need.”

She nodded, extending a hand after the fashion of sailors and merchants throughout the seven kingdoms. He gripped it tightly as the deal was struck.

Chapter 6

Kirian limped painfully up the stone stairs as the guards pushed and teased her. The steel helmet pulled her head awkwardly such that she had to use her arms to try to maintain a modicum of balance as she tried to walk on her aching feet. She was forced forward when she threatened to stumble, pulled up when she threatened to slump. She needed water. She had lost much through sweat and piss as she had suffered in the punishment cell. She had to remain strong, for her sister Lila at least, but as she was pushed by the guards toward the sunlight, naked and clad in a punishment helm, it was getting harder to focus on her goal. Her feet stung as she slapped across slimy stone floors. She could see through the small air holes and a gap between the collar of the helmet and her flesh that light had appeared; she was outside. The ground underfoot was sand then gravel, and the feeling of sharp stone made her cry out as she was forced on and on.

She was barely aware of the cheers that had gone up from the apparently large crowd. The sounds that she could hear through the helm were loud jeers, mocking laughter and cries of derision for her plight. She was astounded, through the blinding heat and exhaustion that she felt, that these people would gather. Was not the woman, who she was supposed to be, the wife of their Lord? Then she realised that they cared little for their ruler. These people, supposedly descended from the Atlanteans themselves, or so the old stories said, only wanted to see the humiliation, agony and suffering of a woman – even one who was pretending to be someone else.

She felt the impact of rotten fruit against her body, even a stone as she cried out again, the guards pushing her, dragging her, whenever she threatened to falter from her route, the road to the wooden horse and a beating with birches. The cheering was louder now, the sound of her own breathing inside her hot helmet was drowned out by the manic crowd as she felt the guards grabbing her arms and the backs of her thighs. They began to lift her as the crowd cheered even louder. She gasped, sweat covering her face inside the hot confines of the steel helm, as they gripped the underside of her thighs, widening her, pulling at her sex so that she might be properly

splayed and ride the hideous apex of the cruel, triangular, wooden horse.

She knew there was little point in begging for mercy. She had already agreed to this. Part of her wanted to scream that they had the wrong woman, that she had made a deal that she wanted out of. Then she realised that her sister must have suffered far worse in her time at the oar, and she did not resist as she felt herself being let down onto the apex.

Even the knowledge that the savage edge was coming to touch her pussy lips was not enough to console her, as they almost dropped her onto it. She heard herself scream as she felt the rough timber scrape against her sex, and the guards expertly positioned her so that she was balanced. Tied as she was, her hands fastened to the horns of the helmet, her movement was limited. She could do little as she swayed atop the cruel device, her lips pushed neatly asunder. She could still hear the crowd cheering, feel rotten fruit bouncing off her leg and hear it landing nearby. Then it stopped. She could hear something being dragged toward her, then moved her feet instinctively as they tied something around her big toe. Damn them. Was the threat of time on the apex not enough? She felt movement now as another thick string was tied around the toe on her other foot. The weight of the wooden bucket was released, pulling her down further as she moaned. Did they intend to fill it? By the goddess, the helmet, pinioned wrists, a heavy bucket attached to her toes while she rode the vile horse. Why would any married woman even risk taking a lover in this vile city? She realised, ruefully, that was the point.

Hardor watched from the balcony as the woman he had known as Kirian was placed on the wooden horse. The crowds had been pushed well back from the main square. He had had to double the guard to keep them back. Did these people feel so strongly about noble marriage? No, they simply wanted to see a noble woman, or perhaps just any woman, facing cruel punishment. He reminded himself that they behaved like this even in the knowledge that this was Marie, his wife. Did they, in their blatant ignorance, wish him harm, revel in the fact that his wife was being supposedly horsed and birched for her transgressions? He sighed, secure in the knowledge that despite his proud boast of the Atlantean heritage of the people of his island nation, the true Atlanteans were a lost people. The

population now were simply remnants of a bygone, vanished race, descended, or so he had been told, from the slave population of the ancient empires.

The woman was ready. It was time for him to speak. He could sense Fallon below, gazing up at him.

“People of Ferloss, listen to me now,” he boomed.

Silence began to fall. Hardor thought initially that it might have been out of respect, then he realised, regrettably, that the impatient crowd simply wanted the ‘festivities’ to begin and knew that they could not start until the nobleman had had his say.

“You know me as your Lord, a just leader of the people.”

The guards on the ground below his balcony looked suspiciously about them, in case anyone should decry what had just been said, so that heads might be broken early in the speech and thus dissuade others. Hardor reasoned quickly that the benefits of owning the city guard were many and varied.

“You know me to be a fair man, though cruel when I am deceived or made to look a fool.”

A few shouts of approval from the crowd this time. Hardor nodded, basking in the noise from the crowd.

“Yet even I would not let my own wife break the marriage laws of our fair city, and escape justice.”

More cheers this time. He gripped the handrail of the balcony. He had them.

“Even I would not let her escape the torments that so many of your unfaithful wives have suffered here, so that we might not have the sins that are more at home in the corrupt city states on the mainland.”

The crowd were beginning to approve, to applaud even, although some women did not seem to agree with his words. He could feel their stares.

Damn them, he thought.

“I would not even let my wife,” he paused to wipe his eye, to stop tears that would never really form. “I would not let her break our laws, and so...” his voice cracked, “and so she must suffer.”

“I have added to her plight by having the bucket fixed to her toes, so that it might be filled with rocks after her birching and she may suffer yet more, to show you all how even noble women must endure and suffer for their crimes.”

Fallon swallowed nervously. He had not told Kirian about this extra torment. He had not known himself. That old bastard, he thought. Was this because she had criticised his lovemaking? He set his jaw in anger. He did not want her to suffer. He was not sure why. By the gods, why had he been gifted with these emotions, this ability to charm, and be charmed by, so many women? It was no gift, he reasoned, but a curse, plain and simple.

“Have her beaten and horsed. Proceed, Captain!”

The crowd cheered as Fallon turned to the muscled, hooded men who had stood to one side as Kirian was mounted on the cruel instrument. They moved forward, one carrying a barrel full of birches, kept moistened by the seawater in it.

Fallon could see Kirian tense. He could see her ‘birthmark’. The crowd had no idea who she really was, yet they had all come to see a woman, any woman perhaps, suffer the punishment that adultery called for in this vile kingdom.

The masked men withdrew a thick birching rod each. The rod was made up from eight or more thick twigs, bound tightly together. The individual welts were bad enough, but built up over time they would cause agony to the victim. He reminded himself of the point of this. He closed his eyes as they took their places, one in front and one behind Kirian, and began to raise the birches. This had been his idea, so that Marie could avoid this torment, and now he could not get the mercenary woman out of his head. He had not even visited Marie in prison, did not want to see her chained and

filthy, yet he had freely taken Kirian as she suffered in the collar and floor in the punishment cell. He wondered at what he had become, as the first slaps of the birches fell across Kirian's body. He could hear her screech inside the steel helmet – more at the shock, perhaps, as the first strokes slapped her body. They fell again and again.

Fallon had seen these punishments before. The birching was bad enough, though could be treated. The horse, however, would leave a woman permanently without feeling in her sex, especially if left for so long. The fact that Hardor had added the bucket to pull her further meant that she would never feel a man's love again, have no sense of pleasure or of being a woman. She would never feel 'his' love again. How in the name of the gods could he allow this to happen? This had all been his idea, but now he was starting to have feelings for this woman. He opened his eyes. Kirian was writhing and yelping now with each welt, as two soldiers counted the number of strokes for each of the hooded men. It had to be one hundred on each side as the tradition dictated. He watched now as welt after welt landed on her breasts and belly, while the second man lashed at her back and buttocks. One hundred strokes. He could see the guards counting. It was difficult to find men who could count so high, he considered. He felt pity. He had made a mistake. He had helped Hardor because he had bedded his damned wife and did not want to be found out, and now the gods were making him suffer for it, making him fall in love with this warrior woman because of a damned birthmark.

He looked away as the birches continued to slap hard against Kirian astride the wooden horse, as she suffered.

She cried out again, the scream reverberating around the steel helmet she wore. It was impossibly heavy and stifling now, and her own screams echoed loudly and deafened her as she was lashed again and again by the strong men who were making her suffer. She had been punished before, but this was different. The men took pleasure in welting hard but also giving very little time between blows so that the stinging fire was constant, combined with the numbing growing pain in her loins which was made worse with every rapid involuntary jerk and horrible twist in response to the strokes against her body. She felt the bucket rock as she swayed and jerked, pulling

the weight agonisingly on her toes and legs via the thick strings that tethered her to it. Her mind became a frenzied thing as welt after welt made her screech inside the hot steel globe that she wore, powerless to do anything to stop the agony.

* * * * *

Meline winced as she watched.

“How do you even know that’s her?” she said to Trask. She did not need to whisper. The cheers of the crowd with every stroke now were almost deafening.

Trask pulled the thick hood tighter against his head. “Her birthmark. It was clear as she was being brought out. The Lady Marie has one on her back. I imagine most of the crowd care little for it. After all, they only want to see a public birching and then suffering on the horse. It is what these people have become – animals.”

Meline winced again. She had been publicly whipped herself a few weeks before. It had been one of the worst experiences she had undergone, especially so after her foul treatment in the Riverwake Tower prison in Irulan. This ordeal looked a lot worse.

“Can’t you do something?” she said to Trask, watching as the woman screeched inside the heavy steel helmet she wore.

“No, too many people and too many soldiers. “We stick to the plan.”

* * * * *

Fallon clenched his fists in frustration. He could hear Kirian’s moans as the darkness began to fall, hear her crying out in sheer agony. The horse was bad enough. After the men had birched her continuously until she had

taken two hundred welts across her body however, they had slowly, deliberately filled the wooden bucket with stones and bricks, until she had screeched from the weight pulling her toes and thus her body, tight against the savage, splitting apex of the horse.

He had not returned to his barracks after the punishment, had not even gone back to the prison to try to arrange an excuse to see Marie. Instead, he had grabbed a wine skin, and slowly began to drink. Even now the wine tasted vinegary, though he found that he did not care. He could not leave, yet he needed something to tear his mind away from the moans and gasps that Kirian made as she tried to adjust her position on the horse, tried to pull the bucket with only the strings that threatened to pull her toes from their sockets. He watched from the balcony of the palace outbuilding. He had hoped that the place was remote enough so that he could not be seen, and neither would Hardor be able to easily find him, and thus he could not be summoned without difficulty. He did not care any more if that meant that Hardor would scream at him for insubordination.

Instead, he could remain here and slowly get drunk until she was released. Four guards surrounded Kirian now. Two of them had taunted her. One had even kicked the bucket with the flat of his foot to gain a screech of agony from her. It had been all he could do not to rush down the stairs of the villa from which he watched her and slit the man's throat. Quick action from one of his sergeants, however, who had reprimanded the man, had soon cooled his temper. He reminded himself that the sergeant would have to be rewarded, promoted even. He would also be finding out the names of the two men who had taunted Kirian in her agonies.

It would not be long now. Perhaps another hour until darkness finally fell and she would be released. She had ridden for hours. By the gods, he hoped that she had not been permanently damaged. He knew a few good healers, a few who even claimed that they practiced magical arts. He hoped they were right – for their sake, if not his own.

He poured another goblet full of wine from the skin, watching the skies.

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“I hope you’re ready, Trask. How long is this spell of yours going to last?” Meline whispered, levelling the crossbow, or more correctly, the ‘device’ that Trask had given her. He had described it as a crossbow, though the brief introduction he had given her had revealed it to be so much more. He had shown her the thin darts and the fact that it did not need to be reloaded after each shot. Apparently it was an Atlantean artefact, a design that she could neither fathom nor re-fashion if asked to. Though it was mechanical, the devices and components used were completely alien to her. Trask merely told her to point and use the long angle spline to fire. It would have more range than conventional crossbows. She had even tried it by the docks. It was powerful, surprisingly so. If Trask had access to such magics and artefacts, surely he must be powerful. She wondered just what else he could put his hands on, just how powerful he really was.

She looked around, picking up only a haze in the moonlit alley beside her.

“I can’t see you, Trask, just a... shimmer.”

“That’s exactly the point, Meline,” he whispered, with effort, the concentration required to keep the spell active apparently weakening him. His voice was detached and alien.

“Oh, so this is your spell, is it?”

“Ancient Atlantean wisdom can be easily misconstrued as simple ‘magic’ by those with little understanding of the truth of it,” he said. She could almost hear the sarcasm in his straining voice.

“I think I’ve just been insulted,” Meline whispered, speaking to the air around her, it seemed, as Trask was plainly trying to remain focused on the mission at hand.

“Concentrate, woman,” he hissed.

“Fine. Are we ready?”

“Almost. Take your position.”

“Trask. What happens if I get captured? We still have a deal as far as you rescuing Tria is concerned, right?”

“Yes, of course,” she heard his voice echo. Then a pause. “If you are captured...”

“Best not to be taken, then?” Meline interrupted quietly.

“Agreed. We move; remember what I told you, and I will see the ship’s rowers freed of bondage.”

Meline hefted the crossbow and began to move.

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Fallon thumped the empty goblet down on the railing of the balcony. It was time that Kirian was released. He only hoped that she had not suffered too much through the agonies of the horse. He felt wracked by emotion, or was it guilt? What had the gods let him become, damn it?

His vision began to blur as he stood up, dizzy. He shook his head, watching as he saw a guard fall; a whooshing sound in the wind and another fell. What was this? A third bolt appeared in the neck of another guard. The men were dropping. They were under attack! He shook himself from the stupor of the wine. He cried out.

“Alarum, alarum!”

He backed away from the balcony, reasoning that the stair would take too long. Swiftly, he moved forward, dizzy still.

“Alarum. Guards!” He saw the fourth man fall, even as he had sought cover in the approaching darkness.

There was movement in the street below, then it seemed that it was gone. He started to make for the edge of the balcony, taking it and leaping across to the next building. He slipped, the wine having got the better of his reflexes, his hands gripping the edge just in time as he dangled. He stared at Kirian below, glimpsing a shadow, a shimmering shape around her. He heard her cry out as it seemed to cut the ropes holding the bucket at her toes. The stones fell with a clatter as Fallon moved himself up. Below now he could hear movement from the nearby streets. Was the barracks finally waking up?

“Alarum!” he screamed again, hefting himself onto the balcony. He could hear the sound of booted feet now. Someone, something, was taking Kirian, his Kirian! The soldiers would be too late. He pulled himself up, and then he dropped as three light crossbow bolts slammed into the wooden railing in front of him.

His trained soldier’s mind reacted as he dived for cover, tried to interpret the direction from which the thin arrows had come. The fading light made it difficult, but he could see the firer clearly in the moonlight. He had hidden behind some barrels in the square – with superb lines of sight to the guards around Kirian, but he had had to move out of cover to fire at Fallon’s position. He moved to see Kirian now. Her hands had also been cut loose, though she still wore the helmet. As she was lifted into the air, it seemed that there was a shimmer of moving light underneath her. Was this... magic?

Another bolt struck the railing as he started to move and he leaped across to another balcony, landing awkwardly as he gasped. He caught glimpse of the firer, moving into the square and motioning to the ‘thing’ that carried Kirian. The firer was... a woman? What in the nine hells was going on here? He could cry to his men reaching the square, but it would be too late. He rose awkwardly and ran to jump to the next balcony. She was starting to run as Kirian’s shape reached her. Sensing his movement, she fired a number of bolts at him. Fallon cried out as he felt one pierce his shoulder.

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Meline hissed at the shape carrying the naked, helmeted woman.

“Move, Trask. Soldiers are coming. I think I hit the one on the balcony. Quickly!”

Meline ducked into an alley as Trask’s amorphous, barely visible shape passed her, carrying the moaning woman. Trask kept moving as Meline ducked out and fired a number of bolts from the crossbow to cover their retreat. She heard at least one ‘thunk’ followed by a cry, as the gathering soldiers in the square started to mass, understand what had happened, and now give chase. Her firing had made them take cover. A number of larger crossbow bolts from their side now hit masonry and roof tiles, but they did not have the rate of fire that she could command with Trask’s artefact. She moved back, keeping the bobbing, naked woman’s body in view as best she could in the darkness. She fired a few more bolts and ran on. The street was crisscrossed with alleyways, and the commotion had now prompted shouts and from nearby doorways.

She turned to run, keeping the woman in view as they headed toward the docks. This was not going to work, she realised. They were simply leading the guards toward their hiding place. Searches would follow. They would be found out. Damn it. Then she remembered the plan, Trask’s plan. His Atlantean mystic arts could hide them for as long as they needed, or so he said.

She ducked into another alley, fired off some more shots. The soldiers, confused by darkness and apparently unaware of just how many people were involved, had split off into groups and were moving, very slowly now, against what they believed were a number of people firing crossbows in volleys.

Excellent, Meline thought, we might just get away with this. She was starting to believe it herself, and then she felt something sharp and pointed pushed into the back of her neck and realised, as her heart sunk, that someone had sneaked behind her.

“Drop the weapon,” he hissed, his voice straining with the effort of having run a considerable distance. She tried to turn her head.

“I said, drop the weapon, or you’ll never see the light again, wench.”

Meline closed her eyes. Perhaps, if she was quick enough, she could turn and...

“Don’t think about it. You’ll die.”

“I’ll die anyway, now,” she grunted.

“Aye, you will. Make your move then.”

The sword had not moved. The man was impassive, a professional. She could hear the soldiers getting closer. And Trask, where was Trask? She dropped the crossbow.

“Good choice. Stand up.”

Slowly she began to rise.

“Keep your hands where I can see them.”

Meline nodded, her eyes closed. Damn you, Trask, she thought.

“Turn around.”

Keeping her hands by her sides, Meline slowly turned to face the man. He was tall, dark and muscled and, she noted, a crossbow bolt was sticking out from his shoulder as he watched her. She could discern his features in the poor light. He was large and powerful looking. As she watched, he tugged at the bolt, and grunted as he pulled it free before throwing it at her feet.

“I believe this is yours,” he grimaced. “Now, where did the woman go? Quickly, wench!”

“What woman?”

He moved the sword swiftly across the top of her breast and scratched deeply as she cried out.

“Where? Quickly!”

“I don’t know,” she grunted, wincing and raising a hand to the fresh cut he had left.

He moved the sword again.

“Wait. I was just hired help.”

“Hired by who?”

They were interrupted by the sound of feet at the end of the alleyway.

“You there!” a voice barked, backed now by the arrival of more soldiers.

“It’s all right. It’s Captain Fallon. I have captured one of them,” he said, sighing as if the men had arrived far too soon.

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Meline had been placed in thick, heavy chains. She still retained her clothes for the most part, though her tunic had been torn in the struggle, revealing one breast, and her sandals had been removed as the thick ankle fetters had been locked in place. The chains allowed her to walk, though they were tethered via another length of chain to the cuffs at her wrists. She realised, as they put her in them, that she was not going anywhere. She was dragged back through the town, through the square, the chain combination making moving at any sort of fast pace very difficult, as the steel rubbed painfully on her wrists and ankles. She could see the bodies of the men she had killed. The guards had taunted and pushed her, not keen on seeing how she had despatched their fellow soldiers. They ripped her tunic still further until it hung about her.

She was taken inside the ‘palace’, as it appeared to be – the building from which she had seen Hardor make his speech. Had more people been awake, she knew she would have been jeered, just as the Lady Marie had been. She tried to quell the fears as to what was going to happen to her.

Meline's guards dwindled to a few, though the man who had caught her, this Captain Fallon, was ever present. Now that she could see him in the torchlight of the palace courtyard, he seemed handsome, though she was well aware that none of that would stop him having her punished, or even tortured. He clearly wanted to be there when she was taken inside though. She was pushed and dragged up a spiral staircase toward a massive oak door. Captain Fallon knocked dutifully.

"My Lord Hardor? We have her, my Lord."

Meline shuddered. Trask, what the hell have you got me into, she thought to herself, hearing her chains rattle as she moved.

"Enter," a voice boomed from inside, as she was pushed toward the opening door.

Hardor stared as the woman was pushed inside. He liked to see women in chains, especially those who had perhaps considered themselves powerful. To see them brought down to the level of his prisoner. Her hair was auburn, a little bedraggled as it reached her shoulders. She was strong, that was clear, had been used to working. Her breasts were large, but proud rather than sagging, with large nipples. He licked his lips. Her tunic had been almost torn away from her. She still wore a loincloth and was barefoot. Her waist was trim and fit, though again wide enough to indicate her strength. He approached.

"So. This woman killed four of your men from a distance, Captain Fallon?"

"Yes, my Lord, with this."

Fallon held up the crossbow-like weapon as Hardor gazed at it in awe.

"An Atlantean weapon," he whispered.

"Sir?" Fallon responded, quickly dismissing the guards and telling them to stand outside and wait.

“And what of her accomplice and the woman that he... or she took from the horse?” Hardor said, still gazing at the weapon despite the presence of the half-naked woman in chains in front of him.

“Your wife, sir?” Fallon corrected.

“My... Yes, of course, my wife,” Hardor replied, returning his attention to Meline.

He moved his hand to her breast, tracing the line of its curve as she shuddered and tried to pull away, though she was held in place by the vicelike grip of Fallon.

“My Lord. There is not time. We must determine where... Kir... where your wife is, my Lord.”

Hardor stared in response, not moving his hand. He sighed, wincing as he looked into Meline’s eyes.

“Very well. Take her to Lady Demos.”

* * * * *

Trask had reached the derelict warehouse by the docks with little trouble. It was only after he had made sure that the building and the surrounding area was secure, that he realised that Meline was nowhere to be seen.

He lowered the steel helmeted woman to the ground even as she scrambled and screamed in pain, whining something inside the helmet. The effort of the spell took its toll as he fell to the cobblestones near her. He was sweating and exhausted, and now clearly visible. The woman struggled beside him.

“Calm down... I must get water, and then we can remove this helmet, yes?”

She continued to fumble, in difficulty after her terrible ordeal, her skin still glistening with sweat and the marks from the birches. She was strong, he thought, hardly like the noblewoman he had thought her to be.

“Stay calm,” he boomed. “I will get the helm removed if you remain calm.”

He moved to a bench, returning with water and salve for her wounds. He fumbled at his belt for a lockpick with which to unlock the heavy steel device. Her head was still pulled to one side by its weight.

“Easy now,” he said, as she gripped the helmet by its horns to steady it. “There.”

He heard the audible click and quickly grasped the massive steel ball-like implement. He saw the back of her head, dirty blonde hair matted and wet with sweat, heard her gasp of relief as he opened and pulled the helmet away from her face. Setting it down, he moved toward her with the water.

“Drink now, and we can...”

“You fool,” she croaked, as her face was revealed, weak from fatigue and agony, but clearly not that of Lady Marie.

“What?” Trask exploded. “Who... who are you?”

“Clearly not what you expected,” she said, wincing as she tried to drink deeply from the cup Trask had provided. With a little recovery, she shouted at him.

“And now my sister is doomed to die on the galley, you fool. Don’t you see what you have done?”

“But you had the birthmark.”

“A convenient ruse,” she croaked, and then was wracked with coughing, which further hurt her ruined body as she twisted in pain. Understanding slowly began to dawn on Trask as he looked at the purplish mark on her back.

“By the ancient empire, what have I done?”

Kirian crawled slowly to the larger bucket, wincing with each movement of her wracked body, trying to keep her feet off the floor, beginning to dab at her belly and back as she winced and gasped in pain. Trask began to help her, giving her cloth to bite on as he treated the welts.

“You took Marie’s place in order to have someone released from a galley? You must be completely mad, woman.”

Kirian screeched behind the rag in her mouth as he worked on her, gripping her thigh like a vice as he cleaned her. Feeling of a sort had started to return to her sex, though she feared that the damage would be permanent because of the weight that had been applied in the bucket. She could barely move her feet, fearing that her big toes were in some way broken by the hideous weight that had been applied to them and had pulled her sex on to the vicious apex of the horse. The rag dropped slowly from her mouth.

“EAGHH... those... those bastards went a little too f... far, didn’t they?”

She began to cry, and Trask placed a hand upon her shoulder and she tensed.

“I am sorry, though at least the pain has ended.”

“I am ruined... with no reward because of you,” she croaked, crying freely now.

“You are not ruined...” he responded. “I will heal you. It will take time. Please believe me. But I will heal you. I promise.”

Trask despaired. Nothing had gone right on this night. He hoped that Meline would find her way here at some point, as they had agreed. If she had been captured? He refused to consider what might happen then, and he returned to work on Kirian’s body.

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Meline tried not to move, tried not to consider her predicament. Somewhere in the back of her mind, as she was captured, she had hoped that an invisible Trask would swoop in, slay all her enemies, and rescue her from bondage. It had not happened. They had stripped her naked, marched her in chains to the prison – the one that Trask had been so afraid of, she reasoned. She could understand that now. She had been marched past poor, half dead unfortunates in cells. The place was drenched with filth and the smell of death, making even the Riverwake Tower seem welcome in comparison. Down and down they took her, until she had been pushed into a massive chamber of torment. She had tried to keep her composure, even as they had unchained her and bound her hands behind her. They had forced her toward a large press like device, amidst the racks and hanging chains and cages. She had wondered at first at what horrors it might inflict. Her questions had soon been answered as they pushed her chest toward it, held her in place while they tightened the two boards via a wheel in order to hold her breasts. She had felt the dull spikes on the inside of the boards clamp her tightly, press against her skin, as she realised that she could not move.

Thick fetters held her feet chained to a similarly spiked metal plate with a pit underneath it. Once fastened, they had begun to shovel hot coals underneath the plate. She had panicked then, screamed that she did not know anything, told them that they could have her body if they would only let her go. They had refused, had not even teased her, seemingly more afraid of whatever mad tormentor was coming for her and what she might do to them if they did not carry out her orders to the letter. Lady Demos, Hardor had said? A woman? Surely a woman would not be as cruel as a man might be upon one of her own sex.

She had been left alone. She could feel the steel heating beneath her feet. It was uncomfortable now, and she knew it would only become worse. Part of her hoped that they might forget to add more fuel. She could not move her body without causing pain.

She heard a door open and saw a man walking toward her in the poor light of the torches. Was this someone who would put her to torture? She

swallowed nervously. Then, she saw that it was Fallon. In another life, another time, she would have tried to get him to bed her. Now, she only wanted him to release her from this hellish place.

“It would be wise of you to talk and talk quickly,” he said.

Meline looked up carefully.

“I don’t know what it is you think you’re going to find out,” she said, a catch already in her voice as she spoke. “I told you... I was hired by a man I hadn’t met. He... he left me notes at the tavern.”

“Which tavern?” Fallon said quietly, moving his hand to the wheel of the press as he watched her tense, wide eyed, her lips moving but no sound coming out.

“You’re lying,” he said. “I would advise you not to lie from now on.”

“I would advise that too, of course, Captain Fallon,” an icy female voice wheezed from the door. It sounded like a creature from the pit. Meline shuddered as she watched the woman approach. She heard no footsteps. It was as if she glided. A thin veil covered her face and a wide, black dress covered her apparently skeletal body. Meline wanted to cry out as she lifted the veil. The woman pushed thin white hair from her skull-like face. Large dry eyes set in puckered pale skin regarded her with disdain. A narrow pink tongue shot out and licked horribly thin lips.

“My latest client has not been put in place correctly, Captain Fallon,” she said, slinking around Meline’s naked body.

Fallon moved away from the device. Clearly any instrument in the chamber belonged to this woman, and even the mighty Captain Fallon did not want to antagonise her. He stared, as he would have looked at his mother, without words, when he was about to be scolded.

“I do not understand, Lady Demos.” Meline could hear the catch in his voice. Were they all afraid of this woman?

“The soles of my client’s feet were not brushed with animal fat so that they might roast on the hot steel.”

Meline gasped in horror.

“Inform your men that they will each be spending an hour in my chamber, Captain, when I get time to deal with them.” Her face creased in an approximation of a smile as she looked at Meline.

“I am sorry, my dear. I will see to you presently. It is difficult to get guards who understand these things, you see.”

Meline stared at Fallon, hoping that he might rescue her, take her away from this place and predicament before this mad bitch could get started on her body. She swallowed, hoping for a sign, hoping for something from Fallon. He moved closer to speak.

“Just speak and it will end. We need to know where the woman... where Marie is. We need to know quickly. You understand?”

“But I don’t...” Meline stuttered.

“No lies. Tell her!” Fallon turned, beginning to walk away as Meline looked at him, wanting to scream at him not to leave her here. She yelped as a thick liquid doused one foot and then the other. Hissing steam rose from the heating steel spikes. She moved her feet and caused herself further discomfort.

“There, “ Demos said. “It’s not ideal, my dear, but I would hate to see you miss out on all I have to offer.”

She watched in horror as the old woman raised a shaking spindly white hand towards the wheel of the breast press.

“Now,” she rasped. “Let us begin.”

The wheel whined as it started to turn.

* * * * *

Marie shivered in the almost total darkness, hearing the sound of her chains rattle and the distant coughs and moans of other prisoners. Her cell was even more stinking now. She could not get used to the smell in this vile place. She had heard the crowds this morning, cried when she thought that she was going to be taken and punished. But they had never come for her. Were they playing with her mind?

They must be, she reasoned. She had briefly seen Fallon a few hours ago. She had wanted to call out as he led a naked woman in chains past her cell, but there were too many guards. She could not be sure that Fallon would want her to say anything. He must have known that she was there, but could not speak to her. That was it. She just had to be patient now. She sighed again, letting her head fall to one side as she sat in filth against the cold stone wall. Fallon would know what to do, she consoled herself.

“Hello, Marie.”

She gasped with surprise as she looked out at the rusting bars. She could see a large man in the torchlight. Her husband? Her chains rattled as she moved away from the wall, crawled toward the bars.

“Husband. I... I had hoped that you would not see me like this.”

Tears began to well in her eyes. She watched as he signalled for the jailer to unlock the barred door. Two other men were there too. Was she to be freed at last? As the door opened he signalled to them. She could see now that they were masked, and carried long knives that reflected the glow of the torchlight. They moved forward, stepping over the steel barred threshold of the cell.

“My Lord, please, I don’t understand!”

Marie pushed herself back toward the corner now, fumbling backwards with hands and feet as the assassins neared, chains rattling madly as she scrambled, as the men closed upon her, as she screamed.

“I’m sorry, my dear. It is the only way,” Hardor said quietly.

THE END of Book 2