

SAVAGE LAND

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Chapter One

Extract from 'A Concise History of the 21st Century' by Aaron Svenson:

In retrospect, the outbreak of the Third World War in 2010 was as sadly predictable as that of the first and second had been in the previous century.

This time it wasn't the fault of the European powers. By the beginning of the century, it was clear that attempts to stop nuclear proliferation had failed, and some of the newcomers in the nuclear club were countries run by highly unstable religious fanatics. The dreadful consequences of modern global war were quickly evident after the brief but cataclysmic conflict. The bombs directly resulted in only a fraction of the deaths; the rest came from radiation poisoning, starvation after crops failed, and widespread violence after the breakdown of all semblance of state control.

Virtually every major city in the world was decimated. The few who escaped the bombs, such as Geneva, were still caught by the fall-out. Only a few more remote areas, such as northern Scandinavia, escaped the twin terrors of explosion and radiation. Elsewhere, law and order broke down completely. Violence and starvation claimed as many lives again. The war was never officially ended, it was just forgotten as governments lost control or ran out of bombs.

Local wealthy people quickly raised small private armies to protect themselves. Many of these annihilated each other by making pre-emptive strikes to deal with real or imagined threats. National borders faded from view and gradually a feudal system emerged. Tension eased as the population thinned. It is estimated that in two years the world population halved; over the next ten years it halved again, as much due to a falling birth rate as the spiralling death rate, and continued to fall, until by 2060 it was less than four per cent of what it had been in the year 2000. The few countries which had escaped the worst of the carnage with an intact system of government were forced to close their borders or face being over-run by refugees.

In the wilderness which was now Britain and most countries, there was no law except that imposed by those with private armies, who were now the new Lords of the Manors. Technology was their plaything, something only vaguely remembered by the now downtrodden masses. After all, it was fifty years since the war, and the average life expectancy, except for the lucky few, was well below that age.

The population drop was beginning to slow, but mankind was now back in the Middle Ages. It would be a long time before the climb back to formal civilisation began. ...

Serena Durham surveyed the hot Australian landscape from the rickety old car in which she was travelling and wondered once again if she had done the right thing.

She was twenty years old, and even without make-up she was very lovely. Copper-brown hair framed a face with light blue eyes, an impish nose and full lips covering even white teeth in a sensual mouth. Her body was equally attractive, a lithe figure and firm, full breasts, a trim waist and a gorgeous bottom, all hidden by the shapeless, old and dusty clothes she was wearing. The trouser suit might have been impressive once, but that was a long time ago. It had been her mother's, and possibly her mother's before that. Like most people, she owned very few clothes.

Her father had been a fairly highly ranking officer in the self-styled Earl of Oswestry's army in Shropshire. She had been educated up to the age of fourteen, then went to work in the army kitchens. Her mother had died when she was young, and she was an only child, as most children were: radioactivity had considerably reduced the incidence of pregnancy, and besides, who but the rich could afford several children? With no other close relatives, she and her father were alone.

So when the devastating news came that her father had cancer, and less than a year to live, the blow was even greater. Modern folk, however, lived too much under the shadow of death to grieve for long, and besides, they had to decide what would happen to Serena. Without her father to protect her, the Earldom began to look far less safe. Marriage, despite her beauty, was not on the horizon: there were far more women than men, and many of those men could not afford to marry.

At that point the idea of emigration to Australia looked very attractive. She had an uncle there, and with some small semblance of world communication still in existence, the message had got through that, yes, she would be welcome to join him. In addition, Australia was far more healthy a climate than post-catastrophe Britain: although the main cities had been bombed, the radiation count was far lower. When both your parents die young of radiation-linked diseases, this is a major consideration.

So, as soon as her father had died and been properly buried, she was off. Travel was possible, but horrendously expensive: it was the run by small groups of opportunists who made a fortune from it. Serena's father had arranged the sale of the family house and all their other possessions before he died, and most of the proceeds were swallowed up in getting her to the west coast of Australia. Her last few pieces of gold - now the only international currency - had got her a seat in this doddering old vehicle on its weekly journey across the barren wastelands. It was the equivalent of the old Western stage-coach; two men drove it and guarded her and the other two passengers, both older men, on the last lap of her journey.

It had been a hard journey across England to the coast, then over the ocean. Several times she had been forced to supplement her fare payments with her body. She was not a virgin. On her seventeenth birthday, the Earl had exercised his "droit de seigneur" over her, as he did with all the attractive girls within his little kingdom. Her views, and those of her father, on the revival of this ancient custom were irrelevant: they had no real choice in the matter. So she nervously presented herself at his bed-chambers that evening, and he had his fun. Twice since then she had been caught out late at night and raped. Although she knew her attackers, she could do little about it: it was not considered much of a crime in the Earldom unless the girl was injured, and she couldn't complain on that score. She'd also done it voluntarily once or twice with young soldiers she'd met: casual sex no longer carried any social stigma.

For some ten minutes now she had been aware of a cloud of dust on the horizon behind them, and that the elderly car's speed had been increased. She could guess the rest: this was bandit country. (Actually, to be honest, the whole world was bandit country.) But could this ancient rust-trap outrun three men on horses?

In the event, this point became academic. Rounding a bend on the road, they found it blocked by debris strategically placed by the bandits. It wouldn't take long to clear, but by the time the two guards had hauled the foliage out of the way, the raiders were upon them. The guards were armed, but clearly unwilling to make a fight of it. Why should they, when they had nothing valuable of their own to protect, and the bandits might punish any serious resistance? So whilst one bandit covered the two guards, the other two went through the luggage of Serena's two fellow travellers, finding a few items of worth and pocketing them, ignoring the feeble protests of the old men. Serena herself had no valuables, only a small bag of clothing, plus the clothes she stood up in and a last couple of coins hidden in her sandals.

When they had finishing ransacking, the raiders turned their attention to her. She endured their lustful gaze stoically. Then one turned to the other and said,

"Shall we take her?"

Serena took this to mean rape. Mentally, she shrugged. This would be her first taste of Australian cock. It was not something she looked forward to, but she had realised the potential situation from the moment she first saw the cloud of dust in the distance. She was aware that the other two passengers were now regarding her with a mixture of sympathy and pity. The two guards seemed less concerned. Why should they be, she thought angrily, since she had paid her fare in advance?

The other bandit looked thoughtfully at her. "Let's see," he said to his comrade, and then in a sharper tone to her: "You! get your clothes off and let's have a look at you."

Reluctantly she peeled the trouser suit off, keeping her sandals on to conceal the coins hidden in them. Underneath she wore battered and faded underwear which she also discarded to stand nude. Since leaving rainy England she had picked up quite a good tan, and she presented a lovely sight. Being naked in front of them bothered her only slightly: these days only the daughters of the rich could afford the luxury of excessive modesty. Even so, she hoped that they would be gentlemanly

enough to take her behind that bend in the road and do it to her in private, not in front of everybody here, though obviously everybody would know what was happening to her.

The two men looked at each other and exchanged nods. One of them approached her and said, "Hold out your hands, wrists together." Puzzled, she obeyed. He produced something from his pocket and moments later she felt her wrists encircled with cool metal. Looking down, she saw handcuffs on them, the chain no more than six inches long. Instinctively, she tugged to try to free herself, but the cuffs did not yield. The man grasped the chain and pulled her over to one of the horses, then strong hands grasped her and slung her over the horse, bottom high in the air. He mounted the horse himself, and the other two bandits mounted up too, keeping a wary eye on the stage-coach guards. They needn't have bothered. Seconds later they were galloping away from the scene. The breath was driven from Serena's body as she bounced up and down on the animal, but she seemed in no danger of falling off. She had realised by now, of course, that their intention was rather more than rape, although in her nude and (she knew) enticing state that was still a possibility.

"Wh-where are you taking me?" she gasped, finding it difficult to breathe. Moments later she regretted asking as a solid male hand descended on her bare buttocks with stinging force. As she yelped with the unexpected pain, he growled "shuddup," but then added, "you're off to a new life, baby: kiss the old one bye-bye."

So she was being kidnapped. She realised with a sinking feeling that these men could well be slavers. In the Earldom slavery didn't exist as such, but many of the serfs were little more than slaves, and in many other parts of England the old practice had returned, especially for pretty girls. Serena wondered what her chances of rescue were. Raising her head, she saw the car had resumed its sedate pace, the road now clear. They were clearly in no hurry. The guards would sell her clothes, including those she had so recently been forced to remove, in the markets. There were no authorities to inform. If only she had realised what was happening and got one of the two other passengers to take a message to her uncle! She had written to him to tell him she was coming, but there was no way of telling whether the message had got to him. (It was amazing that any postal service existed at all, but like many other things there was gold to be made from it.) Besides, could her uncle do anything? He ran his own community, but it was a tiny one, just three or four families, and it allied itself to several others only for self-defence. And anyway, how would he find out where she was?

Some time later, the raiding party arrived at a small temporary camp. There were about a dozen horses and men, plus a mule train being loaded up. Clearly they had been making a number of raids on local settlements, and the mule train would take the pickings back to their home. Serena's captors pulled up, and she was unceremoniously tipped off the horse to fall sprawling to the earth at the feet of a formidable looking woman in her forties.

The woman looked at the naked girl with a hard sneer, then addressed the lead raider.

"Whatcha got here, Bill?"

"Found her on a road raid, Ma," he replied. "I know you said go for booty not pussy on this trip, but I thought she was too good to pass up."

The woman looked down at Serena. "Stand up," she snapped. Serena was not stupid enough to refuse. She stood, head bowed and hands cuffed in front of her, whilst the woman quickly looked her over. She felt like a piece of meat.

"Yeah, mebbe you're right," the battle-axe said. "Hitch her up to the mule train. Now listen up: four of the boys raided a farm near here. They resisted, with guns, and Josie bought it."

"Josie's dead?"

"Yeah." She spat. "Most of the boys are getting ready to pay another visit and teach those farmers a lesson. You go with them. We'll get the stuff back home."

Serena only vaguely heard the last of this, because one of the men was leading her over to the mule train. Eight or nine mules, donkeys and other beasts of burden were linked together, all loaded with the spoils of the raiding trip. Mostly the raiders had gone for light valuables. The man produced a long piece of rough rope and began tying it around Serena's slender waist, ending with a knot at the front. She now expected him to tie the other end to the back of the rear mule, but instead he passed the piece of rope between her legs.

“Whaah?” she began, and then changed it to an “ooohhh” of anguish as he wrapped the rope around the waist rope, pulling very tight. The coarse strands dug into her, pushing past her sex lips and into her sensitive flesh. Before she could regain sufficient equilibrium to protest, he had brought it back between her legs and knotted it at the front once more, so that a second length invaded her. Only now did he secure the other end to the mule, ignoring her pleas, and then walked off. Serena began to frantically try to loosen the rope, then saw the woman called Ma looking at her sternly, holding a supple-looking branch of a bush in her hand. Serena got the message: that branch would be hellishly painful if whipped across her naked flesh. Reluctantly, she ceased trying to loosen the rope. She hadn’t been getting very far, anyway: the knots were tight.

For some time Serena stood there, helplessly feeling the uncomfortableness of rope between her legs. The roughness of it itched, and it felt as if she was being cut in two. Her body was automatically reacting to the invasion by producing the juices that would lubricate her passage, and she could feel her nipples hardening. The hot sun caressing her unclothed form was also sensuous, and were it not for her worrying situation, she could possibly even have enjoyed this.

Eventually the mule train was ready to move off. Four men on horses, plus Ma, whose considerable weight was carried by a fifth horse, guarded it; unlike the stage-coach guards, they quite clearly meant business of anybody was foolish enough to try to rob them.

Serena began to walk, very aware that it was essential that she did not allow the rope to become taut and cut into her even further. Two of the men rode behind her, admiring her curves and making lewd comments to each other which she could not help but overhear. Ma insisted that the other two ride in front for security purposes.

Hours passed. Serena’s lovely body became caked in dust and sweat. The more she perspired, the more dust clung to her. She was quite fit, but she eventually began to tire and her walking became more ragged. After a couple of painful jolts when she fell behind and the rope went taut, she learned that it was better to hold the rope in her handcuffed hands, ensuring that there was always some slack between her hands and pussy. Since the journey was otherwise boring, the men amused themselves by watching her as she struggled along, ogling her bare rear. Ma tolerated it, but only just.

“Blasted piece of totty comes along and yer can’t take yer eyes off it,” she grumbled.

That was all she was now, reflected Serena as she half marched, half staggered into captivity. A piece of totty!

Chapter Two

Extract from 'A Concise History of the 21st Century' by Aaron Svenson:

'By the year 2060, half a century after the Third World War, the remnants of the population remained surprisingly well educated. The average peasant, as most of the population could be described, could still read and write, and had some knowledge of science, history and geography. The robber barons running tiny feudal empires found this useful and encouraged it. Many of them were able to live in technological comfort, with the old machines nursed along and well looked after. But everybody seemed to instinctively retain the value of being educated, as if learning was all that stood between them and a return to total savagery.

"Quite possibly, they were correct.' ...

Serena trudged along behind the mules, sweat pouring from her naked body. She was exhausted: they had been on the move for hours. She had to keep moving: the rope linking her to the mules was threaded through her crotch, and it would be agonisingly painful to be dragged along by it. She clutched the rope in her handcuffed hands, trying to keep some slack in it.

She had nothing left in the world except the loose, ill-fitting sandals she wore. The coins which had been hidden in them had fallen out along the way; with her wrists locked together and unable to pause, she had been unable to pick them up. The two bandits on horseback behind her hadn't spotted them: they had been too busy leering at her cute behind as she walked, and exchanging crude comments about what they would like to do to her. She heard all these suggestions - they didn't bother to lower their voices - and she knew there was every chance they would get the opportunities they craved. She was certainly in no position to resist. If it hadn't been for their crudeness and her hatred of them for capturing her, she might almost have welcomed them: the crotch rope had been stimulating her wickedly. Her nipples were rock-hard and her groin was very wet, although of course she was also soaked all over with perspiration. Fortunately, with her back to the men, they couldn't see the tell-tale signs of her sexual state.

Eventually they came to a settlement. There were eight or nine houses, a couple of farm buildings and a few tents. Within minutes of their arrival it was a hive of activity. Older men and women of all ages hurried to unpack the mules. None of them showed any surprise at the naked girl trailing in the wake of the animals. Serena said nothing as they went by: she had noticed Ma watching, and didn't doubt that the woman would birch her at the least excuse. Besides, what could she say? It was quite evident that she was here against her will; even if any of these people felt like freeing her - and why should they? - Ma wouldn't allow it. And where would she go? She was still over a hundred miles from her uncle, and, with no money, had no way of getting to him. For the moment, the only thing she could do was wait.

One of the men untied the rope from the mule and, to Serena's immense relief, undid the knots and freed her from the crotch rope. The ropes hurt as they worked themselves clear of her body, but she was grateful to see them go. If he noticed the wetness in the rope, he made no comment; hopefully he would presume it to be sweat. The handcuffs on her wrists were not removed. He didn't miss the chance to give her a casual grope, before calling:

"Where do you want this, Ma?"

"In the pen," the large woman replied, unconcerned. The man beckoned to Serena to follow him, which she did as he made his way through the bustling camp. Again there seemed little point in trying to make a break for it, though he kept a wary eye on her in any case. Most of the men, busy though they might be, spared at least a few seconds to admire the naked girl as she passed by, and there were a few wolf-whistles and crude suggestions. Serena blushed and tried to ignore them.

They came to what might once have been a squash court, though the twenty-first century girl did not know the game. On three sides there were high walls, with a ceiling which allowed some pleasant shade, although it was in a bad state of repair. The fourth side was at one time open, but now roughly but effectively fenced off except for a gateway. The man undid a lock on the gate and indicated that Serena should go inside.

She hesitated. "Please," she said, holding up her wrists. He grunted, and sifted through his bunch of keys until he found the one which unlocked the cuffs, then repeated his signal for her to go inside. With no choice, she obeyed. The gate was dragged back into position and he went away.

Serena sat down on the warped and twisted wooden floor, which was covered in places by straw, and regarded the other occupant of her new quarters. Sat opposite her was another young woman, with beautiful features and what would normally be jet-black hair, although currently more than slightly tinted with dust. Doubtless Serena's own copper-brown locks looked similarly grubby at this moment. The woman was wearing tattered rags through which a voluptuous body could be seen, in fact some of the holes in her clothes were quite revealing, although Serena herself was of course even more fully exposed. The girls looked at each other, and Serena was the first to speak.

"Do you speak English?"

"Sure." The accent was clearly Australian. In the many years since national and global travel and communication had been reduced to almost nil, accents had become more pronounced. Before arriving in the southern continent, Serena had never heard an Australian accent, though since then, of course, she had become quite used to them.

They exchanged stories. The girl's name was Helen, she was eighteen and had been captured on a raid a week or so earlier on her community, quite a distance away. It seemed that the bandit company tended to travel a long way, set up a temporary camp, raid the area, and then return home. That way, it was unlikely that their victims would find their base and organise an attack. Helen's community suffered an attack every few years; with only five or six families, there was little they could do to protect themselves: it was hard enough just scraping a living. Mostly raiders were after goods, but sometimes one or two girls would be kidnapped as well. The girls never returned home, and Helen didn't expect to get the chance to, either. Since her abduction, she had spent most of the time on the road, arriving here only a day or two before Serena.

"So what's going to happen to us?" Serena asked.

Helen shrugged. "Probably be sold." She eyed Serena. "You a virgin?" Serena shook her head. "They bring higher prices, they say."

Serena didn't want to think too much about that. She eyed the other girl's rags enviously. "I wish I had something to wear. I feel so exposed."

"There are some bits and pieces in that corner; see what you can find."

Serena sorted through a small bundle of tattered cloth. There wasn't much, and Helen had obviously already bagged the best which, considering how much the younger girl was still showing, didn't say much for what was left. Still, she managed to find what might once have been a halter top. Since the front was no longer connected, it left her breasts visible, but covered them from the side. Helen had the only pair of shorts, though her buttocks showed through two of the many holes, so Serena found the largest piece of cloth and tied it around her hips. It only covered her front and about half of her rear, but it was the best she could do. At least now she felt a little more in control of events. But only a little.

Evening came. The girls seemed to have been forgotten, except when one of the older women arrived with two small tin bowls of food. It wasn't very appetising, but Serena was hungry. Later, they could hear some of the men having a party. Helen was listening anxiously to the sounds, Serena noticed, and wondered why.

She soon found out. Two slightly drunk men arrived at the pen, opened the door, and beckoned to the two girls. Neither of them were keen to come out, so the men came in, grasped their wrists and pulled them out. Years of hard physical toil had made these men stronger than twentieth century men, and the girls were pulled along with little effort, so they soon gave up struggling. They were led to a camp fire around which a dozen men were gathered. Serena shuddered. What lay in store for them now?

Chapter Three

Extract from “A Concise History of the 21st Century” by Aaron Svenson:

“Soon after the devastating nuclear war in the year 2010, all civil authority collapsed in most countries. In most lands, robber barons flourished, and in nearly all countries the only law was the will of the mightiest. It is perhaps therefore not surprising that practices such as slavery surfaced once more, and that most slaves were women. Even amongst free women, their position in society had declined: for example, rape was no longer generally a crime, unless the victim had a powerful husband or father capable of protecting or avenging her. Might, not possession, was now nine tenths of the law.

“However, the radiation had brought some small compensations. The eradication of all but the fittest and healthiest members of the human race had eliminated many diseases, or possibly mutated the survivors slightly to increase their immunity. Whatever the reason, sexually transmitted diseases were now almost non-existent, and pregnancy far less common without the aid of herbal fertility drugs.

“Doubtless, however, this was all cold comfort to the victims.”

A dozen men sat around the camp fire in various states of inebriation. Serena and Helen stood facing them, both conscious that the flimsy rags they wore hid little of their youthful bodies. Serena’s top consisted of little more than two pieces of cloth, unconnected at the front, which shielded her breasts only from the side. Her only other protection was a piece of cloth tied around her hips, just about covering her front and about half of her buttocks. As they stood helplessly, several of the men were making lewd comments.

“Fancy a bit of that.”

“Which one will you have?”

“The black-haired one. Nice pair of legs.” That was Helen.

“The copper-haired one for me. Look at those tits.” That was Serena, and it was not difficult to get a good look at her breasts, despite her shielding arms and the nominal clothing she wore. A twentieth century woman would have protested indignantly, demanded her rights and so on, but Serena and Helen were products of another age. These men were in physical control of the situation, therefore they would have their way. Serena counted heads. A couple of them looked asleep from drink, so with luck there would only be ten. Five each, she thought with grim resignation.

But several of them wanted some fun first.

“Make ‘em walk the tightrope,” one suggested, and there were several nods. Someone produced a length of rope and secured it between two posts, about waist height and four or five metres long. One of them beckoned to Helen to come over to it. When she did so, he snapped abruptly,

“Get your shorts off.”

With a slight shrug of the shoulders, Helen unzipped and pulled the ancient garments off. She had no underclothes, and her hole-festooned t-shirt was not long enough to cover the thick thatch of black pubic hair, nor her pert young buttocks. One or two men made a couple of very crude comments; it was difficult to ignore them, since they would soon have the chance to make good their boasts.

“Straddle the rope.” Obediently, but not without difficulty, she stepped over the end of the rope. It forced her onto tiptoe, and even then the rope was tight between her legs. One of the men pulled her sex lips apart and made sure it went inside them. “Walk to the other end,” the leader ordered.

Helen obeyed. The friction of the rope began to stimulate her, whether she wanted it to or not. One nipple could be seen growing hard through one of the tears in her shirt, and the outline of the other was also clearly visible through the threadbare material. By the time she got to the other end of

the rope, and had been made to walk backwards to the starting point again several times, she was well roused. Then they made her dismount and turned to Serena.

Serena undid the bow she had tied to keep the piece of rag around her hips and let it fall to the ground, though she tried to leave it where it could be retrieved when the evening was over. Stepping on an upturned crate, she swung a long leg over the rope and lowered herself onto it. As soon as she was down, she pulled her own now exposed love lips apart with her fingers to make sure the intrusive rope went right through the middle of her: better to do it herself than have some man do it. Then she began to walk. Somewhere nearby, one of the men had been unable or unwilling to wait and had grabbed Helen. Serena listened to his grunts and groans and Helen's involuntary moans as she walked back and forth, feeling the inevitable changes in her body chemistry as the rope had its effect. She had been marched to the camp earlier today secured by, amongst other things, a crotch rope, so she already knew the sensations it produced. That did not make it any less unpleasant, although she had a feeling she would soon be grateful for the lubrication.

After a while they pulled her off the rope. She rejoined the unhappy looking Helen, who was now completely naked; the man who had been fucking her was now sleeping contentedly near the fire. Helen probably wished he was in the fire. One of them pulled at Serena's top, and a moment or so later she was also nude.

"Tie 'em together, back to back," the leader said, and two men quickly began to carry out his command. A length of rope was tied very tightly around their waists, constraining their breathing, and their wrists were also tied together, Serena's right to Helen's left and vice versa. Then they were pushed, staggering, into the middle of the men. At the command of the leader they began to turn around, rotating constantly on the spot.

Rough male hands reached out to them, painfully mauling and squeezing their breasts, fingering their pubic hair, sometimes intruding into their love holes. As she turned, Serena would move out of the reach of one load of hands, only to come into the range of another group. She heard Helen's gasps as they mingled with her own at the painful and humiliating treatment being doled out to them.

"Enough. Move back." The leader's sharp command came as beautiful deliverance to them, but it was only temporary. They stopped turning, but after another barked order from him continued their rotation. Serena saw to her dismay that several of them were picking up short leather straps, taking off their belts or even picking up pieces of rope.

The lashing began. Leather tips flicked into their breasts, stomachs and pussies. All of them hurt, but the ones which caught them right inside their triangles or on the underhang of their jugs made them squeal with pain. They were both sore when the onslaught stopped and they were released. Serena was now praying that these beasts were sufficiently stimulated to start raping them; better that than more torment as their lusts built. For once her prayers were answered. She and Helen were both pulled to the ground, their legs forced open and the first of many cocks began to ram its way into her body. She writhed in the dust as she felt him enter her. Behind him, others impatiently waited their turn.

Chapter Four

Extract from “A Concise History of the 21st Century” by Aaron Svenson:

“The collapse of structured society after the Third World War was for most people the end of many things that the pampered citizens of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century had taken for granted. For example, electrical power: only those local groups fortunate enough to have a small power station or source nearby, and the technical know-how to maintain and adapt it, were able to continue enjoying its benefits. These were the people who could continue some small level of manufacturing; but much of the wealth this generated for them had to be spent on small armies to guard their asset from those who would covet it. Other communities, looking for power for purely domestic purposes, used windmills or wheels driven by animals or slaves. Most communities, however, simply went without.

“Coinage was at first another casualty. The collapse of the banking system, and hyper-inflation caused by far more money than worthwhile things available to buy, quickly wrecked the old system. Precious metals such as gold and silver soon took over.”

The chains connecting Serena’s wrists rattled again as the horse trotted along. The ominous and voluminous figure of Ma, one of the leaders of the pirates, twisted in the seat of her own horse, labouring under her weight, and glowered at her. This time, however, she did not bother to use the switch on Serena’s largely unclothed body. The message of that glower was clear enough and Serena, remembering how that switch stung, made a fresh effort to gather her chains together to stop them rattling.

At least the horse that she sat astride was a luxury. She had been marched naked and on foot to the camp, and now, several weeks later, she was leaving the camp by a much less strenuous mode, very welcome in the constant heat. Of course, the provision of the horse was not for her benefit: it was simply to make the journey that much quicker. Still, the feel of the animal’s hide between her bare thighs was a lot more welcome than the many men she had been forced to entertain there in her time at the camp.

Many, many men: there must have been thirty or so in this band of raiders, and she had been taken by each of them at least twice. Still, the nights when they came to her pen and simply raped her were not as bad as the nights they dragged her and her fellow captive Helen, now on the horse beside her, into a little party where they might be tortured and degraded before being gang-banged. Often worse still was the reaction of some of the raiders’ own women, particularly the middle-aged ones whose husbands were so keen to sow their oats into these two nubile young nymphs: as if doing all sorts of drudgery during the day wasn’t bad enough. The girls were usually roughly treated by their female overseers. The men did not protect them: why should they bother? And the women had no time for the girls’ only defence, namely that they did not want these men but were clearly forced unwillingly into sex. Jealousy is seldom rational. Fortunately Serena and Helen had always been able to retrieve their skimpy clothing after their frequent forced strippings; whilst they were both now well used to being nude, it often inflamed the women still more to see these two outstanding young bodies in their full glory.

But now they were leaving the camp at last, for good as far as she could make out. Serena had been foolish enough to ask the grumpy Ma what their fate was. Ma had taken the whip to her, and she would not ask again. There was simply a party of them riding somewhere, her and Helen, Ma, and three armed young men acting as guards, an invaluable escort in this land. They carried a few items to sell wherever they were going, but the main items of merchandise seemed to be Helen and herself.

One of the guards, a brash, confident and arrogant young man, brought his horse level with Ma’s and said conversationally,

“You know, Ma, I reckon we would’ve got a much better price for these two kids in the city markets.” Kids, thought Serena angrily: she was twenty, Helen eighteen, and this young bastard was no older than she. Neither was his prick up to much, she recalled, although she of course would never dare say so, much less refuse his advances.

Ma grunted. “Yer probably right,” she drawled, “but we ain’t planning a trip there for a few months yet, and it ain’t worth going just for these two. Meanwhile, they’re eating our food and distracting you lot at nights so you don’t get yer work done by day. Told yer before, Hogan, it ain’t worth dealing in slaves unless you do it in a big way. I reckon you lot pick one up every so often jest fer yer own use.” They probably did at that, Serena agreed silently. She didn’t quite agree with Ma’s valuation, though: she and Helen had been made to work for long hours every day, and they weren’t given a great deal to eat. Again, though, it would be unwise to voice her thoughts. Anyway, she was very glad to be leaving the camp. With a bit of luck, there would be fewer men where they were going.

They arrived at a tiny settlement, less than a dozen houses. Serena wondered at first why it didn’t suffer from raids, being small, and then saw the high look-out tower which, given the flatness of the surrounding terrain, made a surprise attack impossible. Also, she saw that the tower was armed; she had heard of heavy weapons that could throw death much further and more devastatingly than ordinary guns and rifles, and got the impression that there were some of those up there. At any rate, Ma and company made peaceful contact. An older man, a farmer by the looks of him, came out to greet them. Helen and Serena were made to dismount and he looked them over, although for a change it was not a lecherous look. He opened their mouths to examine their teeth, although he did not order the removal of their pitiful tatters of clothing.

“Suppose they’ll do,” he said at length. “Don’t suppose you’ve got any male slaves.”

“The boys never seem to come back from raids with male ones,” answered Ma wryly. “Still, we’ll look out for some for yer and bring ‘em on our way to the city next time. Maybe a part exchange.”

The man nodded. “All right, I’ll take ‘em,” he said. “Two silver coins each, you said.”

“I said three each and you know it, you old horse thief.”

“Five for the pair.”

Ma sighed. “I’m making a loss here, but ... done, I suppose.” What loss, thought Serena bitterly? Neither she nor Helen had cost anything to start with. Ma went on: “but that doesn’t include the handcuffs.” The pathetic rags that the two girls wore also belonged to Ma, but she didn’t bother to reclaim them. The only things she owned in the world were not worth someone else’s while to take off her.

The handcuffs were unlocked and removed, and as the two girls stood rubbing their wrists the coins were exchanged and Ma and her three guards rode off, clutching the reins of the other two now rider-less horses so that they would follow. They ignored Serena and Helen. And that, Serena reflected, was that. She had been sold. It was brief, humiliating, and of course she had no say whatsoever. Even the price wasn’t much: she had paid more for the trip across the countryside which had been prematurely cut short by her abduction.

The man led them inside the fortified wall surrounding the settlement. Serena took a last, lingering look at the plain outside. Unshackled, she could have made a run for it, but there was nowhere to hide and they would quickly catch her, either on foot or horseback. Even if they didn’t, she wouldn’t last long in the heat without either food or water. Hard though her life was, she had no wish to end it.

He led them to a corner of the settlement where a great wheel was being turned by a muscular young man wearing only a loin cloth. Four spokes, each some four feet long and at chest height, emanated horizontally from the wheel. He was pushing one of these to turn the wheel, slowly but continuously. Serena noticed the chains linking his wrists to the spoke, which meant that he was a slave or a captive. They were the same thing, really.

“This is our electricity generator,” the old man explained. Serena knew what electricity was, although she had never had the opportunity to use it. “We have two male slaves to turn it, but that wasn’t really enough, so now we have you as well.” That, Serena realised, was why he would have

preferred male slaves. "Since you're female, we'll work you together." He looked at his watch. "It's more or less midday now, so you can begin your first shift right away." He began to unlock the male slave's chains. Sweat was pouring from the bronzed and muscular body. Before her abduction Serena would have found him arousingly attractive, but she had been raped far too often in the last few weeks to think of that right now.

The old man freed the slave from the wheel, although his wrist manacles remained. He turned to the two girls.

"In view of the heat, you will perspire less and work more efficiently without clothing." It didn't seem to be an order as such, but Serena had been thinking along the same lines herself. Largely indifferent to the male eyes upon her, she shrugged off the partial halter drop from her shoulders and undid the piece of cloth tied around her hips, whilst Helen pulled her much-perforated t-shirt over her head and slipped out of the also holed shorts. The resulting bulge in the male slave's pouch was a little embarrassing to Serena, who waited whilst the man fitted chains to Helen's wrists and attached them to one of the bars, and then repeated the operation with Serena on the bar opposite.

"All you have to do is push the bar. It is not necessary to keep it moving at all times, so you may stop for a few seconds from time to time to drink from the trough. No longer, though." He indicated a large fixed container full of water, which would be close enough to them as they passed by that they could dip their faces into it and drink. "You will not be supervised as such, but the dials will record the power level at the end of your shift. If it is too low, you will regret it." With that, he departed, leading the male slave.

Serena leaned her weight onto the bar, and began to push. It moved without too much resistance, and she began to trudge around. Helen also did her share. About eighty per cent of the walking circle was in sunlight, and soon they were sweating in a most unfeminine manner. From time to time Serena would momentarily pause beside the trough and lower her face into it. The cool water refreshed her, and she would begin her walk again, pausing only to let Helen take her turn at the drinking point.

The first hour was a novelty, the second rather boring, but during the third their tiredness began to show, and by the fourth their limbs were aching. Fear of the lash drove them on. Serena had found very few kind people in this harsh world, and had few illusions about her new masters, even though she had yet to meet more than one of them, and he only briefly. At least, as the sun lowered, more of the circle came into shadow; nevertheless, it was a great relief when their owner arrived with another handsome and muscular male slave to take their place.

The first of their many stints at the wheel was over.

Chapter Five

“A Concise History of the 21st Century” by Aaron Svenson:

“During the brief nuclear conflict in 2010, most major cities were destroyed by the missiles or fall-out. Many smaller ones perished of disease or civil conflict.

“Quite a few towns, however, survived, particularly those whose sewage and other important (because of avoiding disease) functions operated independently of national power grids and did not need constant attention. Within a generation many of them had been re-titled cities, either because of civic pride, such as remained, or because they were the largest remaining gatherings of people. The idea of size, in any case, had altered greatly with the shrinkage of the population. Anything with more than a couple of hundred inhabitants was now considered a town, and more than a thousand constituted a city.

“Although the nature of life had changed drastically, some semblance of order remained more evident in the cities than in the country. Sometimes.”

Around and around Serena trudged. It was the daytime shift, midday to 4 o'clock in the afternoon, and they were (she guessed) about half way through. Their task was fairly simple: in front of Serena, at chest height, was a thick horizontal bar of metal, a spoke from a wheel. By pushing the bar, to which her hands were chained, she and Helen would turn the wheel which provided electricity to power the settlement where they now lived as slaves. The electricity would be stored in batteries until needed. Serena knew the terminology, although not really any of the science, but it didn't really matter: her job was simply to keep the wheel turning.

The wheel wasn't that hard to push, but four hours of walking and pushing invariably left them extremely tired. Sweat oozed out of Serena's lovely, naked body: it gleamed on her breasts, trickled irritatingly from her armpits down her sides, dripped from her face. With her hands chained in front of her, she could not wipe it off. Her beautiful, slightly curly copper-brown hair reached some six inches down her back, the ends were wet where they came into contact with the perspiration-soaked skin. The front of her hair round her face was wet too, because there was a butt full of water by the side of their path, and every ten minutes or so Serena could stop and dip her head in it: with her arms shackled, this was the only way to drink, and anyway, the coolness of the water on her face was refreshing. Mercifully, it was in the small area of shadow. Then she would resume her pacing until Helen, on the opposite side of the wheel to her, came level with the water and could have her turn. Fortunately there was no shortage of water here, since there were several wells nearby and they also experienced a reasonable amount of rain. They had actually done more than one shift in a downpour, which seemed nice at first, but they soon found it cold, wet and depressing. Both agreed that it was better to work in the sun. Not, of course, that it was their choice.

They were not usually supervised, and there was no set number of revolutions they had to complete, but their owner would check the dials on the machine from time to time alter their shift. On their second day, he had pronounced the power levels unsatisfactory and had taken a sharp stick to both of the girls. It had hurt considerably, and because of the wood he had used, they were picking splinters out of each other's bottoms for over an hour afterwards, which, given the already inflamed state of their cheeks, was not nice. Thereafter, a whip was left hanging pointedly near the wheel and any passer-by who observed them shirking was invited to scourge them across bare backs or buttocks to encourage more effort. Naturally they both put their backs into their work to avoid this, but unfortunately one or two men just enjoyed doing it anyway, and they rarely got through a day shift without a stroke or two. On this day there were three red marks going diagonally across Serena's back, and a further two horizontally decorating her behind. Still, they had been promised the stick again if the power levels dropped, and that was far worse!

At 4 p.m. their owner or one of the other freemen brought one of the two male slaves to replace them. Unshackled, they were permitted to go to another water butt where they could wash themselves. Slightly refreshed and restored, they would don once more the flimsy rags which substituted for clothes and, always hungry now, go and get something to eat. Afterwards they would report to one of their supervisors, who would lock them away in the cell they shared. Tired, they would soon doze off to sleep, only to be roused shortly before midnight for their next shift.

At four o'clock the next morning they would be relieved once more and the routine would continue, the only difference being they were warned never to make much noise in the early morning, when most of the settlement was asleep. In these violent times there was always a sentry on guard in the tower, and he could spare a few minutes to come down and lock them in their cells once more. The night shift was of course cooler than the day one, although even at night it was quite warm here, but marching near blind in the darkness was no better than doing it in the blazing sun. Lights were only switched on for the changeover; for the rest of the shift it was just a waste of power which, since the girls had to do the work to generate it, they would hardly object to!

The routine went on every day, without exception. It was physically hard, but they were both young and healthy girls and they survived. Gradually they were getting fitter, their already handsome bodies becoming leaner and more lithe. They never talked while at the wheel, needing all their energy for their task; neither wanted to get the stick again. In fact they didn't talk that much at all, although they had become firm friends. They swapped life stories: Helen was very interested about life in England, and also Serena's trip to Australia - very few people from any country ever ventured abroad these days - and Serena learned all about Australian life, at least Helen's experience of it, but after that there was little to talk about. Also, work was never far away, either their last shift or the next one.

Both girls toiled naked at the wheel, always. As they had prepared for their first shift, their new owner had suggested - not really ordered - that they might find it best to strip off, and by the end of the shift they realised he had been right; clothes would have been unbearably sticky and stuffy, and besides, their tattered and ancient rags would have disintegrated by now. Serena was very conscious of the fact that the remnants of a halter top, with the two front pieces no longer connected, the shapeless piece of cloth she wore tied around her hips, and her sandals, were the only things in the world she owned, and then only because nobody else wanted them; but because they were her only possessions they were important.

Arriving at the wheel, she would immediately disrobe and put her things neatly in a corner. The male slave at the wheel would gaze at her with undisguised interest; she endured the humiliation of being ogled, pretending she did not see the expanding bulge in his loin cloth. The other male slave would get a similar bulge when he came to relieve them. Serena's own body, as she removed her rags to take her place naked at the wheel, showed her own interest, albeit slightly less obviously: but the hardening nipples and bulging mound of Venus were there for anyone who cared to observe. Nobody did, though: who was interested in the thoughts and desires of a slave? Well, perhaps the two male slaves did; but she was usually too embarrassed by the signals she was giving off herself to look in the direction of the male slave she was replacing at this point; at least, not in the direction of his face. On the other hand, when they were relieved at the end of their shift, she was always too tired to care whether the other, equally interesting, young male slave spotted her arousal or not. Helen also stripped indifferently, although Serena did not know her friend's views on their voluntary self-exposure, and did not ask.

Actually, both of the girls had been largely unmolested since their arrival there a month earlier. After the almost nightly multiple rapes in the camp, this had been both a surprise and a relief at first, but after a while Serena found an urge, almost an itch, that she had never previously known in her life, and could only put down to the high level of sexual activity, albeit forced, that she had experienced at the camp. She found herself admiring the physiques of the two male slaves, but they were kept in a separate cell somewhere else, under rather tighter security than the girls.

There was also the problem of when: at the times when Serena was released from the wheel, hot and sticky with sweat, the one male slave was immediately replacing her and Helen, whilst the other was fast asleep. By the time their replacement was himself released from his shift, the girls would themselves be in the land of nod. There was no question, even if it were permitted, of missing a sleep

session: they were always far too tired; and nor was there any possibility of a holiday, or day off. They did their two shifts every day, without the slightest exception.

Anyway, neither Serena nor Helen went entirely unused, but visitors averaged less than one per week. Helen's theory was that most of the settlers were married, and the wives disapproved, and unlike the less civilised bandit camp they had sufficient sway over their husbands to keep them away. When visitors did come, it was normally in the evening; the visitor would wake the girls, choose the one he wanted, and turf the other one out of the cell whilst he had his fun. Both girls being equally striking, the choices split about fifty-fifty. The girl told to leave would just walk a little way away from the door, find the most comfortable (or least uncomfortable) piece of ground and go back to sleep. The girl who was chosen to "entertain" missed some of her sleep and was thus a little less able to pull her weight on the next shift (another reason why they were not taken advantage of too much?) so the other had to compensate; fortunately, they had never yet both been used on the same evening. Neither minded having to compensate: each appreciated, only too well, that the other had no control over a man deciding he wanted her. And, of course, obedience and cooperation was expected, as night is expected to follow day.

Being used in this way didn't bother Serena too much: she was used to it now. Unfortunately, neither did it excite her much, except for one or two brawny guards: she was developing more of a lust for the muscular type. Certainly those two male slaves looked mouth-watering to her ...

More weeks went by. With absolutely no possibility of escape or any improvement in their circumstances, Serena and Helen simply ate, slept and toiled at the wheel as required. There was no alternative. Then one day Ma showed up.

The first Serena and Helen knew about it was when they were woken during their sleep period and taken to the front gate. The raiders' caravan stood outside; naturally enough, the settlers were sufficiently Distrusting not to let the bandits inside the compound. One of Ma's guards stood with a chained male slave, and Serena remembered that the woman had said she would call by here again on her way to the city and part exchange a male slave for Serena and Helen. Whether any money also changed hands she did not know, but evidently they were about to leave. She never had got that chance with either of the male slaves. The leader of the settlement did not even say goodbye to then; he collected his new wheel-worker and went back inside without so much as a backward glance.

The guard handcuffed Serena's wrists together, and attached a chain from the handcuffs to the back of one of the wagons. Helen was similarly attached to the other. If they were in for a long hard march, at least this time she wouldn't have to suffer the crotch rope. And she was clothed, too. Unfortunately, the latter did not last long.

"Take their clothes off," Ma grunted; "they'll sell better with an all-over tan." Serena felt strong hands tugging the scrap of cloth from around her waist. The halter top would not come off, so he simply tore it off, the battered garment disintegrating without much protest. As the caravan moved off, Serena looked back sadly as her only possessions, apart from her sandals, lay in the dirt in front of the gate. Then she felt the pull of the chains, and the now naked girl began the long trudge to God only knew where.

Chapter Six

Extract from “A Concise History of the 21st Century” by Aaron Svenson:

“In the new civilisation following the Third World War, civic authorities, where they existed at all, had changed quite radically.

“In the towns which now passed as cities (the old cities having for the most part been destroyed), most had their own kings or otherwise unelected rulers. They levied taxes which paid for a police force of some kind, which functioned as much to protect the ruler as the citizenry in general. Few rulers were sufficiently secure to behave as tyrants: they ruled with a loose hand, aware that if they tried to turn it into an iron fist, it would disintegrate into a trickle of sand. Most such rulers needed the support of the citizens and the visits of traders and so made some efforts to enforce law and order, after a fashion. There was no advantage, of course, in helping slaves, or any good political reason to suppress slavery.

“Architecture had changed, too. Town buildings were no longer spread out, but closely grouped in order to facilitate defence against raiders, and also because of the much more limited availability of transport. Many towns without electricity already resembled medieval settlements.”

Like many cities, this one had a fortified wall surrounding it, undoubtedly built within the last fifty years. The guards on the gate regarded the caravan with both suspicion and avarice as it came to a halt in front of them.

The inevitable haggling between them and the irritable Ma began. They claimed that the city levied an entry fee, which was only a flimsy disguise for a bribe to them. Ma told them so, but she knew that she would have to concede some payment; the argument was really only over how much.

Stood behind the second of the two wagons, chains leading from her wrists to the rear of the vehicle and, apart from them and sandals, naked as the day she was born, Serena listened disinterestedly. All she wanted was to be allowed to rest. They had been on the march for three days, and she felt dirty and sweaty. She hadn't had much rest at night, either: each night one of Ma's two henchmen had her, whilst the other one had enjoyed Helen, swapping on alternate nights. Neither of the girls had shown any desire for coupling, but of course that was irrelevant. Serena had forgotten just what beasts men were; it hadn't taken these two long to remind her.

All the time, she had been naked. Her flimsy rags had been torn from her on Ma's orders before they had set out: Ma said she would get more for the two girls at the sales if they had all-over tans. Serena certainly was a lot more tanned now; also, since she had arrived in Australia, the sun had lightened her hair a little, so that it was now rather more copper-blond than copper-brown, almost golden in hue.

Another change, this time as a result of her months of labour at the wheel, was that she was far stronger and fitter. Just after she had been captured, she had been force-marched for less than a whole day, at the end of which she had been exhausted. Now, even after three solid days of marching, she was, although tired, far from collapse. Her body reflected the changes: her arms, though still feminine, were slightly more muscular, her tummy flatter, her breasts firmer, her bottom and legs a little trimmer, and she had an overall slightly more sharply defined shape, like a blurred image that is brought into focus. It was not a displeasing result to the onlooker, although Serena would have preferred not to have gone through what it took to achieve it.

Her friend Helen, who at eighteen was two years younger than Serena, had also become fitter, and had lost a little puppy fat. A native Australian, her tan had already been more pronounced than Serena's, but the remnants of what would in another time have been called a ghost bikini had gone: her breasts and crotch were now as tanned as the rest of her. Her normally jet-black hair was, like Serena's currently more than a little tinted with sand and dust, but that would wash out. She was also chained to the back of the wagon.

The two guards were wandering around the wagons, asking about contraband. Serena was musing vaguely how much nicer her life had been before capture, but was roused from her daydream when one of the men spotted her and Helen. "Well now, what've we got here?" one of them asked.

Ma shrugged. "They're fer the market."

"Yeah? Pretty nice couple of Sheilas." The one doing the talking approached Serena. She shrank back a little, but her chains were already fairly taut. A hand reached out and grasped her upper arm, pulling her to him, and the other hand stroked her breast. She instinctively resisted a little, but she knew it was hopeless. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the other guard giving similar attention to Helen. "Maybe there's some contraband hidden on them," he said.

Ma shrugged. "Have a look if yer want," she said indifferently. It was no skin off her nose!

"Maybe I will at that," returned the guard, and produced a grubby finger in front of Serena's face. "There's only one place it could be hidden, so let's have a check." As he spoke, he thrust the finger between Serena's legs and into her vagina.

"Oh!" Serena could not stifle a gasp of dismay, but a sharp look from Ma warned her not to struggle. If the guards could be pleased this way, they might forego their bribe. The finger probed a little, then withdrew.

The other guard was doing something similar to Helen. "Tight little thing, isn't she?" he sneered.

"I wouldn't know," said Ma mildly. "But if yer wanna fuck 'em in return for letting us in free, go ahead."

The two guards considered this. After exchanging looks, the one groping Serena said, "yeah, alright. Lie down on your backs, girls."

Wordlessly, Serena and Helen obeyed, as Ma and her two men retreated to a discrete distance, although maintaining a watch to make sure their goods were not damaged. The ground was a hard-baked bridleway, uncomfortable beneath Serena's bare skin, but her attention was focused more on the guard as he dropped his trousers and pants to reveal a dirty and semi-aroused member. With a look of pure lust, he descended onto the still handcuffed girl, and without further ado began to thrust into her.

It didn't take either him or his friend long to shoot their loads. With her hands still chained together above her head, Serena could do nothing to either stop him, or help him enjoy himself, but he wasn't bothered either way. Afterwards, he extracted himself, wiped the end of his prick on Serena's inside thigh, and did up his trousers. His friend had already finished, and together they moved off to open the gate.

Serena got wearily and sadly to her feet just as the wagons began to move. A little trickle of semen inched its way down her inside leg. Neither she nor Helen had said a word during their rapes, apart from a couple of grunts and gasps acknowledging the force and occasional pain (and not any excitement) of their treatment; nor had either of the guards, or Ma, spoken directly to them. Once inside the gate, which now shut behind them, Ma said, "put a couple of blankets over the wenches; we don't wanna be stopped by every flamin' guard in the city."

One of her two men roused a couple of coarse grey blankets from the rear of the wagon, and passed one each to Serena and Helen. He dusted each of their backs off first, to avoid getting the blankets dirty. Serena pulled the itchy, rough material gratefully about herself; although by now sadly used to nudity, she knew that she would be less likely to get more unwanted attention if she was covered up. She quickly arranged it so that only her head, hands and lower legs were showing.

The caravan made its way through the narrow streets. Plenty of people passed by, showing a wary interest. The veneer of law and order was very thin in this post-apocalyptic world, and many of them carried weapons for self-defence, mostly sticks, a few knives or even swords and the odd gun. It was quite a mixture. Serena had noticed that the further east she travelled in Australia (having originally landed on the west coast), the fewer guns there were. Something to do with the availability of either bullets, powder or parts, she supposed. She had been looking out for anybody in authority to whom she could appeal for help; she had, after all, been illegally kidnapped! But she did not dare do it in front of Ma or the two men, especially since she doubted whether anybody would help her. She was a child of this world, after all, and knew the nature of the men in it only too well.

Soon they came to a square, where, it now being early evening, Ma declared they would camp for the night and set up shop the next day. It was apparently a market-place of sorts.

“Have yer last night of fun with the girls,” she said to her two lieutenants; “tomorrow we’ll be selling ‘em.”

Needless to say, the two men did not pass up the opportunity.

Chapter Seven

Extract from “A Concise History of the 21st Century” by Aaron Svenson:

“Although society as we understand it collapsed in the wake of the devastating Third World War, some aspects of civilisation remained. The generally accepted theory is that in the dawn of time, it was the concept that had taken ages to form, rather than the mechanics.

“For example, consider currency. In the immediate post-war period, the banking system had gone: stocks and shares were now meaningless and therefore worthless, and in any case most financial records had been held on electronic media which were wiped by radiation bursts. Those whose wealth was invested in such things became impoverished overnight. Most countries then experienced a period of hyper-inflation and the emergence of a bartering system. However, this was inconvenient, and in very different ways countries began to revert to a coinage, especially as the coins were already minted. As the coins were made of valuable metals, they retained a confidence that bank notes did not have, and that combined with the physical fragility of the latter led in most places to coins becoming the only currency.

Because of the initial low value of the coins, there followed either massive devaluation or in some cases an imposed revaluation. Prices varied enormously in different cities at first, and so some travelling traders made huge fortunes out of this, but their action gradually evened the differentials out. By the year 2050, most currencies were reasonably stable.”

The crisp morning air was lovely. Despite the unfortunate condition of her slavery, Serena could still enjoy the beauty of nature, and even in the city the stench of civilisation could not disguise its wonder. Evidently the sewers still worked in this place.

One of the two guards was marching Helen and herself down to the public baths for a wash, not out of consideration for the two now filthy girls, but purely because they would sell better later this morning if they looked their best. Serena had wondered if someone would see their chains and ask questions, but nobody did. Slavery here was clearly accepted, and her hopes of being freed were diminishing once more.

Public swimming baths had once, she understood, been used solely for leisure, but now were also for washing. The guard paid something for the entry for the three of them and they were led to the poolside. At this time of day there weren't too many users. Serena removed the itchy blanket which covered her otherwise naked form, stood placidly whilst her overseer unlocked her chains, and then slid gratefully into the invigorating water. Soap and oils were on hand, and she had soon transformed herself back into a lovely young lady. The pool water was constantly being renewed, so it was a pleasure to swim gently in the cool waves. Eventually she hauled herself out and sat on the side of the pool. Her guard was in no hurry; if he returned early Ma would only find him more work to do, and he could always say that there had been a queue at the baths. He didn't neglect to keep the two girls under observation, though. Serena had considered making a dash for freedom, but she couldn't get out of the place quickly, and the man on the front entrance would probably stop her until the guard caught her up. Anyway, naked and penniless, how far would she get, what would she do? She knew better than to think that there were any authorities here who would help her. At best they would enslave her themselves, at worst return her to Ma, and she didn't want to think what Ma would do to her for running away.

A handsome young man sat down beside her. He wore trunks which revealed a strong, masculine body, just the sort she liked. He discretely looked away from her nudity. She and Helen weren't the only naked bathers: about a third of the users wore no costume, but the two girls were the youngest and most attractive of the nudes. No wonder she had attracted this young man's attention.

“Hello there,” he began. “I haven't seen you around here before. Are you local?”

Serena was silent for a moment, caught slightly by surprise. He obviously fancied her, and she wondered if he might help her escape. She wouldn't mind being very grateful to him, very grateful

indeed. He looked well off; perhaps he had money and power. But her guard was upon them like a shot. Unlike Serena, he had obviously seen this young man's approach. Trying to be as diplomatic as his limited education allowed, he said, "you want something?"

The young man not unreasonably assumed the guard to be a boy friend. He backed off, politely. "Just being sociable," he said gently and evenly. "I didn't want to tread on any toes."

The guard shrugged. "If you want her, come and bid for her in the market." He produced Serena's chains, and the copper-blond beauty resignedly held her wrists out for him.

The young man raised his eyebrows the slightest fraction. "Oh, a slave, is she?" At that moment, his whole demeanour changed. The facade of discretion vanished, and he looked down her naked body with undisguised animal interest. Serena felt crushed; in a split-second, she had gone in his eyes from being an elegant young woman being gently courted, to a piece of meat on sale.

"Up for sale today, if you want her." The guard thought that Ma would be pleased if he did a bit of advertising.

The young man looked Serena up and down candidly. She was too crushed to hide herself, and anyway the guard would only have clipped her round the ear and made her display her charms openly. Then the stranger's hand reached out towards her, stopping just before her chest. "May I?" he enquired politely.

Outraged, Serena was about to retort sharply, "no you may not" when she realised that the request wasn't addressed to her but to the guard. He shrugged and said unconcernedly, "sure." The hand travelled the last few inches and grasped Serena's exposed breast, giving it a painful squeeze. Moments later the other hand found her other breast and she felt herself being kneaded and mauled like dough at the hands of a baker. Any protest she might have made had been silenced by the realisation that neither man had dreamed of eliciting her permission. Around them, bathers carried on with their leisure and ablutions, ignoring them. The guard had called Helen over to similarly re-cuff her, thinking it was time they got back. "This one's up for the block too," he said hopefully.

The young man transferred his attention to Helen, who like Serena had little choice but to stand there and let him look. "Really," he mused, and his strong hands reached out to the teenager, taking hold of and fondling her breasts as casually as if she was a piece of fruit, and with no slightest concern for the girl's feelings. Helen coloured only slightly: like Serena, she was now sadly used to such treatment. After a minute or two he let go and surveyed the two bare girls before him. "How old are they?"

"This one's eighteen," the guard said, indicating Helen, "the other's twenty."

"In the market this morning, you say? I might possibly call by." And with that, he drifted away.

Back in the market, Ma and the other guard had set up their stall. Most of the trinkets they were offering for sale were, Serena knew, stolen from their various raids, but although that would also be fairly obvious to the customers, nobody seemed bothered. She and Helen, of course, had been acquired in a similar way, and now were similarly offered for sale. Naked except for handcuffs, they were tied to the stall by crotch ropes. From what Serena could gather, if a decent bid came in for either of them, they would be sold there and then, and if not they would be put in the auction that afternoon.

For the next few hours both of them were frequently inspected, poked and prodded. Each person who showed an interest could within minutes have become Serena's legal owner, and knowing this, she tried to make herself as alluring as possible to any virile or kindly looking male who came by, but most of them were only window shopping, availing themselves of a free feel. Although both girls were by now quite used to such humiliations, it was most unpleasant. It wasn't painless, either: after a couple of hours, Serena's breasts were aching from being squeezed and mauled.

Then the young man from the baths came by. He took the opportunity to give Serena a good feel, but it was clearly Helen who interested him. After some haggling with Ma, he finally handed over some coins. Ma removed Helen's cuffs, but kept the crotch rope on, disconnecting the end from the stall and offering it to the young man. He departed, leading Helen by the rope as one would a horse. The girls had no chance to exchange goodbyes, apart from a brief tearful look over Helen's

shoulder as she was led away. Serena felt suddenly very lonely; she wondered if she would ever see her friend again.

A few offers came for Serena, but Ma had set her price quite high and rejected them. Consequently, a few hours later Serena found herself being led to a stage area where a small crowd had gathered. The crotch rope had thankfully been removed, but the handcuffs remained; other than that she was still nude. She watched disinterestedly as a succession of girls, equally bare, paraded on the stage and were sold. When her turn came, the cuffs were removed and she stepped resignedly onto the stage, displaying her lithe young charms for the audience. Having no control over who bought her, she took little interest as the bids came in. Eventually she was sold for twenty silver dollars and taken down to a burly man with a beer gut. Taciturnly, he led her away, across the square and down a series of streets until they came to a pub. Apparently he owned it, and she had been bought to work there. She was to become a tavern wench!

Chapter Eight

Extract from “A Concise History of the 21st Century” by Aaron Svenson:

“The trend towards total selfishness that had begun in the late twentieth century was not halted by the devastation caused by World War Three; in fact, if anything it was accelerated by it.

“Protecting oneself and, if it existed, one’s immediate family was no longer a minor concern: with the breakdown of formal law and order it became vitally important on a daily basis. There was scant time for any consideration of moral correctness, let alone concern for total strangers. Where larger groups of people banded together, it was for mutual benefit, and therefore one could not join such a group unless one had something to offer it. What was more, the larger the group, the more easily it would break apart from internal tensions.

“Look after Number One was therefore now an almost universal creed.”

Almost the first thing Serena’s new owner did after purchasing her was to have her branded.

Having taken her back to his tavern, for he was by profession an innkeeper, the man summoned one of his male employees who looked fifty per cent bartender, fifty per cent bouncer, who accompanied them as they set out along the narrow side streets once more. Serena was still naked: she had no clothes of her own, and Ma, the woman selling her, saw no reason to give clothes away with her. Her new owner had said nothing to her, and she had also been silent: what could she say to him? She didn’t like the look of him: if she had been bought as his pleasure slave, then she was in for an unpleasant time. He was overweight, looked crude, irritable and unkind, and was probably nudging fifty years of age. Serena’s history was rather vague, but his age meant that he might have been born before the devastating war which had changed the world so much. She knew that the world had been different before that, although she didn’t know exactly how, nor really cared. It was how the world was now that was important, even more so her life within it. Right now, her life wasn’t too good, but she still had no chance to escape, nor really any plan of what she could do if she ran away. She knew better than to expect any help from either the authorities or people in general. So what else could she do? There was nowhere to hide in a city she did not even know, and if she managed to escape to the desert outside, it would only be for a slow, lingering death from sun, thirst and starvation. And however grim her life currently was, she had no desire to lose it.

They came to a blacksmith’s forge. Serena had not seen any working motor vehicles in this part of the country (in any case they were a rarity anywhere), and horses seemed the main mode of transport, so blacksmiths were quite common. They entered the building, to be hit by a burst of hot air. The smith came over, wiping grimy hands on grubby overalls, and nodded to the innkeeper.

“G’day, Jason,” he said. “Usual?” The innkeeper nodded, and the smith went on, “be a couple of minutes warming the stick up.” He turned back to the furnace and put something Serena could not see to heat.

Minutes passed. The climate in this part of Australia was hot, but in the forge it was hotter still. Serena felt sweat running down her naked body, running in rivulets down between her breasts, trickling from her armpits, gleaming on her thighs. The two men were perspiring even more profusely. Then the smith looked over his shoulder and said to her new owner, “about ready, I reckon.”

Almost immediately, Serena found herself grabbed by the bartender from behind. She gasped in surprise, wondering what on earth this was all about. The grip on her arms was iron-hard: in this day and age men who had to work for a living were often far more muscular than in the past; there were times when Serena found this pleasing, but not now. She struggled for a moment, then gave up temporarily; the man was far stronger than she. But a few moments later she saw the blacksmith, advancing towards her with a red hot iron. Realisation dawned, and with a hysterical scream she began to twist and turn frantically. The man’s grip remained unyielding.

“Shut up, you silly cow,” said the innkeeper, and slapped her face twice, hard. Serena’s scream halted abruptly, leaving her panting with fear, staring transfixed at the glowing end of the metal rod as it came nearer. The innkeeper knelt in front of her, and grabbed her left leg firmly with both hands. His hold was as strong as the other man’s, who now brought his right leg around Serena’s right and pulled it away, forcing her legs apart. Her right leg was pinned, immobile despite her efforts. The blacksmith came closer; she could feel the heat of the branding iron on her thigh. The tip of it, red hot, was fashioned into the simple letter “S”.

“No ... no!”

“Be quiet, unless you want a good whipping,” Jason grated, but his words did not penetrate her mind. Now that the iron was only inches away, however, her struggles ceased as she froze in terror; and then she screamed again in agony as the brand was pressed into the outside of her thigh. There was a loud hiss, and the smell of burning flesh - her own - and then it was gone, leaving a throbbing, burning pain, and a sobbing Serena. The blacksmith inspected his work, pronounced himself satisfied, took the coin Jason offered, and returned to his other work. As soon as the two men let her go, Serena collapsed to the floor, still sobbing, but she was hauled roughly to her feet and propelled out of the forge. She limped back through the streets, her leg very painful. She had a brief chance to look at what had been done: the letter was clearly and crisply defined, the skin a deep purple colour, the brand perhaps two inches tall. There was no question but that it was permanent: she would carry it for the rest of her life.

Back at the tavern, they were met by a middle-aged woman who took Serena into the kitchens. Making her lie down, the woman dabbed iodine on the brand. It stung, and Serena whimpered.

“Oh, shut up,” the woman said, not too unkindly. “Anyone’d think that you were the first girl ever to get branded.” As Serena stared at her, she lifted her ragged skirt to display a similar mark, the same letter in the same place. The brand was evidently years old, but still perfectly clear. Serena burst into tears anew as the finality of what had been done to her hit home, but her weeping was ignored. Her thigh was bandaged up, and within an hour or so she began her new career, serving as a tavern wench.

Chapter Nine

Extract from “A Concise History of the 21st Century” by Aaron Svenson:

“Inevitably, in the lawless post-apocalyptic world after the Third World War, the fact that might now always meant right led to women returning to the state of subservience.

“Indeed, when determined men could take what they wanted by force, pretty women could consider themselves lucky to retain any freedom at all. Many attractive women, unless they had powerful male protectors, either husbands or family, were simply grabbed and enslaved. What law there now was tended to be made by strong men as they carved out little empires, and all too often slavery was either tolerated or even fully legitimised. The only thing preventing a man from seizing any woman walking out alone was the fear she might have a protector whom it did not pay to cross.

“A woman with a slave brand, it followed, was either property or, if a runaway, fair game. Either way she would not evade further slavery.”

“More beer, slut!”

The raucous call was directed at any of the three serving wenches, but Serena was closest to the lounging lout, so with a muted “yes, master,” she hurried off to fetch another mug of ale for him. Hurried, because there were other customers who might call for service at any moment, and she did not dare to keep either him or them waiting.

“Huahh!”

The involuntary gasp escaped her lips as she felt a rough male hand come up under her tiny mini-dress and prod her in her most private area. She was not allowed to wear knickers on duty, so access was very easy; she had on only a ragged dress, exceptionally short at the bottom, and also with a deep neckline exposing plenty of cleavage - and even more when she bent over to deliver the drinks or take an order.

It wasn't the first time she had been probed under her dress tonight, but that didn't make it any easier to take. At the same time as she felt the hand between her legs, the other hand grasped one of her wrists, ensuring that she wasn't going anywhere. The latter hand was more or less superfluous: it had been made crystal clear to her on her arrival here that this sort of behaviour from customers was quite in order, just as she was expected to display “plenty of tit”, as her new owner had described it, when serving drinks. Her own distaste was, of course, quite irrelevant: if she resisted and the man complained, she would be likely to get a whipping, quite possibly in front of the customers, who enjoyed such displays. So far, Serena had managed to avoid such a chastisement, although she'd had the strap a few times for being slow. That had been quite unfair, as she'd been working as fast as she could: but there was no point in arguing about it. She had learnt to take the punishment, enduring the pain as best she could, humbly beg forgiveness (whilst trying to forget the bitterness in her heart), and get back to work, trying to ignore the throbbing after-effects of the leather's kiss.

She could feel the coarse, thick fingers running through her curly pubic hair; then a single finger began to push it's way inside her. Although it was extremely humiliating and unpleasant, she was even more concerned about the other man waiting for his beer. “Please, master,” she breathed throatily, unable to fully resist the effect his attentions was having on her, “another customer is waiting for his drink.” It was an allowable request, she had found, although he was not obliged to accede to it; moreover, the waiting customer, if he became angry with waiting, was entirely capable of punishing her even though the delay was not her fault; hence her concern. Life wasn't fair: but then, she had always known this.

The hand belonged to a gnarled, heavy man of about fifty years. Serena was young enough that she could have been his daughter. He grunted and, to her relief, released her, but the words he spoke were not good news. “Come back and see me later, baby.”

She hurried off to get the drink from the bar, considering the invitation, or more accurately the order. It was a quandary she often faced. If she returned, she would at the very least be in for a

thorough groping, probably a finger fucking as well with this one. If she didn't, then there was a fair chance he would forget about it, particularly if he ended up having a lot to drink or latching onto another of the wenches; but if he did remember, and grumbled to the landlord, she would get a beating and probably be given to him in one of the rooms upstairs as a "freebie". Serena decided to leave it for a while and keep an eye on his table; if he was getting well tanked up, she might risk not going back. She wouldn't have to leave it too long, though, in case he got impatient and sent for her.

The bartender handed her a mug of the frothy warm ale served here - the city had no refrigerators - and she hurried back to the man with it. She went a different way, but even so she felt a hand on her bottom more than once. The tables were close together, and it was impossible not to come within reach of several of them on her way. One man pinched the firm flesh hard. She suppressed a gasp: any reaction usually encouraged the pinchers. Again, it was not the first such pinch she had received tonight.

As quickly as she could, she got to the table. The man who was evidently alone, was tapping impatiently on it. "You took yer time," he said gruffly.

"Sorry, master," she said humbly. "Another customer delayed me."

She might just as well not have spoken. "Can't have slaves slacking," he muttered, and pulled his chair out from the table. "Get yerself over my lap."

Despite the sinking feeling in her heart, Serena did not hesitate. It looked as if she would get a hand spanking, and, whilst it would hurt, it was far preferable to a whipping - which would probably be followed by the spanking anyway. She draped herself over his meaty thighs, silently cursing him, the innkeeper (her owner), the bandits who had kidnapped and sold her and just about everybody else who had contributed to her being here now, herself included. It was a familiar litany. Meanwhile she settled herself down. Bending over caused the tiny skirt to ride up so that her buttocks were almost totally uncovered, but in any case she felt him grasp the ragged hem and yank it right up. Lovely twin globes met his eyes, the skin flawless except for a couple of bruises from pinching and the faintest reminder of a minor strapping two or three days ago. Serena felt a rough male paw caressing her satiny skin and shuddered a little.

Slapp!

A familiar and unwelcome sting spread though her cheeks. Expecting it, she did not cry out, but her breathing became a little heavier.

Slapp! Slapp!

He wasn't being gentle with her: he had a heavy hand and he wasn't holding back much. Sadly, Serena had found this to be normal: there were few gentle men in England, and she had encountered none so far in her brief but regrettably wide experience of Australian men.

Slapp! Slapp! Slapp!

Serena tried to think of something else, but the fresh stinging pain of each stroke kept bringing her back to what was happening to her. In any case, there was little in her recent life more pleasant to think about.

Slapp! Slapp! Slapp!

How many more, she wondered? That was nine so far, and her rear was beginning to throb. This was the stage when the strokes began to hurt more, on a bottom which was now starting to feel delicate.

Slapp! Slapp! Slapp!

The barrage ceased. A dozen, then, she thought: quite a common figure, but just as she began to relax a last and extra hard spank caught her by surprise. "Oof!"

"One for luck, baby," he smirked, and released her.

Not her luck, she thought unhappily, and pulled herself back onto her feet. "Thank you, master," she said a little breathlessly. "I'll try to do better next time." She had found it wise to debase herself a little after such treatment: it was not unknown to be pulled over for another dose. Fortunately, he just shrugged and waved her away.

As she was serving the next group of men, she heard somebody striking up a tune on the battered acoustic guitar that was always kept behind the bar for such a purpose. Few songs were written nowadays, it not being a profitable venture, but many popular tunes had survived, albeit often

approximately, from the days before the war. Serena recognised the opening chords of a very popular one called “Hey Jude”, which always ended in a lengthy sing-along. The singer was a frequent performer and quite good, and the crowd hushed somewhat to listen. At the end of the number, there were plenty of requests for more, as usual.

“Let’s have a couple of dancing girls to go with it,” someone suggested. “You two will do,” he added, pointing to Serena and another girl, Alex.

“Good idea,” agreed another man. “Get yer togs off and get on the table, girls.”

With the faintest of resigned sighs - it didn’t do to show too much lack of enthusiasm - Serena grasped the hem of her dress and in one go lifted it over her head. She wore nothing else, not even shoes; indeed, she owned nothing else, and not even the dress itself, however battered, torn and threadbare it might be. In the centre of the room was a large and solid oak table, usually used for large parties or a gathering of friends. Serena clambered onto the table, aware of plenty of male eyes on her. She was unhappily quite used to being naked before men these days, although being ogled and leered at was still humiliating, but she found having her brand on display had made it quite a bit worse. That brand announced to the world that she was unquestionably, irrevocably, a lowly slave, to be used as men saw fit.

Alex climbed up onto the table to stand beside her, even more reluctantly, her face blazing red with embarrassment. She was only sixteen or seventeen, her nubile young body still developing, her breasts firm but with the hint of greater things to come, her thighs and legs superb with the trimness of youth, her pert bum a great favourite with the spankers. She hadn’t been a slave for long, and although she hated all of it she found the nudity particularly hard to take. She had been taken into slavery quite legally, seized by bailiffs in lieu of her family’s debts. With no other assets, her parents had been unable to prevent it. They still kept in contact by letter, but she was too ashamed to let them actually visit her. Like Serena, she was branded; it seemed almost sacrilegious to Serena to mark such a flawless young body, but of course her opinion counted for nothing. It also seemed even harsher to her than usual for a girl to be enslaved so young: at least she herself had been able to enjoy a couple of years between reaching adulthood and enslavement.

The singer started again with a more upbeat number that Serena didn’t know. She began to sway to the music, then settled into a rhythm, feeling the slight rise and fall of her breasts as she danced. One or two crude comments were shouted from the floor, which she tried to ignore, but it is not easy when you are naked and dancing on a table in front of an audience of some twenty men. Alex was finding it even worse, although this was not the first time either of them had been in this situation. The teenager had long, straight blonde hair which swayed beautifully as she moved jerkily. Her eyes were watery.

They had to do three numbers before the crowd began to get bored and the guitarist started to lose interest. When at last they were allowed to descend from the table, Serena’s dress was not where she had left it. She looked around and saw a man sitting on it. There was no point in even asking for it back; she simply carried on serving in the nude. As always, she had no choice. Alex’s flimsy frock had also been “confiscated”, and she too had to continue her tasks in the altogether. Again, it was not unusual: Serena reckoned that she usually finished up naked about two nights a week on average. She would have to keep an eye on the dress to make sure she got it back when the man went: she would be beaten if she lost it. The gropes, pinches and slaps invariably came thicker and faster when she was nude; one or two men had a favourite habit of stopping her as she went past, winding a single pubic hair around a finger and pulling it sharply free to keep as a “memento”. She had to suffer this indignity without complaint, of course, except for a quiet “ouch” permitted when the hair was actually pulled out. Fortunately, or perhaps not so, not enough hairs had been removed to more than slightly thin out her covering.

Later tonight, once the rush of customers was reduced to a trickle, her owner would be prepared to hire her and the other tavern wenches out for “one on one” work. Money would change hands and some sweaty, uncouth bastard would grasp her wrist firmly and lead her to one of the upstairs rooms to be fucked. If she was lucky, she would only be hired out once; if she was unlucky, she might get three or even four takers. It was just another night.

Serena hurried through the smoke-filled room with a tray of drinks, doing her best to ignore the frequent male hands venturing under her tiny skirt.

She was grateful to be dressed at all, since she often had to serve naked, but her owner believed that not showing off all his serving wenches' charms all the time enticed the customers back more often. Even when dressed, though, as now, she was far from fully covered. She was wearing a very low cut blouse, and it was not uncommon for a leering male customer to reach a hand down the front and pull out a breast or two. The mini-skirt was very short indeed, and underneath it she was not allowed to wear any knickers, so there was scant protection from the roving hands. The skirt was so short that bending even slightly over a table exposed her buttocks, whilst at the front her brand was visible. Apart from those two items of clothing, she wore nothing. The bandages had been removed a couple of days after the branding to reveal a crisp, clear mark, purple-brown in colour. It had ached for a few days, but that had now ceased completely; it felt just as it had before the branding, but the mark was there, and she was very conscious of it.

Serena had been here for a month now. The tavern was a busy one, and during peak periods there were four serving wenches, including herself, on the go. All of them were fair game for the customers, who could pay to take them upstairs or just avail themselves of a free grope or two. Serena hated the humiliation, to say nothing of the tastelessness of it all. Most of the men were also middle-aged with beer guts and receding hairlines, which made it worse.

Of the other three girls, Alex was a slave, branded like Serena: it seemed that all slaves were marked in the same place with the same simple and obvious letter. They didn't communicate much, although they lived under the same roof, in a single room along with the middle-aged woman who acted as the cook, and the bartender who availed himself of their bodies whenever he felt like it. The other two serving wenches were free girls, but were treated more or less the same and had to put up with the same indignities: their families were poor, near starving in fact, and they needed the money, and there were apparently not many jobs for pretty young teenage girls. Both of them, like her fellow youthful slave, were indeed very pretty (or else they wouldn't have got the jobs), but she was easily the most lovely of the four, although she was sufficiently modest not to know it. The two free girls tended to look down on the slaves as social inferiors, and Serena made little effort to get on with any of them. She missed Helen.

Serena's brand made any thought of running away quite pointless. The few laws enforced in this city were made by property-holders for their own benefit, and it was an offence to abet an escaped slave. She wouldn't get very far before being apprehended, whereupon she would be taken to the city jail, for her owner to reclaim her on payment of a small fee, revenge for which he would undoubtedly take out on her hide. The sanctuary of her uncle, wherever his settlement was in relation to this city, seemed a million miles away now.

The brand had also affected her psychologically, making her feel very subservient. She had also come to be as embarrassed to reveal it as she was to expose her most intimate areas of breasts, buttocks and crotch, not that she could afford to be too sensitive about any of them since they were all frequently on show. Like the perpetual groping hands and the frequent customers leading her upstairs so that a sweaty, flabby, gross male body could flap about on hers, humping her and acting as if she should be enjoying it. Serena hated this life: she longed, if she had to be a slave (and there seemed no way out), for the fresh cleanliness of hard labour pushing the electricity wheel or even the long hot march which had led to this disgusting place. Even the raiders' camp had been better than this: although the men used her cruelly and frequently, at least they were fighters, not slack, degenerate city-dwellers. She longed to be elsewhere.

And, for once, her wish was about to come true, at least to some extent. As she served the drinks, ignoring the finger trying to push up her rear passage under her tiny skirt, she was aware of a man at another table coolly appraising her. It was not the leering gaze she was so used to, nor was he like most of the rough, working class boors that congregated here. When she was free, he snapped his fingers and she went over to him. Her standard enquiry of "what can I get you, master?" was ignored,

but when she made to move away - there were other customers to be served, and her owner would not be pleased if she wasted time on a freeloader - he sharply said, "stand still! Take your clothes off!"

She hesitated for a moment, unsure whether her owner would be more annoyed about other customers not being served, or by this one complaining about unco-operative maids. She decided the latter was the worse risk: she'd already had a couple of short but painful beatings in recent weeks for evading particularly obnoxious gropes. Besides, his presence was commanding. Moments later she stood naked before him, embarrassed as much by her brand as her private parts, and also, as she turned around on his command, by her buttocks being red from the slapping and pinching that she suffered every evening, and her dirty bare feet. He regarded her for a moment or two, and then said, "fetch your master."

"Yes, sir," she acknowledged, and hurried off. She was still naked as she traversed the inn, but she was not unused to serving naked; besides, it seemed advisable to obey quickly, and in any case he had not given permission for her to re-clothe herself. Master Jason was busy, but came nevertheless: he considered that customers were to be pleased, and also there were certain men in this city who it did not do to get on the wrong side of. When Serena had led her owner to the table, the stranger said to Jason, pointing at her but speaking as if she wasn't there, "how much did you pay for her?"

"Twenty-five silver dollars," Jason replied, not quite truthfully as Serena recalled; but of course she did not dare say anything.

The man gave no indication of whether or not he believed this; instead, he simply said, "I will offer you forty dollars for her."

Jason thought for a moment, and looked at Serena, who was still naked. She was extremely attractive, but it was a very good price, and there was always the market tomorrow when he could doubtless get a replacement for a good deal less than what was being offered here. "Alright," he said.

Thus it was, a short while later, that Serena padded barefoot along the streets behind her new owner. She was still nude - it seemed the custom to sell slaves without any trimmings or wrappings, and she was reminded once more that she had nothing in the world, aside from her own body. And even that did not belong to her, as the mark on her inner thigh attested for now and evermore. She had escaped the tavern, but what new fate awaited her?

Chapter Ten

Extract from “A Concise History of the 21st Century” by Aaron Svenson:

“Inevitably, in the lawless post-apocalyptic world after the Third World War, the fact that might now always meant right led to women returning to a state of subservience.

“Indeed, when determined men could now often take what they wanted by force, pretty women could consider themselves lucky to retain any freedom at all. Many attractive women, unless they had powerful male protectors, either husbands or family, were simply grabbed and enslaved. What law there now was tended to be made by strong men as they carved out little empires, and all too often slavery was either tolerated or even fully legitimised. The only thing preventing a man from seizing any woman walking out alone was the fear that she might have a protector who it did not pay to cross.

“A woman with a slave brand, it followed, was either property, or, if a runaway, fair game. Either way, she would not evade further slavery.

When Serena had been a tavern wench, it had been her dearest wish to escape from the grasping male hands of the sweaty, overweight, boorish working men who frequented the place.

She had more or less come to terms with being a slave. The experience of being branded had altered her a great deal psychologically. Apart from the very act of it, and the added difficulty it would present in any escape attempt, she would carry the single letter “S” on the outside of her thigh for the rest of her life, and although it was quite high up, it was low enough to be visible if she was to wear short shorts or even a mini-skirt. Any man copulating with her could not possibly miss it.

Other factors also helped her adjust to her new life. For one thing, her previous life had been no bed of roses either. Like most people these days, she had lived since birth under the sufferance of the local lord of the manor, and like most pretty girls was fair game for gangs of marauding young men. Even on her trip across the devastated world from England to Australia, she had been forced to sell her body more than once to eke out her money. Truthfully, she had never really been in full control of her destiny.

So slavery had come as an unpleasant shock, but not so much of a shock as it would have been to the pampered women of the previous century. Not that Serena either knew or cared about history; modern people could not afford such luxury. One had to concentrate on living now. And, no matter how difficult life becomes, the tough adapt and survive. Serena was a survivor.

Still, the tavern had been a decadent, distasteful place. It was not just being the plaything of men that Serena objected to: she could scarcely expect anything else, although that didn’t make it any easier to take. No, it was the type of men who she had to pander to. They were peasants, as she herself had been in her former life in England, true; but they were idle, city dwelling, good for nothing men, who accepted a low station in life and between being bossed about all day in their repetitive manual jobs and nagged by their women at night would escape for a couple of hours and lord it over a naked or near naked slave girl even lower on the social scale than themselves. Serena found herself comparing them unfavourably even with the brigands who had first abducted her. At least they were men, fierce fighting barbarians who decided what they want and took it, as she had found to her cost. But for all the harshness of her time with them, she would far sooner be ravaged by one of them than by the wimps with beer bellies who came to the tavern.

The best, or more accurately least worst, period of her slavery so far had been when she and Helen had worked the wheel to provide electricity for that small farming settlement. Oh, she had not forgotten the drawbacks of that time: the lash, wielded without mercy whenever they slacked off the fearsome pace demanded of them; the mind-numbing exhaustion at the end of the shift, exhaustion which faded only slowly during the eight hours before they were dragged back to the wheel for their next turn; the blazing sun by day and the sweat pouring from their bodies, or the depression of trudging round in the dark at night, or the monotony of their routine. None of this had faded from her mind, nor the fact that even there they were not exempt from the lust of men: but they were better men

than the city dwellers, and their visits less frequent, their ways less perverse, and the single biggest objection Serena and Helen had to being used by them (not that objections counted for anything, or were even allowed) was only that they were always so dreadfully tired, and if they missed out on their rest, their next shift would be even worse ... but there had been a cleanliness about life there, and Serena would far rather be there than either the tavern or where she was now.

The man who had bought her from the tavern turned out to be a scout for some important and rich local man, who owned a harem. Serena's new owner called himself Prince Martin; he claimed the royal title because his elder brother was king of the city, a crown he had created himself after winning control of the place some ten years previously. Whilst the elder brother, King Michael, sought to extend his empire, the younger Prince Martin was content to enjoy the luxuries of life. His scout was always looking for the most beautiful of slave girls to augment the harem, and had clearly spotted the fairly obvious potential in Serena. She had always been very pretty, but once the attendants had got to work, washing off the grime of the tavern, trimming and styling her copper-blond hair, cutting and smoothing her nails, and so on, she was transformed into a stunning beauty. The hair trimming included her pubic hair, which was not completely eradicated but thinned out and shaped into a neat little triangle. She wasn't sure if she preferred her pussy hair like that, but since her opinion was irrelevant there seemed little point in thinking about it. Dressed now in sensuous, semi-transparent flowing robes which offered teasing glimpses of her lovely body, she looked sensational. Before arriving in Australia her hair had been coppery brown, but exposure to the fierce sun had lightened it considerably to its current copper-blond hue. Since (sadly) she had spent most of her time in this new world in a state of total undress, her pubic hair had been similarly bleached, so her "collar and cuffs" still matched. She gazed at a full length mirror in wonder at the almost unknown person staring back.

In another sense, too, she had been changed, specifically since her arrival in this harem. It had been clear from the start that her basic duties were sexual; that is, to satisfy any man who she was given to. This was not strictly prostitution, which can be defined as a free woman selling her own body; in Serena's case it was her owners selling, or rather loaning, their property out. Either way, it was important that the customers were satisfied, and to that end Serena had been thoroughly trained in the art of pleasing a man. The girl who had arrived here was hardly sexually inexperienced, but even so she had now been transformed into a sexual sophisticate.

That training had not been easy, or pleasant. As soon as the beauty treatments had been finished, she had been given over to a handsome woman in her late thirties. This woman was sharply dressed in a leather halter top and mini-skirt, and a brand was clearly evident on her thigh; but although a slave, she was clearly much higher up the hierarchy than Serena, as evidenced by the fact that she carried a cane. Serena was not going to argue with that, especially after the woman had given her an immediate couple of sharp cuts with it to establish her authority.

The woman gave Serena a long lecture on sexual technique. She produced a plastic penis replica for demonstrations, and unhesitatingly stripped off her skirt (under which she wore nothing) to show how each trick was done. Serena had to learn and copy the tricks, and she got several stinging flicks of the cane whenever she got anything wrong or was unenthusiastic about some of the more perverse moves. After several hours, the woman summoned one of the male guards and ordered Serena to pleasure him using the techniques she had learned. Serena had heard some legend that harem guards were eunuchs, but she found that this was undoubtedly not the case. As if the humiliation of a long bout of foreplay followed by a full coupling with the guard, all in front of the woman's critical eye (it didn't seem to bother the guard), was not enough, there followed the cringing embarrassment of a post mortem discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of her performance. By the time that was completed, the guard had recovered and Serena had to give a repeat performance.

This went on for several days. When one guard was played out, another would be summoned to take his place. There seemed to be no shortage of them. Serena would return to her tiny cell at night, feeling sick to the pit of her stomach at some of the things she had been made to do; but any sign of revulsion was ruthlessly dealt with. She was made to study all the pleasure zones on a man, and the many different ways in which they could be stimulated, and then the various areas of her own body

which could be made use of. She learned exactly how to use both her vagina and mouth to maximum effect, and also how her fine breasts could be utilised at the same time.

But worst of all, she was made to sit for several hours a day impaled on a dildo, not in her vagina but up her anus. It was to enlarge her so that her rear passage could be satisfactorily penetrated, and it had been a short and thin pole at first, later replaced by a slightly longer and thicker one. Serena had been horrified when she had first been commanded to put herself onto the thing, and had refused point blank despite the threat of the cane. One severe and extremely painful thrashing later, she tearfully lowered her now welted buttocks onto the greased pole. Never had she felt so low as at that moment. The moment that she felt it slip in between her clenched cheeks, she shot up again, and only after three further slashes of the cane did she lower herself fully onto it, weeping copiously. She spent about two hours each day on the plug, and each day it was an effort (often needing the cane's encouragement) to get herself on it and a blessed relief to get off it. There was some tuition on how to please a man when being buggered, but thankfully, even after the woman had announced after her daily check that Serena was now sufficiently enlarged, she did not get one of the guards to actually do it to Serena. Serena was extremely grateful for this - though it had occurred to her that her anal virginity was being preserved for some specific client - and tried in return to be less reluctant in some of the other fields, even the least pleasant ones.

Serena's basic training took about a week. She never kept an exact count of the days: what was the point? Then she joined the rest of the harem girls. There were over twenty of them, and they spent their day sunbathing, or bathing in the pool, or grooming themselves, all in a sumptuous and large outdoor courtyard. Rich visiting men would wander around, appraising the girls and brazenly choosing one, who would then accompany him to one of the lavish bed-chambers for his pleasure. There were a constant stream of such men, but with so many girls Serena found herself called upon no more than two or three times a day, and sometimes less. At the end of the day the harem girls would be lined up and the cane applied vigorously to anyone whose clients had voiced any dissatisfaction. Serena was caned twice during her first week, once for showing revulsion (when asked to lick a man's arse) and once for just not being good enough. Fortunately (in a way), the woman sometimes observed them in action, unknown to the men, and would be able to give constructive tips on ways to improve their skills. Each girl was very keen to improve, simply to avoid the cane. Serena learned quickly: she took a couple more canings during the next two weeks, and then only one during the next month.

But she found life here scarcely better than the tavern. She wasn't expecting life to be enjoyable by now, of course; and just a couple of rapes a day was not as bad as the nightly groping, pinching and mauling she had got at the tavern; which is not to say that it wasn't still very unpleasant. Also, by day they lived in greater luxury than she had ever known in her life, although by night they slept in cells that were very much more Spartan. Still, she had escaped being the plaything of beer-bellied, drunken slobs to become the plaything of bloated, wheezing rich merchants, most of them old enough to be her father and in some cases even her grandfather. Also, she found the sedentary life grating. Never that athletic in England, she had found the forced marches and the long hours on the wheel since her enslavement here in Australia had awakened in her a thirst for manual labour she had never known before. Perhaps it was her mind's way of trying to cleanse herself after the filthy things she had to endure almost every day, or perhaps the sleek and well-toned muscles she had developed behind the wheel and which now gave a sharper definition to her luscious curves simply cried out to be exercised. Whichever, her chance would come soon enough.

It was another hot, sultry day. Several of the girls were splashing happily in the pool, whilst others were stretched out on the slabs, sunbathing. None of them made any effort to hide their nudity from the two or three men who were wandering round, trying to decide which girls to pick for their entertainment. Most men took quite a long time choosing: that was evidently part of their pleasure. Other slave girls, wearing skimpy briefs and (sometimes) bras or the long flowing diaphanous robes, were busy grooming themselves, combing their hair or manicuring their nails.

Serena sat in the shade, idly watching the sun sparkle off one of the sculpted fountains. She didn't have much to do with the other girls: frankly, they didn't get on with her. She found them snobbish and idle, and the first time she had spoken to them they had made fun of her accent and English roots, dismissing her as being "a lowly colonial". Like most people, Serena knew very little about history, but she was fairly certain that England had never been an Australian colony, in fact it had been the other way round. This provoked hoots of laughter: how could a tiny island have conquered a mighty continent? She couldn't answer this, but she still thought that they were wrong. Relationships had not improved much since then. Although Serena wasn't sure what the date was, by her reckoning she had passed her twenty-first birthday sometime since her arrival here, but she didn't tell anybody. They wouldn't have joined her in celebrating it, nor would she have wanted them to. From time to time, she wondered what had become of Helen, the girl with whom she had shared her earliest days of slavery. It was over six months since she had been kidnapped, and about half that long since she and Helen had been split up.

She must have dozed off - which wasn't uncommon, given the boredom here - because she was suddenly aware of some people standing over her. One was a visitor, as the men who came here to use and abuse the girls were termed, and the other one of the male assistants who attended the visitors. Serena struggled to her feet, as you were supposed to do when being specifically looked over. She wore a silken halter top, through which her nipples showed clearly, and baggy pantaloons, also made of silk.

The visitor regarded her for a moment and then made the slightest of gestures towards her top. Without hesitation, Serena grasped the hem and pulled it up, over her breasts and then over her head, then slipping it down her arms and discarding it. He gazed casually at her now bare tits for a moment, and then made another gesture, lower this time. Immediately she pushed her thumbs into the elastic waistband of the trousers and pushed them down, letting them float down to her ankles and stepping out of them.

"Turn around."

She did so, putting her hands into her long blonde hair and posing a little. This always felt like being in a meat market, but she obeyed without reserve nevertheless. She did not want to be caned.

"I'll take her," the man said offhandedly, his eyes on her but speaking to the attendant. The latter made the appropriate noises and then led the visitor to one of the rooms. Serena followed, without needing to be told to. She padded along barefoot behind them, naked. None of the other girls took any notice: this was happening to all of them, all of the time. It was Serena's first one today, even though it was well into afternoon, although she'd been used twice the day before. She was by now extremely skilful and experienced: she hadn't had the cane in weeks.

The attendant left them alone in the room, which was dominated by the ornate bed. Serena hadn't taken much notice of the man who was about to enjoy her: he was fat, balding, in his fifties, obviously rich, just like all the rest of them, in fact. She helped him to undress, hiding her grimace as every new roll of fat came to light, contrasting with her slim, sleek, youthful body. She tried to put the sight of him out of her mind: it would be just another (unimpressive) prick up her passage.

But as it turned out, that was not quite his intention. Once he was naked, he waved her away and ordered her to lie on the bed, bottom raised. She did so, apprehensively. Would he beat her? Some visitors liked to do that. She cursed her luck, then realised that it was even worse as she felt him push a dollop of lubricating grease between her cheeks. The awful memory of the butt plug came flooding back. Since then, nobody had taken her that way. Until now.

"Nnooo!" It was a quiet but piteous cry, but he was not affected.

"Shut up and relax your muscles," he growled. She buried her face in the bedclothes, breathing deeply from fear and horror. Back home, in the remote Shropshire village from whence she came, this was considered unnatural and disgusting, insofar as it was heard of at all. Serena fought to control herself, but when she felt the man's prick pushing in, she lost control and leapt off the bed.

He looked first surprised, then furious. "Get back here at once!"

She shook her head, unable to speak and totally unable to obey. Getting up, he moved towards her with mounting irritation, but she darted away from him. He changed direction, but she evaded him

again. After three or four attempts which left him red-faced, tired, frustrated and furious, he went to the door and called for the attendant.

It was some moments before he appeared. Problems with the girls were never anticipated. When he entered the room, he found himself unprepared. He looked at Serena and snarled, “do what you’re told or you’ll be thrashed so hard you’ll never forget it.”

Cringing in the corner, Serena shook her head dumbly. She could still feel that grease between her cheeks. She would submit to being raped, assist in that, even, but not to be sodomised. When the attendant reached for her, she darted around him and fled out of the door. She hadn’t a clue where she was going, only that she had to get away. There was mayhem for several minutes before the guards were finally able to catch and hold her.

Several hours later, Serena stood, head bowed and still naked. Her wrists were handcuffed together in front of her, and her ankles also chained. Any thought of a further escape attempt was forestalled by the extra chain leading to a heavy sofa. She was in Prince Martin’s lavish reception room, the first time she had ever been close to her owner. He was receiving a report from the senior attendant. It didn’t sound good for Serena.

“The duke was absolutely livid,” said the attendant. Serena hadn’t known he was a duke. “He said he was humiliated. Partly, I think it was because he didn’t want his preference for anal sex widely known. He demanded we send her to the arena.”

“That might well be the best solution,” mused Prince Martin. He was in his late twenties, and Serena marvelled that someone less than a decade older than her could own so much, this palatial harem and clearly much more money besides, whilst she had nothing, not a penny, not a stitch of clothing, nothing. She didn’t even own her own body. She wondered what the arena was; she had never heard of it before.

“We’ve got to maintain our reputation,” Prince Martin went on. “Also, we must set an example to the other slaves. I think that the arena might be the only solution. How much did she cost when we bought her?”

The attendant consulted a file. “Forty dollars,” he replied.

The Prince grimaced. “We won’t get that much if we sell her to the arena, but the duke is an important customer. Tell him we’ve done as he wanted, and also offer him free use of any girls for a month. I trust you didn’t charge him for today?” The attendant shook his head. “Good. Get what you can from the arena people for this one. Before she goes, of course, have her flogged in front of the other girls, with the duke invited to attend.” He looked at Serena for the first time. “And get one of the guards to bugger her.”

Serena’s head sank even lower. Could life possibly get any worse?

Chapter Eleven

Extract from “A Concise History of the 21st Century” by Aaron Svenson:

“Soon after the devastating nuclear war in the year 2010, all civil authority collapsed in most countries. In most lands, robber barons flourished, and in nearly all countries the only law was the will of the mightiest. It is perhaps therefore not surprising that practices such as slavery surfaced once more, and that most slaves were women. Even amongst free women, their position in society had declined: for example, rape was no longer generally a crime, unless the victim had a powerful husband or father capable of protecting or avenging her. Might, not possession, was now nine tenths of the law.

“Sociologists use this period as evidence for their theories that organised society needs an outlet for violence. Denied the technology to maintain television, which had served as that outlet for much of the previous century, society reverted to an earlier idea, first practiced in an even more barbaric form by the Roman Empire: the gladiators.

Even the most unobservant of watchers would have seen that Serena was trembling.

She had good reason to be frightened. Until two days ago, she'd had an unpleasant but secure life as a harem slave; then she had rebelled when a visitor had wanted to avail himself of her rear entrance. How was she to know that he was a duke? Not that it would have mattered: her rebellion had been instinctive. Her punishment was to be flogged in front of the assembled harem, equally publicly buggered, and then sent to something called “the arena”. She had not the slightest idea what the arena was, and since she had been kept chained up in isolation since her attempted escape, and since the guards who brought her (occasional) meals were uncommunicative, she had no way of finding out. She knew that two of the three parts of the punishment would be awful, and could not escape the feeling that the third would be even worse - something that she was not sure she could even imagine. Tough survivor though she might be, it had occurred to her that she might be better off dead; but even if that idea had been more than a fleeting moment of despair, there was nothing she could do about it. Her hands were permanently handcuffed to a ring in the cell wall.

Nor were they taking any chances when they came to take her to that flogging. Her hands were cuffed in front of her and a guard walked by each side of her. Before taking her out of the cell, they gagged her with a ball gag, straps from which went both over her head and under her chin to meet at the back of her neck. It was not a gag that would be worked loose. Serena had been allowed a shower just before they came for her, but already she was sweating with fear. Her mouth, on the other hand, was dry.

She walked out into the courtyard, blinking in the bright noon sunlight. All the harem girls were there, dressed in their tantalising robes or bikinis or halter tops and arab-style baggy trousers. Nobody was bathing or grooming themselves: all attention was on her. She alone was naked, as she had been since that fateful afternoon. She looked around, seeing only sympathetic faces from the other girls. She had never got on with them, but they were still sorry for her. She looked around to see if the duke was there, but he was not. If he had been, would she have had the chance to beg him for forgiveness - and if she had been given the chance, would she have taken it? She wasn't sure, even now. A little voice inside her was saying, “defy them all: let them do their worst.” But the rest of her mind disregarded that as crazy.

She was led to a large marble stone, just over waist height and at least six feet across. It was too heavy to be moved by hand, having presumably been brought here in the days when such things could be done by machines. Normally it's flat top served as a bathing spot, but there was nobody bathing there today.

They unlocked her handcuffs, but again took no chances, both guards staying close to her. There was no point trying to run, though. Trembling even more now, she leaned over the slab, spreading her arms. There were two rings cemented into the slab, and one of her wrists was locked to

each of these. Then they unshackled her ankles, spread her legs, and chain them well apart. She had not forgotten the second part of her punishment.

The chief overseer stepped forwards, holding the whip. It looked long and heavy. Only now did Serena's self-control slip: frantically, she tugged at her bonds. They did not yield an inch. She tried to beg, plead, but nothing escaped the gag except "mmumehggumuhfumff!"

She had never felt anything like that lash. The first stroke was agony, her bottom exploding into pain. By the fourth, she was screaming into the gag. By the tenth, that had subsided into a hoarse gasping. The second ten strokes were on her back, and the four final ones across the backs of her thighs. They had a bucket of cold water ready in case she fainted, but somehow she did not. Every fibre of her body was wracked with pain. They left her that way for some ten minutes to recover her senses. The pain diminished only slightly. Then, she heard one of the guards step forwards. She could not see who it was, but she knew what he was about to do. This would be to teach her that there was absolutely no profit in her resistance. They showed sufficient mercy to lubricate her, but her thoroughly welted back, buttocks and thighs ensured that it was a painful experience as well as a very degrading one. Afterwards, she was released from her bonds and escorted as she walked, with some difficulty and great discomfort, back to her cell.

Serena was allowed several days to recover from her flogging. One of the other harem girls was also permitted to come and put soothing cream on her wounds. After three days, stiff and sore and with still visible marks, she was handcuffed once more and marched from the harem. Although very nervous about her unknown fate, she did not look back. However, she did not forget that she had gained one thing during her time there: she was now a trained pleasure slave, even if that was not her actual current status. She also retained some of the beauty treatments she had received there, most notably her styled hair and manicured nails. Once more, she was leaving a temporary home as she had arrived: naked.

The guard took her to what had once been a football ground. Serena had seen such places in England, and knew that before the war, when (apparently) everybody had plenty of leisure time, people used to go to watch matches. Football had survived into her era, and a few old men talked of other games like cricket and rugby, although virtually nobody young enough to play these games actually knew anything much about them.

The inside of the ground, however, was not what she had expected. Most of the pitch had been built on, leaving only a small area of grass, maybe a quarter of the original pitch, in front of the main stand. Concrete stands had been built around it, below which were a maze of tunnels through which she was led. The whole place looked depressingly secure: there was a guard on the entrance to the ground, and other exits were locked and bolted.

Serena was led into a room, and immediately felt as if she had descended into Hell.

There were about a dozen women in the room, most either naked or very skimpily dressed in rags. All were branded as slaves. Ages varied, she would guess, from late teens to early thirties. None of them were more than moderately attractive, and one or two considerably less so, although all had well-shaped bodies; but the thing she noticed about them above all else was that they were hard-looking, almost vicious types. Most of them had marks or bruises to indicate that they had recently been in fights of some sort; one or two had what looked to be permanent scars. Serena was conscious of her comparatively soft, luscious body, her outstandingly beautiful face and her styled, coiffured hair. So evidently, were they, because she got quite a few hostile looks straight away.

One woman stepped forward. She had "leader" written all over her, and to confirm this she was the only one fully dressed. About thirty, she had an evil sneer from which Serena shrank. Even her voice was harsh. "This the new girl?"

"Yes," said Serena's escort. "My orders are to leave her with you." With a nod to the woman, and without a word to Serena, he turned and left. Serena felt very alone.

Some of the women were on benches, having bruises or welts treated with soothing cream or being massaged. The three or four who weren't began to crowd around Serena. The leader spoke.

“Welcome to the home of the damned, honey,” she sneered. “My, but you’re a pretty one, aren’t you? We’ll soon knock that out of you. Pretty girls don’t belong here: they get bought up by lecherous sods or sent to the harem.”

“I ... I was in the harem,” stammered Serena. “But I rebelled. They sent me here.”

“And you don’t rebel here, girl, not if you know what’s good for you. My name is Rose, and I’m boss here. Unless you feel like taking my place?” Serena shook her head quickly. “Good. Now, do you know what this place is?” Again Serena shook her head. “Well, twice a week the arena above is full of people. Mostly men, but not all. They come to watch us fight and suffer. You’re going to be a gladiator. And we’ll start off by making you look like one.”

They sat her in a chair. Thoroughly frightened, Serena did not resist, but it turned out they were only going to cut her hair. Roughly, they chopped and hacked at it until most of the copper-blond locks had gone. They left a short, uneven crew cut. They were just finishing off when a male voice boomed, “what the Hell do you think you’re doing?”

All of them jumped, even Rose. “Just getting her ready,” she said uncertainly to the man who had entered the room. “We thought that she wouldn’t look much of a fighter with that long hair.”

“She wasn’t supposed to,” the man replied angrily. “We were going to bill her as beauty against the beast, with one of you sluts as the beast. I’ve a good mind to thrash the lot of you. Now get back to work.”

Showering Serena with looks that could almost kill, they did. It was not a nice welcome.

Twelve girls marched naked into the arena.

The shows were held on Wednesday evening and Sunday afternoon. On this occasion, the first one for Serena, it was the midweek show. This was preferable, because in the evening the temperature was quite reasonable, whereas in the early afternoon the arena was a sun trap, and, with no shade, baking hot. The audience, of course, had plenty of shade, not to mention loads of lovely cool drinks!

Serena looked around as she marched out. There was a large crowd, not far short of capacity, two hundred or so, she guessed. They were a lot closer to the arena itself than she had realised, sadly (for her) close enough to see every feature of her naked beauty. Close enough, no doubt, to see how frightened she was. She had been briefed on the proceedings, so she knew what to do, and of course the unpleasantness of doing it had to be put aside. But at the very best she was in for a rough evening; and at worst ...

They had to warm up first, standing in a circle facing the audience. Some of the exercises were not a problem, but others were obviously designed for the enjoyment of the men watching: running on the spot, so that breasts, firm though they were, bounced up and down; on their heads and shoulders, backs raised off the floor, doing upside-down cycling (quite impossible to hide her most intimate areas); leg spreads, and bridging with legs wide; and lying on backs, stretching legs over heads until feet just touch the floor, legs apart again, of course. Each exercise had to be carried out with the most intimate view towards the audience, and after each one they had to rotate in order to humiliate themselves in front of a fresh section of the almost entirely male crowd. Aware that their trainers (of which there were three, hard and merciless) were watching, and that they had canes, which they would not hesitate to use after the show, none of the girls dared to hold back. Serena degraded herself fully, face flushed. Some of the other girls looked very embarrassed too, particularly the younger ones, others at least appeared indifferent, or at least resigned. Serena could already feel herself very much at the centre of attention, not just because she was new but also because she was easily the most attractive of the girls, even with her copper-blond hair roughly cropped.

After the warm-up, the programme was to start with a series of “athletics” races, each between four girls. In each case, the girls were “encouraged” to work hard by the fact that the last girl would be caned and, slightly less effectively, the winner would get some small privileges between now and the next show. Serena was in the first race, which was a straight-forward sprint around the arena, specifically around the four sides of a square, marked by four posts embedded in the ground.

She lined up with the others, but as the whistle went to start the race, someone stuck a foot out and she went sprawling. She managed to keep her feet, but only just. A quick glance at the umpire's grinning face left her in no doubt that such tactics were quite acceptable, but fortunately she wasn't slowed up much and was level with the other girls when they got to the first post. That was regrettable, because two of them sandwiched her and she got a sharp dig in the ribs, then was prevented from turning so that she ran straight into the wall. She wasn't injured, but she had to start up again, now some way behind the others. However, her long, tapering legs served her well, and she began to catch up with the back two girls - one other was now well ahead. However, now rather wiser, she hung back from them at the third post to avoid another, and overtook the third girl on the home straight to keep out of trouble.

When she saw the other two races, Serena was grateful to have been in the first race. The second race was again a sprint, but each girl had two pegs attached to her nipples, from which hung small weights on the end of pieces of string some five inches long. The nipple clips themselves undoubtedly hurt - Serena watched each girl in turn wince as they were applied - and the weights made that worse, but the most devilish part was running with them, because no matter how smooth a girl could run, they inevitably jiggled up and down, and when the strings went taut on the down movement each girl would gasp or grimace in pain. It was, as one would expect, slower than the first race, but not too slow, because the loser would still get caned just as severely.

The third race also used two pegs on each girl, but this time they were attached to the unfortunate victim's sex lips, and the strings were far longer, so that they trailed on the ground behind the runner. Rather than weights, this time they were tin cans on the ends of the strings. There was a similar regular jolting pull from the pegs, but the worst was if a runner behind stepped on the string. If that happened, the peg would be yanked off very painfully. There was an advantage to this, in that the girl would then be able to move faster and less uncomfortably, but on the other hand the pain of having the peg yanked off was considerable. Three of the four girls had at least one pulled off during the race; Serena discretely looked at the sex lips of one of them, and saw that they were bruised and puffy where the peg had come off. Only the last girl had not lost a peg, and she had her own worries with her imminent caning. Possibly worse, the canings would come at the end of the show, so that each of the losers had her punishment hanging over her all the way through.

Next on the agenda was a mud-wrestling competition. All the girls were ordered into a pit of slimy ooze, from which it would simply be the last person still in who was the winner - and the first two out would go on the caning list. Needless to say, the three already on the list were extremely anxious not to earn a double dose!

Serena stepped into the pit, feeling the strange sensation of the mud between her toes and around her ankles. Her plan was simply to try to stay out of trouble as long as possible, and of course avoid being one of the first two out, but she found it difficult with so many nude female bodies around her. Suddenly she felt an elbow dug sharply and viciously into the small of her back; at the same time, a leg snaked across the front of hers and she went tumbling into the mud. Instinctively she closed her eyes, but her mouth was open with a gasp of pain from the elbow, and she got a mouthful of gunge as well as some up her nose. The two women who had ganged up on her gave her several malicious kicks in the kidneys and chest. Had they not been barefoot, they could quite possibly have broken a rib or two: she was learning that these viragos played for keeps. Then between them they picked her up and slung her out of the pit. Luckily, other women were being ejected quite quickly, and more than two were pushed out whilst she was writhing on the floor. She was still safe from the cane.

Serena stood facing the audience - an obligatory position when not otherwise engaged - and wondered why some of the men watching got a kick out of seeing her caked in slime. Eventually only one woman - Rose - was left in the ring. The girls were all lined up against the high wall on one of the arena's four sides and hosed down in numbing cold water. Still dripping wet and shivering despite the warmth of the night, they were ready for the next stage of the night's entertainment.

This was a series of individual torments, one for each girl. Some of them were very violent, others painful, and, if a girl was lucky (!), only extremely degrading. One girl had to stand between two marks about four feet apart on the wall and dodge as selected members of the audience kicked

footballs or threw tennis balls at her. Since there were quite a few missiles heading towards her at any one time, it wasn't easy, and all of them came at her with considerable force and velocity. Unfortunately for her, one football caught her in the abdomen, and she dropped to the ground winded, where she was an easy target. All she could do, until she was sufficiently recovered to get to her feet, was hide her face and breasts and take the blows everywhere else as best she could.

Another girl had to play what they called "Russian roulette" by picking six cards from twenty laid out for her on a table. Half the cards were "free" cards, the others detailed various punishments to be carried out on her: whip on tits, or tummy, or fronts or backs of thighs, ass or back and so on. The relief on her face contrasted with the disappointment of the audience each time she picked a "free", but on the other hand the shriek of horror when she turned over "whip on tits" more than made up for their earlier disappointment.

And so on it went. One girl had her legs tied to two movable posts, which were then separated until she was doing the sideways splits upside down. "Better start practising stretching exercises, honey," whispered Rose in Serena's ear sneeringly. Although it was intended as a taunt, Serena took it as a serious suggestion: it would be agony to be made to do that if she wasn't supple enough. Of course, the light whip being used on the girl's exposed cunt was pretty painful anyway, to say nothing of her shame at the way she was being exposed.

The audience obviously liked a bit of sex, because one of the girls had to submit to being fucked by one of the trainers in full view of the whole audience. It didn't bother the trainer at all!

Serena's own display, one of the last, was comparatively not too bad. She later found out, worryingly, from one of the trainers that the stage manager wanted the beautiful new girl to be dealt with lightly the first week and receive progressively more extreme deals in later shows, to entice the audience back as often as possible. That was not a nice thought for her. It wasn't as if she got off scot free on this night, either: they pushed a crudely fashioned imitation penis up her - to cheers from the audience as it disappeared from view - and secured it with straps. Then she was made to jog six times around the square, each trainer giving her a stinging slash with his belt on her rear as she went by. The sensation of the dildo inside her as she ran had an inevitable, and under the circumstances unwelcome, effect on her, and by the end of the last lap her nipples were rock hard, her mound swollen. Highly embarrassing, of course. Her bottom also hurt quite a bit: they hadn't been gentle with the belts.

After these individual tortures came the final contests. The girls were arranged into six predetermined pairs. In each case the loser, in addition to everything else, got six strokes of the leather, but losing could be pretty painful anyway. One pair fought with short whips, one with canes, one pair boxed (thankfully with gloves); two pairs fought with wooden swords, the ends of which were tipped with hot wax, so that each touch score brought a howl of pain from the recipient. That one seemed to be very popular. Serena's turn came last, and it was a bare-handed wrestling match.

She faced her opponent in the centre of the arena. Already there were plenty of shouted comments from the crowd, crude, unfeminine jibes that she tried to ignore as best she could. Her opponent was one of the lightest and least tough looking of the group of girls, but Serena knew that all of them were hard-bitten and mean street-fighters. She was very nervous.

And with good reason. From the moment the whistle went, the girl flew at her, snarling and clawing. She grasped one of Serena's tits and twisted and squeezed it, and as that distracted Serena the girl brought a knee up between Serena's legs. The pain of that strike brought Serena to her knees, and the real violence began. The crowd loved it. By the end of it, she was covered in bruises and scratches, lips puffy, one eye blackened; and then she had to bend over for the leather as the loser. Still, it could possibly have been worse: the five earlier losers were now chained to the posts and mercilessly caned as the finale of the show.

But as the exhausted, aching and battered girls trooped out of the arena, the crowd did not disperse. Serena soon found out why. The girls were marched to the main entrance, where they were chained against the sides of the entranceway, six on each side, secured to the wall by a neck chain and with their wrists handcuffed behind them. Only now did the crowd leave, pausing on the way out to grope and maul the helpless girls. Serena, like all the others, was groped, poked, finger fucked, her already sore nipples tweaked, the odd pubic hair yanked painfully out as a souvenir. A couple of the

more romantic men even gave her a kiss - French, of course. Even the tavern had been nothing compared to this.

As the last of the punters departed, and the girls waited to be unlocked, Serena whispered to the girl next to her, "is it always like this?"

"Every single show, twice a week," replied the other girl grimly. "Welcome to Hell, baby."

Chapter Twelve

Extract from “A Concise History of the 21st Century” by Aaron Svenson:

“Fifty years after the Third World War in 2010, there was still no effective police force, nor would there be one for some time to come. The onus was therefore on the individual to protect himself or herself.

“As women were physically less able to do this than men, their place in society became in most cases more subservient. But for men, fighting became an important art. In some areas, guns were still widely available, but in others, where there was no natural source of gunpowder or a suitable alternative, they disappeared entirely, replaced by sticks or even swords.”

It has been said before during these chronicles that Serena was a survivor.

She now needed that inner strength like never before. Life in the gladiators’ school was unbelievably hard. Twice a week, shows were laid on in front of a large and predominantly male crowd varying from a hundred and fifty to just over two hundred. In these shows the girls were made to fight each other, compete with each other, and suffer incredible degradation. In her six months of slavery, Serena had already been humiliated many times, but nothing like this. The fact that they did the shows naked was the least of their embarrassments.

But it wasn’t just the shows. The other girls were all evil and spiteful to each other, but even more so to her. The main reason that she suffered particularly was that they all knew that she had previously been in a slave harem. They therefore regarded her as a “pampered snob” - a quite unfair suggestion - and the fact that she was unquestionably far prettier than any of them made it worse. She was jostled, her toes “accidentally” trodden on, her food spilt on the floor. She would be dozing fitfully at night, naked as always (few of them ever wore clothes down here) in her corner of the room they all shared, on what little of the straw she could find, when a bucket of cold water would be tipped over her. And in the twice weekly shows, there were plenty of girls looking forward to fighting her, or accidentally tripping her up in one of the races, or anything else they could do. The format of the shows varied from week to week, but there was always plenty of scope for them to get at her.

So Serena learnt how to fight.

The trainers spent about half of their time either lazing around or taking sexual advantage of the girls, but they were ex-soldiers, bodyguards or similar and other half was spent teaching the girls to fight: the audience preferred good fighters. Serena became an eager pupil. She quickly identified the most knowledgeable of the trainers and attached herself to him as discretely as possible. It was difficult to bribe him to give her extra help, as she had nothing to bribe him with: he could already take her body any time that it suited him (which meant quite frequently), and even her harem-learnt skills could be demanded under threat of the whip or cane. However, she made every effort in her power to please him when he raped her, and was relieved when he was sufficiently pleased with her effort to pay her extra attention. It appeared that she was lucky, because he was a considerable expert in fighting, a veteran of many campaigns. She worked hard herself, too: when the obligatory training sessions were over and the other girls slouched back to their communal cell and massage room, Serena stayed on, doing extra practice. They were either too thick to realise what she was doing, or they didn’t care; probably the former.

She had certain advantages, too: she was naturally well balanced and coordinated, and the many long hours she had spent pushing the electricity-producing wheel had left her fit and unexpectedly strong. She became adept at wrestling, and fighting with sticks, and boxing, and could wield the whip well; but the most important one was learning the sword. In the shows, the girls fought with wooden swords tipped with hot wax, so that being touched with one was very painful. Serena’s guard soon became unbreachable, and she could pierce any opponent’s defence at will.

Even with her new skills, the arena shows were still very very hard. She began to rarely, then never lose bouts in the fighting, but in the other competitions it took a lot longer to learn how to avoid

being ganged up on, and she suffered the cane more than once. In the individual slots, too, she was both tortured and degraded in ways she would not care to remember. How the trainers decided who got what, she didn't know, but she certainly got no favours. Actually, it might have been the show "director", who they rarely saw, and not the trainers at all, who decided their fate for each show. She wasn't sure; and of course nobody bothered to tell them.

She was able to fight, too, outside the shows when she needed to. She had a couple of scraps with one or two of the other girls, who didn't realise until they closed with her just how fast and strong she now was. After that, she was left alone a bit more. Rose, the leader, was more of a problem: Serena had to tread a tightrope, subservient enough to the woman not to threaten her position as leader, yet independent enough not to suffer at her hands. When she got it wrong, Rose would set two or three of the others on to her, but soon they were reluctant to follow their leader's orders: even when Serena lost a fight against superior numbers, she was still able to hurt each of her attackers. As time went on, the girls gave Rose more and more excuses when she ordered them to ambush Serena: injuries from the last show was the most common excuse. Rose would have been far more concerned had it not been for the fact that Serena made it clear she didn't want to usurp Rose's position as leader: she just wanted to be left alone.

Serena's copper-blond hair grew back after it had been chopped short on her first day. The trainers allowed her - ordered her, in fact - to wear it long, and even brought the harem stylist in to cut and shape it. This made her life in the cells even harder, but the audiences at the shows loved it.

A problem which arose was that Serena's new-found ability to fight, plus the aggression she had to show with it, made it more difficult to submit to the trainers. She incurred the cane and whip more often for reluctance or truculence, and she even began to feel the returning of the slightest slivers of pride, which made the twice weekly degradations in the shows even harder to take. And life in the cells was miserable: the food was bad, the company worse, the accommodation worse still, and the shows a nightmare. Also, she always had to be on her guard against the other vixens. Serena had been here for two months, and there was no way she wanted to spend God knows how many years here, especially since she had so far been able to avoid any permanent disfiguring. But unlike the tavern or harem, nobody was going to come along and buy her. Arena slaves, she had found out, weren't ever sold: they were regarded, not unreasonably, as too savage. The only way out was escape.

Serena began to lay her plans. Once out of the stadium, she would have to get out of the city: her brand ensured that it was impossible to masquerade as a free woman, and anyway the guards would be looking for her. The only way out was on horseback - she would never get far on foot. She also needed a weapon. She had never seen a gun here, so the next best thing was a sword. That was the advantage in her arena training: two months ago, she would not have had a clue how to use any weapon. Once she got away from the city, well, even if she was captured somewhere else and forced back into slavery, anything would be better than the arena.

And then the perfect opportunity arose: it was announced that they were to perform for the king.

This meant going to the palace, because the king did not see fit to come to them. The palace guards, if they were anything like the harem ones (the harem adjoined the palace, so this was quite likely), were used to timid and weak slave girls. They were in for a shock, she thought with a smile. Her next job was to set up a diversion. She got two of the youngest and (she hoped) most gullible girls, both of whom suffered badly from bullying as well as the other horrors of their current status. "I have a plan to get the three of us out of here," she told them in great secrecy. "If at some early stage of the performance, we dive on King Michael and pleasure him, he might move us into his harem." She told them exactly what to do: one of them would smother him in kisses, another go for his penis and begin to suck it, and she would persuade the guards that it was all part of the show, before joining in. Then, in equal secrecy, she told a couple of other girls of the plan, and suggested that they could use the opportunity to make a run for it out of the front entrance.

The day of the performance arrived. The girls were escorted in chains to the palace. Serena noted carefully the layout, some of which she already knew from her stint in the harem: she had occasionally been summoned to help entertain palace guests. Her escape route was already planned, but she checked it carefully for any unforeseen problems as they prepared. She could see none.

The king was on his cheap and rather gaudy throne. Serena had never seen him before: the king of the city of Torton, where she had lived (against her will) for nearly six months now. He was about forty, but looked fit, strong and iron-willed, as anybody who had battled to carve out his own empire would be expected to be. His hair was red, with a bushy beard, and a fierce deep voice. Nearby, at another seat, she recognised Prince Martin, the owner of the harem, who had condemned her to this place. He was a few years younger, more softly spoken and with dark hair and no beard, going thin on top, in fact, but he was no weakling either. He recognised her, and looked amused to see her. She tried to mask the look of hatred in her eyes, in case it put him on his guard.

The show began. As it was for royalty, they wore pegs on their nipples from which dangled tiny bells. Serena's hair had been freshly styled and tied with ribbons, and the other girls also looked their best. They went through the usual humiliating warm-up. At the end of it they made their move: Serena didn't want to wait until they were tired. The two girls and she had arranged to be facing the king, and now they darted forwards. By the time the startled guards moved to intercept, the two girls were on him, one smothering him with kisses and the other fumbling with his zip. Serena had been amused that the two of them had swallowed her tale: being bonked in public with the resultant loss of royal dignity was hardly going to please him!

As soon as those two girls had made their move, three more at the back began moving towards the main exit, again as Serena had planned. It was fairly strongly guarded, and they soon got into difficulties, but, once committed, they had to carry on. Their punishment if they failed would not be pleasant, especially for shaming the trainers in front of the royal court.

Taking advantage of the double diversion she had engineered, Serena moved in another direction, a more minor door which she knew led to the harem. Only one guard stood nearby, which was exactly what she wanted, for she needed the sword hanging from his side. As she moved towards him, he faced her with a grin, which changed as she swung a weak and clumsy left hand punch at him. He lazily parried it, but just did not see the follow-up right, now with all her power and skill, which drove into his midriff. As he doubled up, the left, now also moving with beautiful smoothness, smacked into his jaw. He collapsed to the floor and took no further interest in proceedings for some time. Instantly, Serena had his sword out from its sheath and swung it around in a wide arc. Spectators fell back in a mad panic, hampering the other guards as they tried to get to her. Other guards were pulling the two young girls off the king, and the three who had tried to run for the main entrance were being rounded up with some difficulty, but Serena's path was clear. She wrenched open the door and was about to hurtle through it when a male voice called, "oi!"

She turned. Prince Martin stood there, sword in hand. Because the area around his seat had been free, he had been unencumbered in getting to her. Serena instantly weighed up the situation. He was not between her and the door, but if she turned to flee he could disable her with ease. He stood challenging her, and by the way he held the sword she knew that he was no novice with it.

Immediately, she made the only decision she could and flew at him. Again everybody else fell back before the flashing blades. Her onslaught was fast and furious, and far more expert than he had anticipated. Unable to get off the defensive, he blocked her first three cuts, but the fourth got through and buried itself into the side of his neck. He was dead before he hit the floor.

There was a horrified gasp from the crowd. Even Serena paused, stunned. She had never killed a man before, of course. For a second nobody moved or spoke. Then King Michael broke the spell with a thundering shout: "I'll make the man who captures her rich!"

Serena was roused from her stupefied state. She darted through the doorway, and shut the door behind her. The bolt slid home. As she raced down the corridor, pulling the pegs off her breasts with one hand and clutching the sword in the other, she heard the thumping of shoulders on the door behind her. It was not a heavy door, and it wouldn't last long.

She emerged from the corridor into another, and turned left, heading for the royal stables. Every second counted: if the guards realised where she was going and got there first, she was finished. Then she cursed as two guards came into view, escorting two harem slave girls somewhere. Without pausing in her stride, she tore into them, maximising her advantage of surprise. One was immediately disabled by a kick in the privates and then a left uppercut, and as the other grasped her wrist she swung the flat of her blade into his stomach, then grasped the wrist and twisted. He

screamed in pain as the joint was locked. The two slave girls screamed in terror and ran off. Serena wondered fleetingly whether either they or the guards remembered her, and smiled, then set off again. She reached the stables, grabbed the first saddled horse she saw, unwrapped the reins, and mounted it. She guided it out of the stables, but just as she went into the street the king and several guards spilled out from the palace entrance. The king glared at her, his presence dominating the scene.

“You killed my brother!” he roared. “I’ll see you flogged to death if it’s the last thing I do!”

“Go to Hell!” Serena roared back, and gave her horse a kick in the ribs. It bolted, and it was the biggest in the stables. Serena, who had done only the tiniest bit of riding back in England, could only hang on and manage to semi-steer the beast, but it suited her. They raced through the streets towards the city gate and freedom. If the sentries on the gate had any idea of stopping her, they quickly changed it and fled for cover rather than get trampled. Serena and her mount hurtled off into the early evening desert.

She was free!

Chapter Thirteen

Extract from "A Concise History of the 21st Century" by Aaron Svenson:

"The devastation caused by the Third World War in 2010 was far from uniform, and so too was the level of technology in the splintered societies that survived the conflict.

"In countries where communities had been spread over a small geographic area, such as England, technology levels evened out somewhat during the next fifty years, but in more widespread areas such as America and Australia differences from settlement to settlement tended to grow larger rather than diminish."

"Overall, these differences were huge. Whereas cars and even aeroplanes still worked in some places, and electricity and running water were available, in others it was horse-drawn carts and swords rather than guns."

It was around noon on her fifth day of freedom when Serena finally reached her destination. It hadn't been as easy to find as she had anticipated, and her lack of skill in the saddle had further slowed her. On the other hand, she had made progress in another way, for she had completely lost the guards who had been chasing her. They couldn't follow her trail in the dark, and by morning the desert winds had covered it over; but she still needed to put as much distance between her and Torton as possible.

Also, she was no longer naked. On her journey, she had come across a small caravan of traders, and after some hesitation had approached it warily. There were four men in the caravan, one driving each of the three wagons pulled by pairs of horses, and the fourth on a horse, probably acting as sentry. They were as on guard as she as she approached, but even so, when she faced them the lust in their eyes was glaringly obvious as they stared at her naked body. No doubt they also noted the slave brand on her thigh, but the sword she held by her hip would not have escaped their attention either. She took care that all four remained within her sight, and that they did not surround her.

"Will you look at the chassis on that," one of the men murmured. Serena ignored him: she had been ogled by enough men to be at least reasonably able to do so.

Another, more intelligent of them spoke to her. "You're an escaped slave." It was a statement, not a question, and given her brand she could hardly deny it.

She replied simply, "so?"

His eyes moved to the sword, and he decided not to pursue that line. "What do you want from us?"

"Clothing and food," she replied evenly.

"One sword against four of us, and you think you can rob us?"

"No, I've got money: I'll pay for what I want. The sword is only in case you get any bright ideas."

The one who had made the earlier comment about her body spoke again. "I think there's a better way you could pay us, honey," he growled, gazing at her ripe young tits.

His meaning was obvious, and Serena found herself tempted. It was not that she fancied any of them - far from it - but she would have liked to have conserved her stolen gold. She had come across a lone, fat trader earlier and, with little compunction, robbed him. He had quickly found his sword to be no match for hers. More fool him, she thought, for travelling unarmed.

She looked at the men. After the uncountable multitude of rapes she had suffered during the long months of her slavery, four more pricks up her wouldn't have made much difference. However, she could see no way of defending herself whilst one of them was taking her, and they would make a fat profit by grabbing her, taking her gold for themselves, and returning her to the city, enjoying her frequently on the way, of course. There was often a reward for the return of an escaped slave, but they

would be astonished and over the moon when they discovered the price that was likely to be on her head now. It wasn't worth the risk. She shook her head.

"Sorry, boys, but that's not on offer, and anybody who thinks they can change my mind will have to talk to Excalibur here." She patted the sword meaningfully. She had heard of a sword called by that name before, some legend that she couldn't remember, and it seemed like a good name.

An hour later, she was on her way once more. She had left them still nude, but with the clothes in one of her saddle bags, and only dressed once she was sure she was not being pursued. Now she wore a smart green singlet vest tucked into matching mid-thigh shorts, which were long enough to conceal her brand - she had chosen them specifically with that in mind. Functional sandals completed the picture, along with the sword, of course, which was now in a scabbard belted around her hip. Her other saddle bag contained a good store of food and water, which was just running out when she arrived at the settlement she had been searching for, the only place she could think of to go. It was the place where months ago she had slaved at the wheel.

There was no way of approaching the settlement without being seen, and nor did she particularly want to. As she rode up to the gate, two men on horseback came out to meet her. Noting to herself that they were far better riders than she, Serena realised that if this didn't work she would be in trouble. She remembered both the men: they were fair, reasonable and probably trustworthy. It was partly those qualities, possessed by most of the people here, which had drawn her to this place.

Both of them found her vaguely familiar, although they couldn't place her at first. She wasn't too surprised: it had been over nine months earlier, and they had never seen her fully clothed. Slowly the penny dropped. One of them said cautiously, "don't we know you?"

"Yes," she replied gently. "I've been here before."

Still they hesitated, but then the same one said, "aren't you a slave?"

"I was," Serena replied very precisely.

The man noticed the emphasis she placed on the tense. He was easily the more astute of the two. "And now you're an escaped slave on the run," he hypothesised.

"Could be."

The other man was getting nervous. She tried to remember if he had mistreated her: it was hard to keep track when she had been abused so often. "If you've come here seeking revenge ... " he began.

She smiled faintly, and was relieved inside that she still knew how to. "No," she replied, "I don't bear you any grudges."

"Then what do you want?"

"Somewhere to stay for a while, and food to eat, and a stake to earn."

The first man stared at her, surprised. "Are they searching for you?"

"That's my business," Serena replied without expressionless.

"Are you branded?"

Serena coloured. "Yes," she said quietly. "But," she added after a pause, "that's from the past. I'm not a slave any more."

The man did not reply, but regarded her thoughtfully, no doubt wondering why a mere escaped slave should be worth the effort of a major search. The other one said, "how do you plan to earn all that?"

Serena had anticipated that question, and knew that realistically there were only two answers, prostitution or the wheel. "No matter how hard you worked us, you never had enough electricity from that wheel," she recalled.

Both of them raised eyebrows. The first man said, "but we already have three male slaves turning it. One of them replaced you and your friend, as I recall."

She nodded. "But you'd get more current if you had four teams, working harder but for shorter periods," she pointed out.

He knew this to be true, but went on: "but it needed two females to turn it, and even then you needed the lash to make you work hard. Is your friend around here somewhere?"

Serena wondered momentarily where Helen was now. "No, she's not," she replied, "and I think you're right, I couldn't turn it on my own, not fast enough anyhow. But I'll do the bulk of the work if

you get one of the young people from the settlement to help me.” She paused; she didn’t want to do the next bit, but with her food almost exhausted she would be in trouble if they turned her away. “As for the lash, I’ll have to accept that, as long as it’s not gratuitous.” She wasn’t too happy with that, but again she saw little alternative. Beggars can’t be choosers, but they’re still better off than slaves. Anyway, it was true that the threat of it would make her work harder.

The more astute man went back inside to consult with another of the settlement leaders, and then returned a short while later to announce that they were interested in her proposal. Pay was negotiated: it was a hard bargain, but Serena had expected little else. She would work mostly for food and shelter, but would get a little money as well. It wasn’t much, but it would accumulate. Serena insisted that she would not accept being chained, either to the wheel or anywhere else, and that also she would keep her sword nearby; but she was certain that the settlement elders would not break their word to her. The settlement had a strong Christian ethic, and whilst there seemed no difficulty in equating that with the keeping and, when need arose, beating of slaves, nor in the occasional sexual use of them, nevertheless they would honour a promise freely made.

The man, whose name was Clive, showed her where she would live. It wasn’t much of a place, but it would do; and at least she was free, men couldn’t enter at will and beat her or rape her. The only lock on the door was a bolt on the inside, to keep people out, instead of what she had been used to, namely a lock on the outside to keep her in.

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The times for the wheel session were re-arranged. When she had been here before, and right until her arrival today, it had been four hours on, eight hours off. Now there would be three hours on, three off, three on, and fifteen off, allowing for much better rest. Partly because she would be partnered by a free person, she had one of the day shifts, from eight in the morning until eleven, and from two in the afternoon until five, the latter being the hottest part of the day, but Serena didn’t mind. When she had been here before, she had found trudging round in the pitch dark extremely depressing.

She reported promptly at eight o’clock the next day for the first session. Clive was there: he seemed to have assumed personal responsibility for her, which was fine with her. “Your partner hasn’t arrived yet,” he said; “but if you want to get ready, he’ll be here in a minute.”

“Fine,” she answered quietly, and unbuckled her sandals, laying the sword she still carried down where she could quickly reach it. Then, in a quick motion, she pulled the green vest over her head and dropped it to the ground. Moments later the matching shorts joined it and she stood naked once more. She was uncomfortably reminded of her long months of slavery, but there was no real alternative to working nude at the wheel. She only had one set of clothes, which she couldn’t afford to ruin by pouring tons of sweat into them; and anyway, at least on this afternoon’s shift, it would be far too hot to wear anything comfortably.

Clive gazed with barely disguised interest at her nubile form. “Now I remember you,” he said drily. Serena said nothing: she couldn’t blame him for looking at her, but she didn’t have to like it. “You didn’t have that before, though,” he added, gesturing at the brand now very visible on her upper and inner front thigh.

“I’m not a slave any more,” she said shortly. Would she always have to fend off comments about the letter ‘S’ burned into her flesh?

“Of course not,” he said easily. “Ah, here comes the young man now. The elders selected him because they felt he needed a bit of physical building up.”

That was putting it mildly. The gawky youth who met them could not have been more than seventeen, but he was thin and weedy in the extreme. For a moment Serena felt annoyance, but then she remembered that she had undertaken to do the bulk of the work of pushing the wheel. He apologised awkwardly for being late, unable to take his eyes off Serena’s naked loveliness. She did not reply, but simply took her place at the wheel as the muscular negro (who, as she did not know him, must have been the slave who replaced her and Helen months ago) vacated it. He too stared with undisguised lust at her, but his attention excited her rather more. The huge catalogue of abuse that had been visited on Serena had not turned her completely off men, especially strong, muscular, brave

types. But right now she had other things to do. Without waiting for the weed to join her on the wheel, she threw her weight into it, pushing with all her might. It began to turn, slowly. Evidently she was capable of turning it on her own, although only just. She could hardly keep it going for three hours alone. Still, when the weed, now stripped down to boxer shorts, began to add his efforts, it turned a little more easily. Even so, Serena had forgotten just how hard this was. She was aware, however, that Clive held the whip in his hand; and he had told her to be under no illusion, that she would be treated hard from the outset. The weed, of course, was exempt. Clive stayed there throughout the first shift, and before the end of it, although he later said he was satisfied with her work rate, he had lashed her four times across her bare, unprotected back. It was in some ways almost as if she was still a slave.

But only in some ways. Between shifts, she was free to do as she wanted. She took a refreshing dip in the water butt, dried herself, put her clothes back on and went in search of food and rest, secure in the knowledge that no man would be forcing himself on her - not as long as her sword was within easy reach, anyway. The second shift, under the blazing sun, was harder: at the end of it, sweat poured from every pore of her body, and the water butt was an even more wonderful feeling. She hadn't received any more lashes to add to the four from her first shift, although they still hurt enough anyway, and four red lines ran diagonally down her back. The level of effort required of her now seemed to be established, and over the next few weeks she only occasionally received the odd stroke for slacking, and each time she could candidly admit to herself that there was some justification. Meanwhile, she gradually re-adjusted herself to freedom.

At first Serena only intended to stay for a couple of weeks, until the search for her died down, but two weeks slipped into three, then four. In general, life here wasn't too bad: the people here were pleasant, and honest, and seemed to accept her once they were sure she bore no ill will for her treatment during her earlier stay. Even the weed, Colin his name was, became not too bad: aware that if he slacked it was Serena's back that would feel the lash, he put plenty of effort in, and she could see him develop and become more muscular. She herself was becoming noticeably stronger, as she had during her earlier stay, although you could not tell it by looking at her: rather than developing bulging muscles, those she had become better toned and more efficient. The exercise just made her look lovelier than ever: a trimmer waist and thighs, firmer breasts and a lithe, supple athleticism in her movement as she pushed the wheel, and the deep all-over tan (completely all-over, of course) which had replaced the paleness of her body when she had arrived in Australia, all these things made her mouth-watering to look at, and it was not unusual to see a couple of men take a little time off to watch her as she trudged around that circle. She still wasn't particularly keen on being ogled like that, but it could have been worse: perhaps mindful of the sword, always lying near to the central column of the wheel, none of them tried to even touch her, or pick up the lash. Clive was the only one ever to use that on her, and from him she accepted it.

Even after the horrors she had endured, the natural cravings of a healthy and very fit young woman slowly surfaced once more. On ending her shift one afternoon, and having thoroughly washed herself off, she went to the cell of the muscular negro slave whose shifts alternated with hers, and offered herself to him. He accepted with alacrity. It was some time since he had been allowed a woman - a common drawback for a male slave - and because of his eagerness, plus his tremendous strength, he was not gentle with her, but she did not complain, and emerged bruised but not unhappy. Although she did not intend making a regular thing of it, she visited him once more, about a week later.

Then the searchers came.

Serena was eating a meal after her afternoon shift. Every muscle ached with fatigue, which wasn't unusual. A young girl who lived near to her quarters came rushing over to her and said that there were two strangers approaching the settlement. They wore the uniform of the Torton guards.

Forgetting the exhaustion of her body, Serena ran to the outer wall and up the steps to the balcony. There she could see and hear without being seen. Clive was speaking to the two men.

"... Assure you that if she comes here, we'll hold her and send word to you. Leave me a copy of the sketch and description of her. You said there was a reward?"

One of the two men nodded. "A big one: details are on the poster. You sure she isn't here?"

Clive nodded. "Nobody comes in without my say-so. Nobody," he added with heavy significance.

"All right," said the guard as he and his comrade mounted their horses. "Let us know if you hear anything." To Serena's immense relief, they rode off.

Clive knew full well that Serena had been listening, and he came to see her soon after to fill in the gaps. "When you set out to make an enemy, you don't mess around, do you?" he said lightly. "Killing the king's only brother is not good for your popularity in the royal court."

"I didn't mean to kill him, and anyway it was a fair fight," Serena answered defensively. "And he was the one who sent me to the arena in the first place: without that, I wouldn't have had the skill to beat him. And there were several guards I injured as well; I suppose they weren't worth mentioning."

"You sound like a right little communist."

"What's one of those?"

He frowned. "I'm not sure, to be truthful; it's just something my grandfather used to say." He handed her the poster they had left him. "Quite a good likeness, don't you think?"

It was. The reproduced head and shoulder pencil sketch captured her features very well, and the description below detailed her height, weight, and a good description of her breasts and, of course, her brand. Serena's eyes then widened when she came to the size of the reward: three hundred dollars if she was taken alive! When she had first been sold in the market, her price had only been twenty-five.

"Like I said, you're not too popular with the king," observed Clive, watching her reaction.

She looked at him soberly. "I owe you my life," she said quietly.

"My pleasure," he replied casually. "Anyway, I'm not sure that those two could have taken you against your will." His eyes dwelled for a moment at the sword which rarely left her side. But the elders concurred with my action. Even so, I wouldn't go flashing that poster around. That much money might tempt someone."

She nodded, and folded it up. "I still owe you," she insisted. "I want you to tell me how to repay you and the elders. I mean it, Clive," she added forcefully as he tried to brush the matter aside. "You and the elders are the first people to be kind to me since I arrived in Australia. I don't intend to let that go without some sort of repayment."

"Well, if you're absolutely sure, there is something ... I know you visited one of the wheel slaves the other day. The other two haven't had a woman in ages, and slaves work better when they're contented."

"I'll happily screw both of them," she promised. "And, shall we say, half a dozen others of your choice. Did they tell you that I was a trained pleasure slave in Torton? Oh, and to save any soul searching, I insist that one of those half dozen is you. If your wife doesn't mind."

Clive's wife, like Clive himself, was middle-aged and easy going, the latter a rare trait in this world. Serena didn't fancy him in the least, but she was determined to thank him the only way she really could. His wife, after Serena had talked to her, didn't object.

The weeks turned into a month, and the month headed towards two months. Serena still slaved at the wheel. The elders were delighted with the change in Colin, and discussions went on about the benefits of the wheel to character building as well as physical exercise. Serena, now a respected expert on this, was interviewed by the elders, and it was unanimously decided that a few shifts at the wheel would benefit all the young people at the settlement, and Serena soon had regular changes of partners. The boys worked in shorts or pants, and the younger girls in slips and knickers, with one or two of the older ones opting for the more daring bras and panties. Serena still went naked: although she had now found rags that she could wear, she found any clothing uncomfortable and sticky when so much sweat was pouring out of her, for her effort at the wheel had not dimmed. She still had the occasional male spectator, but that bothered her less and less. She was still technically subject to the whip, but this was used mainly as an encouragement to her partners who knew that if they slackened, she would pay the penalty. As she was becoming very popular with them, this was quite effective, and also helped teach the elders' favourite lesson, that of working for others. The male slaves also

had partners from time to time, and the electricity storage units were more than full, so that rations of power increased considerably. In her spare time, Serena had lots of friends, young and old, and she learnt more things, including how to ride a horse much better, and considerable improvement on her limited reading and writing skills. She was very happy here.

One morning she arrived for her eight till eleven shift. At the wheel when she arrived was one of the male slaves and a young girl. The male slave's name was Arnold - from some obscure tradition, male wheel slaves were always called Arnold, Sylvester or Charlesatlas. The girl, who Serena didn't know more than slightly, couldn't have been more than sixteen, and was wearing bra and panties, pushing for all she was worth, although clearly the male was doing most of the work. Serena's partner hadn't yet arrived; she wasn't sure who it was, as it changed frequently. Whilst she waited, she stripped off. Despite being very tired, the male slave perked up a little, staring openly at Serena's unclothed form as he went by. The girl, also very tired, seemed fascinated by Serena's brand.

The overseer arrived and the girl used that arrival as a cue to disappear. Serena didn't blame her: she looked just about done in. Arnold laboured on alone for a minute or two whilst they waited for Serena's partner to arrive. The overseer, a busy man, grew impatient; he had to unchain the slave and take him back to his cell. Although their lot was easier these days, the male slaves were still kept chained, with good reason.

"Do you want to take him away now?" asked Serena after a couple more minutes. "I'll manage on my own till my partner comes."

The overseer looked relieved, but also a little doubtful. An extremely strong and muscular male could be expected to turn the wheel on his own, but a girl? Still, he did have other urgent things to do, not least of which was getting his breakfast, and it wouldn't do any harm even if the wheel was stopped for a few minutes. With the usual care, he cuffed the male slave's wrists together before releasing him from the wheel. Arnold continued to stare at Serena's nudity as he was led away. She didn't mind: the next time she felt the urges, she would let him do more than just stare. They departed, leaving her alone with the wheel.

Serena took up her usual place, grasped the bar with both hands, dug her bare heels in the dirt and heaved. Very slowly, it began to turn. She had never tried to turn it alone before, and it was astonishingly hard, but she was far stronger than she had ever been before, although she still didn't look any more muscular. Gradually, aching slowly, the speed accelerated from inching to crawling. Serena pushed as hard as she could, body at a forty-five degree angle (not that she knew that). Although only eight o'clock in the morning, it was already very warm; rivulets of sweat were already making their way down her back. But, exerting every muscle, arms and legs, she was making it go. Once it was moving, it was a little easier, but she was still putting in far more effort than she would normally use, and she had three hours ahead of her. Still, this was a challenge, and for a couple of weeks she had been wondering if she could move it alone. She completed the first circle, and carried on pushing.

Seconds turned into minutes. Serena always perspired heavily at the wheel, but never more than now. There was a constant flow of sweat running down her back, and down the side of her body from her armpits. Her breasts, tummy and thighs gleamed with it. Time went on: she guessed (having no way to tell) ten minutes, fifteen, twenty. Where was that partner? She couldn't keep this up forever. But somehow she did. The sun rose, and blazed down. She couldn't have been wetter if she had just emerged from the water butt, but she kept the wheel turning. All other thoughts left her mind, except to keep that wheel going. From time to time she had to stop to dip her upper body in the water barrel, but it was so hard to start the wheel turning again afterwards that she began to dread the break more than savouring the cool relief it brought, and soon stopped dunking herself almost altogether.

When the overseer returned at eleven o'clock with Arnold and a fresh partner for him, he was amazed to see Serena, still alone at the wheel, and still turning it. She was so exhausted that she was not entirely aware of them, and they had to gently prise her away from the wheel. She didn't bother to pick up her things, but just staggered naked through the settlement streets until she came to her room, where, as soon as she stepped inside, she fell onto the bed and was instantly asleep.

Happy as she was, Serena eventually decided that it was time to move on. There were a number of reasons for this: one was that, although she had become quite accustomed to slaving at the wheel for six hours every day, she had no desire to do that for the rest of her life. Another was a second visit from the two Torton guards. Serena thought that the search would have died down by now, but evidently it was still going on. Once more Clive turned them away, but if someone here got wind of the reward and decided to betray her, or accidentally let something slip to a visiting trader, there could be trouble. And the search for her was beginning to irritate Serena. If the king was going to hound her, she would give him good reason to do so. Her plans were laid, and after some lengthy farewells to her many friends, she set off one morning, her saddle bags full of food and drink and the now reasonable sum of money she had earned.

And her sword by her side.

Chapter Fourteen

Extract from “A Concise History of the 21st Century” by Aaron Svenson:

In the second half of the twentieth century, the advent of mass communication meant that most communities lost their separate identity. One town came to look and feel much like another, and the people both talked and acted in a similar manner.

But after the Third World War in 2010, such communication ceased, and that trend reversed itself very quickly. Accents became more pronounced, and the leadership in any given town began to mould the inhabitants after its own values and image: sometimes good, sometimes bad. Some places became delightful retreats, whilst others ... well, one hoped never to stumble onto some of the others.

Serena warily steered her horse into the tiny village. She had been on the road for several days and needed to replenish her water gourds, but she was naturally inclined to be cautious. She was surprised that there were no guards or look-outs anywhere. Perhaps this place was too small and too far off the beaten track to attract bandits.

The well, too, was unattended. Serena decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth and filled her containers, after first checking that the water was pure. It was: in fact it was lovely and sweet.

Still nobody came into sight. Had the sight of her, sword at hip, frightened them off? She thought it unlikely. Then she heard voices, not too far away. Still cautious, she walked in that direction, leading her horse. There was a small crowd in the square: it looked like all the village was there, maybe twenty or so adults and a few children. Curious, she wrapped the reins of her horse around a post in such a way that she could almost instantly free them if she needed to beat a hasty retreat, and moved closer.

If anybody noticed her, they gave no sign. All eyes were on the young, frightened girl in the centre of the square. She was very pretty, blonde and fresh-faced, and couldn't have been more than sixteen or seventeen. She was dressed in tattered jeans and denim shirt, and looked petrified. Three men were pushing her about as she cringed in terror.

Serena watched in sympathy. She knew only too well what beasts men could be, and how defenceless young women, especially the attractive ones, were treated in this world. The girl looked hardly old enough to have found this out for herself, but it looked as if she was about to. One of the men reached out and grasped the shirt, as another grabbed her from behind. There was the sound of buttons being torn off, and the shirt came away in his hands. There was a cheer from some of the men in the audience. The girl wore no bra: her breasts were still developing, but had the firm excitement of youth.

“Those of you that want, you can have your fun with her,” an older man said with obvious authority. “Then the law can take its course.” Serena looked at him, and suddenly decided that she would get involved after all. In his hands he held a noose. This was a hanging party.

She quietly moved back to her horse and freed the reins, then circled the crowd until she found a side-street where she wrapped the reins around a branch of a little tree that she could instantly cut with her sword. From this point, there was no crowd between her and the group in the centre of the square. As she did all this, she heard a scream from the girl and as she moved forwards, saw that her jeans had been pulled off her, her shoes falling off at the same time. She now wore only panties. Truthfully, Serena was largely indifferent to the rape of the girl, even if it was her first time, and it looked as if it might be, but if she was going to save her from being lynched then she might as well spare her this as well. She stepped forwards, and they noticed her at last. With her mane of stunning blonde hair, her fantastic figure and gorgeous features, she was something to notice. Several of the men openly leered at her. She ignored them.

“Stand away from her.” Her voice rang out clear and confident; she knew that it would be fatal to show fear.

There were murmurs of surprise, and one or two of delight as well as some of the men eyed her unquestionably beautiful form beneath her baggy shorts and rather tighter t-shirt. But the men in centre stage looked angry at being interrupted, as well they might.

"Whoever you are, this is no concern of yours," said the older man.

"I'm making it my concern," answered Serena flatly. "Let her go."

"Maybe the sun's got to her, Wally," said one of the three men. "Maybe a good seeing-to will bring her round." The older man nodded his consent, and the three younger ones advanced on Serena. The one nearest to her reached out and grabbed her wrist.

None of them were ever really sure what happened next. The one who had grabbed her wrist felt it turning, and his own hand with it until he thought his arm would break; then he found himself sailing through the air to land unceremoniously in a heap. The second nearest man felt himself grabbed and pulled forwards with unexpected strength, but a foot seemed to appear in his way and he too went down. The third man's lunge was stopped short by a driving punch to his midriff which took all the wind out of him. The technique with which it was delivered nearly doubled Serena's not inconsiderable strength, and it would be quite a while before this man felt like getting up.

"Look out!" The scream came from the mob's near-naked victim.

"Thanks, girl," Serena said as she dodged a knife thrust from a fourth man who had emerged from the crowd. Her fist flashed out, catching the man square on the jaw, but then she followed through to land a second blow with her elbow and then her fist flashed back in a return sweep to batter the man's face a third time in the space it would have taken most people to land just one blow. Her assailant dropped unconscious at her feet. Even as she did so, she had already noted the fifth man advancing with a sword in his hand. Her own sword, Excalibur, seemed to leap into her hand and moments later her assailant was back-peddling furiously, desperately parrying her ferocious and skilled attack which only ended when he tripped over and fell to the floor. His threat now ended, Serena retreated just a little to make sure that nobody except the girl was behind her, but no-one else in the crowd seemed inclined to take her on. It was not really surprising. Three men were picking themselves slowly off the floor, a fourth still doubled up winded on the ground. The fifth man, the one with the knife, was out cold. The whole incident had taken about twenty seconds.

"Incredible," breathed the older man, his voice clearly audible in the silence that had descended.

Serena smiled. She knew that her training in the arena had made her a good fighter, but not until this moment had she had any idea just how good. Added to that was the strength and stamina of her time pushing the electricity wheel: she wasn't even breathing hard. It had been a tough, painful road which had given her these skills, but right at this moment it seemed worth it. Still, they had to get out of here fast, before the element of surprise wore off and she was surrounded. She backed off slowly, still brandishing her sword; behind her, the girl was picking up her clothes and moving with her, realising her intentions.

"You're a slave!" one of the men exclaimed.

Serena glanced down and saw that her shorts had ridden up a little during the fight, exposing her brand. "Ex-slave," she replied firmly, "unless somebody wants to try and tame me? No? Just let us be, then, and we'll go on our way."

"But she's condemned!" someone shouted, pointing to the girl.

"So will some of you be, if you try to take her," Serena said, moving her sword meaningfully. She and the other girl were nearly at her horse. "Mount up," she whispered to the youngster. The moment the girl had obeyed, Serena turned and leapt up herself behind the girl. A single swing of her sword cut the branch off and freed the reins, and moments later they were racing out of the village at breakneck speed.

They didn't slow down until the village was well out of sight, and even then kept up a fairly fast pace. There didn't seem to be any sign of pursuit, and as they were travelling over hard rock Serena didn't think they could be tracked. At last she spoke to the girl she had rescued.

"What's your name, girl?"

"Paula. Thank you for saving me."

"My pleasure."

“You fought superbly. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Serena grunted. She couldn’t help but think of this girl as a child compared to herself. Although only twenty-one, she had seen and done so much, or perhaps more accurately had so much done to her. In some ways she envied Paula her wide-eyed innocence, which hadn’t suffered too much from being stripped nearly naked in front of that baying crowd, possibly because she had been more concerned with the threat of hanging.

Paula was putting her clothes on as best she could, since Serena did not consider it wise to stop. The youngster asked, “is it true that you’re an escaped slave?”

“What I was isn’t important; it’s what I am that counts.” Serena’s voice was gruff: she hated people seeing her brand and reminding her of her past, but it was something she knew she would have to get used to. “You tell me something: if I hadn’t stepped in when I did, would that have been your first time with a man?”

“Yes.” Paula’s voice was quiet, and she got the message not to ask any more questions about Serena’s past.

“Have you got any family I can take you to? You can’t go back to the village.”

“Yes, I have; I live with my dad and his friends. It’s about a day’s ride from here. But I can’t put you to any more trouble ...”

Serena shrugged. “It’s no bother; I’m not going anywhere in a hurry. Just as long as they can replenish my food and water.”

“I’m sure they will: it’s the least we can do.”

Serena slowed her horse down to a trot, and steered him in the direction Paula indicated. “Just one other question, Paula: what had you done to make them want to wring your pretty little neck?”

Paula grimaced, at last realising how close to death she had come. “They don’t like my dad,” she said simply, and refused to be drawn further.

“So there’s just you, your dad, and half a dozen other men?”

They were on the last lap of the journey, about an hour or so away according to Paula. Only now was she beginning to open up a little. “Mum died years ago,” she said simply.

“Don’t the other men ever ... bother you at all?”

Paula turned around to look at her saviour. “I’m not completely naive: I know what you mean, and yes, I think they do get ideas from time to time, or some of them anyway. But dad always keeps me fairly close to him, or to the couple of men he trusts, and he can keep the others in line.”

“He must be quite a man. Is that why the villagers don’t like him?” No answer, as usual when Serena got on to this topic. She changed subject. “How do you make a living?”

“We trade a bit.” That was another one Paula was vague about.

“Do you grow anything?”

“What, up here?” They had climbed into rocky terrain. Paula was right: it would be impossible to grow anything here, although it was a natural fortress, easy to defend. As that thought went through Serena’s mind, the pieces of the puzzle at last fell into place. “You’re bandits!”

Paula did not reply, but she wouldn’t meet Serena’s eyes. At last she said, “I don’t go on raids, I just wash and cook. But yes, you’re right. We used to live in the villages, but there was some sort of row years ago. I was too young to understand it all.”

“So how come you got captured?”

“They don’t know me, so I’m the one to go for supplies from time to time. I don’t go to the villages near where we used to live, obviously, because I’d be recognised. Unfortunately, there was a visitor from my old village at the place where you found me. When he told them whose daughter I was ... they locked me up over night, and got everybody together the next morning for ... well, then you came along.”

“Maybe I should have left you there.” Serena’s voice was suddenly cold. “I got captured by bandits. That’s how come I got this brand, and a hundred other experiences you don’t want to know about. Do your father and his friends ever deal in the slave trade?”

"Sometimes," admitted Paula quietly. "I can't help what my dad is, Serena."

"I suppose not." Serena relented slightly. "All right: I'll take you home, and fill my food and water bags, and be on my way." With that, the conversation died. Serena was thinking of the bandits who had abducted her, and the things they had done to her, and the things she would like to do to them in return. They were not nice thoughts.

They arrived at a motley few huts. A rough-looking man in his late thirties came out as they neared. Paula's excited "hey, Billy!" greeting bounced off him.

Where in Hell's name have you been, you little minx?"

"I was spotted by someone we used to know. This woman saved me: she beat up five men!"

Billy ignored Serena, who had dismounted along with Paula. Three other hard-looking men had emerged from the huts. Serena noticed, without surprise, that all four wore swords: it was that sort of countryside around here, and seemed to be getting more so, the further she travelled eastwards into this land. Billy said, "so you didn't get the supplies?"

"They were going to hang me! Billy, where's Dad?"

He ignored her question. "And you lost the money we gave you, and your horse?"

"I nearly lost my life! Where's Dad, and Tony, and John?"

"Gone to look for you. They thought your horse might have gone lame or something. They should be back by sunset."

Paula's face clouded. Serena correctly surmised that Tony and John were the other two men that she could trust. Still, the youngster put a brave show on. "This is Serena. She saved my life. The least we can do for her is give her plenty of food and water."

Billy's hand shot out and grabbed Paula's wrist. "You've lost your horse and money and failed to get the supplies we needed, so the first thing your friend is going to see is you getting what's coming to you. A good thrashing, I reckon, plus it's about time you had your first taste of a man."

"Dad will kill you!"

"He ain't here, and it'll be done with by the time he gets back."

"Leave her alone." Serena's voice rang out crisp and clear. To back it up, as she knew she would need to do, she drew her sword. In a flash, four swords were drawn against her. Serena weighed the odds. These were not witless villagers, and it was four blades to one. Nor was Billy inclined to under-estimate her, as the villagers had done, and he had Paula in his grasp. At best, it was a stalemate.

Billy was evidently weighing up the possibility of capturing Serena, but wisely decided against the risk. "The best thing you can do, girlie," he said slowly, "is to get back on your saddle and get out of here."

"Wait a minute!" Paula wrenched herself free of Billy, but made no move to run for it. "Serena saved my life. We give her food and drink, and I've a little gold of my own that Dad gave me which I want to give her." She stared at Billy, cowering only slightly. "Let me do that for her, and let her go, and then you can do what you want with me if you must." She looked far from enthralled at the prospect, but determined nevertheless.

Blast it, thought Serena. She had been on the verge of leaving, knowing she couldn't do anything to save Paula this time, and seeing no real reason why she should put herself out further, but she couldn't ignore that sort of bravery, especially on her behalf. She took a deep breath.

"All right, listen," she said. "I'll do you a deal. You want to screw someone, you can screw me. I was trained as a pleasure slave;" she reluctantly pulled up the leg of her shorts to show her brand, the first time she had ever shown it voluntarily; "and I can be very good, much better than a novice. In return, you leave her alone."

Paula cried, "No, Serena!" but Billy silenced her with a cuff around the ear. He ruminated for a few moments. Desire for Paula had clearly been building in him and his friends for some time, but on the other hand, whilst Paula was pretty, Serena was stunningly beautiful. And if he didn't agree, it was likely to end in a sword-fight, to say nothing of the aggro when Paula's dad and two friends returned. And if Serena really was an ex-pleasure slave ...

"O.k., we have a deal. You give us a good time, we leave her alone."

“You speak for yourself, Billy, I fancy Paula,” said one of the men, but Billy cut him off with a tirade of expletive-decorated comments which basically carried the message that he should go along with the rest of them in accepting Serena as a substitute, outlining in rather graphic detail some things which might happen to him if he did not and which would undoubtedly bring tears to his eyes, and taking this opportunity to cast slurs on his parentage, manhood, sexual prowess and a few of his personal traits. The man wilted and shut up.

All attention turned to Serena again. How did I get myself into this situation, she wondered, but she was committed now. She nodded towards the huts. “Find a decent room, and I’ll take you one by one,” she said.

The men moved off to get things ready, leaving the two girls alone for a moment. Paula came over to Serena and said, “you shouldn’t be doing this for me. You’ve done too much for me already.”

It was true, which made Serena’s tone brusque. “You want to take my place?”

“Well, no, but ...”

“Then pipe down. Your time will come soon enough - sooner if you and your dad don’t get away from this mob. He can’t protect you forever, Paula.” She walked off.

She was shown into a room, and a few minutes later the first of the men arrived. It was Billy. Serena had already removed her sword belt, leaving Excalibur where she could quickly reach it if needed: she didn’t trust these men. Billy stared at her, waiting, and Serena began to remove her clothes, seductively. He was as interested in her brand as her boobs and cunt, and she was as unhappy at revealing it as she was the other areas. When she had finished undressing, he began to peel his own things off, still drinking in her exposed beauty. His own body, give that he was some fifteen years older than her, wasn’t bad: she’d been had by much worse.

Serena went to work.

She gave each of the four men an unhurried and ecstatic time. Her pride would allow her to do nothing else. The one who had expressed a preference for Paula was made to admit his error, and all four were far too drained to even think about coming back for seconds.

When Serena emerged from the room, dressed once more, she found that Paula’s father and two friends had returned. The two friends looked crest-fallen at finding out what they had missed, which amused Serena. She also noted that Billy was looking rather subdued: clearly Paula’s father had already had words with him. Paula had evidently given him the full story.

Paula’s father, whose name was Calvin, came over to speak to her. He was indeed quite a man, as a leader of a band such as this would have to be. He thanked her profusely and sincerely for saving Paula’s life and, twice, her virginity, and insisted she take away with her most of their gold as payment, as well as all the food and water she could carry when she left. Serena did not refuse: she reckoned she had earned it. As it was getting late, he also insisted that she stay the night.

Serena accepted, but impulsively she added, “I’ll be in the bedroom where I was entertaining when you arrived. And I expect to be visited by your two friends who think they missed out on the fun. And then you.” She’d used her pleasure skills on those four bastards to save Paula. Now it was her turn for her own enjoyment. Besides, why should the good guys miss out?

Morning came. It was another beautiful day.

Serena did indeed have a good time with the three men. They were no more attractive or sexually capable than the other four, but their attitudes were different: they worked for her pleasure as well as their own. When Calvin and she had finished, they went to sleep together, and it was a nice change to actually cuddle up to a caring man.

She was now mounted on her horse, ready to go. Paula had already said goodbye, thanking her once again. Now Calvin faced her for the last time. “You could stay, of course,” he offered. “And I don’t mean to cook and clean. We could use another fighter, and I’ve heard what you can do with a blade.”

It was obvious that this offer was coming, and Serena had considered saying yes. Perhaps if they had all been like these last three ... but maybe not even then.

“Thanks, but I guess I’ll be moving on. I don’t know what I’m searching for, but I haven’t found it yet. Just one thing, though, Calvin;” he looked at her, genuine respect in his eyes, and this from a man whose respect was worth having; “you deal in slaves. The next time you have some innocent little girl in chains, just imagine that it is Paula. A year or so ago, in another bandit camp, it was me. It’s Hell. Think about it.”

And with that, she spurred her horse and rode off into the morning sun.

Chapter Fifteen

Extract from "A Concise History of the 21st Century" by Aaron Svenson:

"What law there was in the towns was administered by local police forces. Some of these were really private armies paid for by the local king, others nominally independent and financed through local taxation (and bribery). In the former case, the king or his nominee would be the judge and jury, in the latter there was usually an appointed judge who could be easily swayed by political considerations or hard cash. Justice was a rarity."

Serena awoke and stretched languidly, feeling her supple muscles move fluidly under her satiny skin.

She looked affectionately at the young man sleeping beside her. He had said that his name was Harvey - whether that was a first name or second, she didn't know - and she had met him yesterday on the road. Naturally enough, she had been wary at first, but they were travelling in the same direction and she soon found herself enjoying his company. He was perhaps seven or eight years older than her twenty one summers, handsome, charming and muscular. When he had stopped that night to set up camp, she had almost automatically stopped as well, and it had taken very little persuading on his part for her to join him in bed for the night.

Even so, she had approached the event with some trepidation, for two reasons. The first was the hurdle of undressing in front of him. She was only too used to baring her womanly charms - indeed, she was no stranger to that even before she had been enslaved - but she was rather more apprehensive about revealing her brand. It was virtually impossible to avoid revealing it, as it was high and prominent on the outside of her right thigh. Even if she could keep it from his gaze, once they started caressing his fingers would soon detect it, as the texture of her skin there was harder and rougher; so, she made no effort to conceal it, and was very grateful when he saw it but made no comment.

She was also inevitably nervous about having sex. So many times during her year or so of slavery she had been forcibly raped, she was no longer sure if this would re-awaken too many memories and sensations. Still, she had no desire to be celibate for the rest of her life, so she had to cross this divide sooner or later. In the event, it had been a lovely experience, but very much a battle between them of the nicest kind. Instinctively, as soon as they had come together, her pleasure slave training had taken over, and she had begun to concentrate entirely on his enjoyment, expecting only incidental pleasure for herself. A couple of weeks ago, she had done the same thing for the bandits after rescuing their girl Paula from a lynch mob, but unlike most of them, Harvey immediately began to work on arousing her and both of them were soon almost struggling for the position which would give maximum pleasure to the other. It was a long and joyous coupling, perhaps the best Serena had ever known.

She slipped from beneath the blanket and went outside the makeshift tent into the morning sun. Its warmth felt good on her naked skin, and she relaxed still further. A few yards away was a stream - it always made sense to camp near running water if possible - and Serena made her way over to it and washed herself. The pure, cool water felt lovely.

"It's a beautiful morning." His voice did not startle her, although she had not heard him approach. She turned to face him. He was as naked as she, and she admired his sinewy form, not least the fine specimen of manhood hanging between his legs. It had been nearly dormant when she had turned around, but as he gazed at her it began to stiffen a little. Transferring her look to his eyes, Serena saw the same lust that so many men had demonstrated, but without the cruelty she had so often seen go with it. Somehow, it seemed complementary, rather than the insulting leers she had so often endured as a slave. Perhaps it was because the body he was staring at was now indisputably hers, rather than at least officially belonging to one of the several owners she had been sold to. Serena had no problem with letting him stare as much as he wanted to at her firm, luscious tits and lightly

hair-covered mound of Venus, but she had to make a conscious effort to stop herself from covering her slave mark, so much so that she drew attention to it. This time he did not pretend to ignore it.

“Are you a runaway?”

She tensed, and nodded tightly. “So?” Her voice was sharp.

He smiled, trying to urge her to relax. “Don’t worry, I’m not a bounty hunter. Anyway, I don’t need to see a brand to know that. You make love like a slave.”

Serena felt unsure of his meaning. She had been thoroughly trained in the pleasure arts - one can always be more effectively trained with the aid of a whip - and was normally very confident of her skills. “Wasn’t it good?” she asked uncertainly.

“Very,” he replied sincerely. “Did you enjoy it?”

She began to relax a little. “You know I did,” she replied, staring slightly coyly at his stiffening tool. “And if you’re not in a hurry to get on the road ...”

He wasn’t in a hurry.

Eventually they were on their way. His horse and wagon only contained a tent and provisions, so he was no trader. She believed him when he said that he was not a bounty hunter, so just what did he do to make a living? She quizzed him on the matter several times, without getting a reply. “I live by my wits” was all he would say.

But then, she could not answer his question about where she herself was going, simply because she did not know. She had first come to Australia to join a distant uncle, mainly for protection. For several reasons, that no longer seemed a good option. For one thing, her best protection was her sword, now that she was skilled (and how!) in wielding it, to say nothing of her equally razor-sharp hand-to-hand fighting skills. What danger there was to her came from any remaining search for her after she had killed the King’s brother in Torton. For another thing, she knew her uncle’s colony to be largely middle-aged, and she didn’t feel too much like going there now she didn’t have to. And last, but by no means least, she did not want the embarrassment of having to admit to the fact that she had been a slave. Her uncle, whom she could remember just a little from her young childhood, would not be impressed with the arrival of “soiled goods”.

Which left the question, where was she going? At the moment, she was just wandering aimlessly. Well, it was better than being a slave, better than any of the uses she had been put to by her various owners. Better especially with people like Harvey around.

Harvey, however, for all that he was in no great hurry, was not wandering aimlessly. They arrived at a town and he booked into a hotel. With nothing better to do, Serena stayed with him. Anyway, he was paying for the hotel room. Living by his wits had evidently not left him short of money. He was discreet about spending it, though: he got her to book and pay for the room. In fact, he stayed very much in the background throughout the day, almost hiding in her shadow. Their meals, which he asked her to order, were served in their room, and he was always in the bathroom when they arrived. Serena wasn’t too bothered, although she was curious; but then again there were certain towns where she would feel equally like taking a low profile. She relaxed, enjoying both the comfort of the room and his physical attention. A young page boy had carried her saddle bag up to the room, waited on them at meal times, and been generally attentive. Without bossing him around, Serena had savoured the luxury of being waited on for the first time in her life. The boy himself wasn’t much to speak of, being goofy and spotty and not very bright, but that didn’t matter. Life was nice.

But then, in the middle of the night, she woke to find Harvey putting his clothes on. Although she had tried not to pry, she sat up with an inevitable question on her lips.

He looked slightly sheepish. “I didn’t want to wake you.”

“I’m a light sleeper,” she replied. “Where are you going?”

“Just for a walk. Get some fresh air.”

Serena didn't believe him for a minute. But what was it to her? His business was no concern of hers. She doubted that he was going to another woman, but even if he was, she had no hold on him. Serena shrugged and went back to sleep.

She was awakened by a loud banging on the door. Still drowsy, she rolled over and looked at the wind-up clock on the bedside table. Four o'clock! Harvey had gone out just after midnight, and had not yet returned. The banging went on. She levered herself out of bed, wrapped a hotel night-gown around her nude body, just awake enough to make sure her brand was well covered up, and unlocked the door.

Four burly local policemen were there. They pushed past her into the room. Two of them started searching the other rooms; the other two confronted her. Wide awake now, but thoroughly confused, Serena cursed her carelessness. Her sword was under the bed, and by unlucky chance they stood between her and it. One of them she might have been able to take in unarmed combat, but not two, and the other two were only moments away. In addition, she could hardly make a run for it, barefoot and wearing only a wrap. Not, of course, that she had done anything wrong; but a visit from the local Gestapo was always worrying even if you had nothing to hide.

The two men just glared at her until their comrades returned. "He's not here, Sergeant," one of them said superfluously.

The one addressed as sergeant, who seemed to be the leader, glowered at her. "Where is he?"

With a double bed in the room and some men's clothes on a chair, it seemed pointless to deny Harvey's existence. Instead, Serena countered, "Why? What's he done?"

She was totally unprepared for the backhand slap across her face which sent her sprawling to the floor. Before she could get to her feet, two of the men grabbed her and hauled her upright. She resisted for a moment, then gave up the unequal struggle. Her head spun from the blow.

"I asked you a question," he snarled. "You answer questions, not ask them, got it?"

For a moment Serena glared defiantly at him, then she lowered her eyes. She was helpless, and she didn't want him to hit her again. "Yes, sir," she whispered.

"That's better. Now: where is he?"

"I don't know. It's the truth," she added hastily as he raised his hand to strike her again. "He went out hours ago. Said he was going for a walk. I don't know where he went."

He sneered. "You'll be telling me next you don't know what he came here for."

"I don't! I met him on the road, and his name's Harvey, and that's all I know." Serena was afraid of this hulking man, but at the same time she wasn't saying anything that would help them much. Really, she was telling the truth: she didn't know anything.

"His name is Harvey James, he's a well-known jewel thief, and he's just stolen a famous collection from a house in this town," one of the other men drawled. "And you're his accomplice, to help him arrive and depart without being recognised."

"That's not true," Serena began, but the words died.

"Looks like we'll have to take you down to the station for questioning," said the sergeant, and didn't bother to hide the look of lust on his face.

Serena saw just one small chance. If she could just get to her sword ... "Can't you just let me go long enough for me to get dressed?" she asked.

The leers on their faces confirmed the sort of reception she would get at the police headquarters. "Get dressed?" the sergeant guffawed. "You're going in for questioning, not to a social party." A rough hand reached out and caressed her flank over the night-gown, then without invitation slid inside the gown. Serena flushed as it went behind her and felt her firm young buttocks, but then she went cold as the fingers traced around her thigh and a puzzled look appeared on his face as they moved over her brand. He pulled back the gown, revealing her mark. "Well, well, well."

"Escaped slave," observed another of the men.

"Let's have a look at the rest of her." He reached out, grasped the night-gown and tore it away. The thin, worn material offered little resistance. Once more Serena was involuntarily naked before men. She closed her eyes, unwilling to look at her captor, but she could not close her ears to the crude comments.

Her faint lingering hope of escape vanished as they produced a pair of handcuffs and locked her wrists securely together behind her back. Then she was marched out of the room and down the stairs. At this time in the morning, the lobby was deserted, except for the page boy. His eyes nearly popped out of his head when he saw Serena's naked body, her front totally unprotected and defenceless. The sergeant signalled the two men leading her to halt, and, beckoning him over, addressed the page.

"That tip you gave us was a good one. We're taking her away for questioning." The page said nothing, still gaping at Serena, stood almost in front of her now. "Nice looker, isn't she?" the leader said. "Go on, have a feel."

The boy very hesitantly reached out a hand to one of Serena's breasts; then, slowly growing in confidence, he began to fondle them more thoroughly. Serena hung her head in shame. Only a few hours ago, he had been her servant. Now she was helpless in front of him. He even slipped a finger tentatively inside her sex lips.

"I think she'll be in great demand for a day or so down at the station," the sergeant said to the page. "But if you want to come down sometime when you're off duty, I'm sure we can make her available to you. Sort of a reward for being public spirited, y'know." The boy nodded eagerly, and watched them go with an almost audible look of anticipation.

They walked through the streets. Serena led the way, with just one of the men holding her arm tightly; that way, the others could walk behind her and admire her curves as she padded along barefoot. Fortunately, at this time, the early hours of the morning, the streets were deserted, but Serena had more to worry about than her lost modesty. She knew that she was in for a bad time. The interrogation was likely to be brutal, and she was unlikely to be believed when she claimed not to know anything - even though that was actually true. Then it sounded overwhelmingly like she was going to be gang-banged. And after that, what? A return to slavery looked on the cards, or even worse: suppose, just suppose, they found out how badly she was still wanted in Torton. It wasn't that far away. Serena went hot and cold at the very thought of her fate if she was delivered back there.

They reached the police headquarters, and she was led inside. It was hardly a hive of activity: a few men lay about, half-heartedly pretending to be busy. Needless to say, however, the appearance of the naked Serena galvanised things a bit. She was taken to what was presumably the interrogation room, although the chains hanging from the walls indicated something about the way such questionings were conducted. One pair of handcuffs descended from the ceiling: Serena's wrists were uncuffed and she was re-secured into them. She now hung with her feet a few inches off the floor. Fortunately, the cuffs were padded, but the pressure on her arms was still painful. More cuffs were on the end of short chains, the other end of which were cemented to the concrete floor; her ankles were locked into two of these, leaving her legs and arms well spread. Muttering something about reporting to the chief of police, the sergeant left the room, leaving about half a dozen men taking an unhealthy interest in Serena.

They gathered around her. She felt a hand stroke her thigh, then another on her calf, then one on her breast. Within moments, they were all groping and fondling her. Serena could do nothing except stare miserably into space as the rough male hands crawled all over her. In this era, police mis-treatment of captives was commonplace, but worse still, Serena bore the mark of a slave. It was not by any means the first time she had been treated in this manner, but it was the first time since she had won her freedom. As the hands pawed and mauled her, all the horror of her slavery came back to her. Her months of freedom seemed now like a brief interlude, a short holiday from the awful realities of her life. She shuddered as a finger pushed its way past her sex lips. She could not close her legs or offer the slightest resistance. Her breasts were being painfully kneaded and squeezed: they were already quite sore. Then she jerked involuntarily in her bonds as she received a hard and unexpected slap on her buttocks. A ripple of coarse laughter went around the group of men at her unguarded reaction. Another meaty hand descended on her behind, and another. It didn't stop the others from continuing to grope her front. The finger had gone from her vagina, only to be replaced moments later by another one - no, two fingers this time.

"Alright, you animals, get back!"

The new voice carried authority, and the men fell back immediately, but the wry amusement in the tone indicated that this was at best a questionable reprieve. Serena turned her head to look at the

speaker as the gang of men continued to move reluctantly away. He was in his early forties, but hard and strong, with a cruel face disfigured by a scar and other indications of many violent altercations. They all wore a tatty and sloppy uniform, but the braid sewn haphazardly onto his indicated his seniority. His piggy eyes stared at Serena with a mixture of contempt and anticipated enjoyment. Serena shuddered with fear, a fear heightened by the short but fearful whip he held in his hand. Behind him, the sergeant leered at her.

He spoke again. "I need to question her about this blasted jewel thief. Should take an hour or so. Those of you who want a bit of fun afterwards, come back at about," he consulted his watch, "nine o'clock. Meanwhile, clear out."

The room emptied, leaving just the chief, the sergeant and Serena. The chief looked her up and down. How used she was to such looks! He continued to feast his eyes on her as he began to bark questions at her.

"Name?"

"Serena Durham, master." How easy it was to slip back into the habit of calling any man master! Perhaps she had been foolish to think she could ever escape her terrible fate, the fate of being a slave.

"Where are you from?"

"England, master."

He nodded to himself. "That explains the accent." He studied the brand on the outside of her thigh. "Where did you escape from?"

She did not dare tell the truth about this one. "Norville, master."

He looked blank. "Where the Hell's that?"

"About a hundred and fifty miles west of here," put in the sergeant. It was a town on the route Serena had been taking before her abduction.

Then came the question she had dreaded. "Where's Harvey James?"

"I don't know, master."

The whip slashed across her bare buttocks. Serena screamed with pain. It was a heavy instrument, and her bottom had exploded in agony where it had made contact. He waited for her to calm down, then said simply, "you're lying."

"No, master, I swear it aaiiieeee!" A wave of fresh stinging, intolerable torment spread over her rear.

"Where is he?"

"I don't knooooowwwwww!" Another slash. Time and time again, the dreadful weapon bit into her, interspersed with questions she did not know the answers to, about her brief travelling companion, his whereabouts and plans. Serena must have received a dozen strokes in all. She hung limply in her bonds, throat hoarse from screaming, bottom blazing with pain. Tears ran down her face.

At long last, he became convinced that she did indeed know nothing. Serena's buttock cheeks were now a mass of purple-red weals. Wracking sobs escaped her lips. "Re-tie her on the floor," the chief said, and the two men unlocked her wrists and spread her out on the floor before securing manacles to her wrists once more. At no time were her ankles released, so she had no chance to resist, but in any case she was weak from the beating. She now lay on her back, legs spread once more. It was not hard to figure out what was to come next.

Whilst the sergeant looked on, smirking, the chief dropped his trousers and pants to reveal a large and filthy cock. He climbed on top of her, crushing her, making it hard for her to breathe, and began to force his way in. Even if she had dared to, she could offer no resistance. It was a particularly unpleasant rape, even for one with her sadly wide experience, and made much more painful by her battered and welted buttocks rubbing against the bare wooden floor. There was nothing but pain for her as she felt him shoot his load inside her. He extricated himself, wiping his dripping member on her breasts, and pulled his clothes on once more, speaking to the sergeant as he did.

"Let the men have her, after yourself, of course, but make sure they don't damage her. No more than, say, ten minutes each: I want them out looking for this thief. It's obvious she doesn't know anything: he probably picked her up as camouflage. When they've done, handcuff her and bring her

to me.” He walked out, leaving the sergeant looking at her with an evil grin. Serena watched helplessly as he began to pull his own trousers off.

Over the next few hours, she was raped by at least a dozen men. Serena lost count after a while. All the rapes were impersonal, brutal and painful, made worse by the constant rubbing of her raw buttocks on the floor and the further groping of her already mauled and bruised body. They used her purely as a receptacle: chained as she was, she could have done little to help their enjoyment even if she had wanted to. It seemed as if the whole police force had turned out, which was quite possibly correct: anybody off duty would have appreciated being informed of her availability. It was worth a little unpaid overtime! Maybe one or two of them had sneaked a second go in: she was too dazed to notice.

In the end, she did not run out of men, but the sergeant re-appeared, looking furious. She could hear him calling out to the men: “all right, break it up! We’ve been tricked: while you lot have been sowing your oats here, our thief has knocked off three more houses and got away with a hell of a stash. You’ve all got his description: get out there and find him!”

There was quite a bit of grumbling from those who had not yet had a turn, but that wasn’t many. Within a couple of minutes the sergeant had organised the men into search groups and sent them off, leaving only himself around. He glared at her balefully. “If I thought you had helped to plan this little diversion ...”

Serena shook her head frantically, but fortunately he did not take that train of thought any further. Instead he released her from the chains and cuffed her wrists together behind her back once more. Serena could stand only with difficulty. Her sex organs ached terribly, and her buttocks throbbed mercilessly from her whipping and subsequent chafing. She staggered along, pushed by the sergeant, to the chief’s office.

The chief regarded the dishevelled young woman who stood before him, swaying slightly. “Everybody else gone?” he asked the sergeant, and the other man nodded. “Right. I know some slave traders in the market. I’m going to take her there and sell her to them. They’ll sell her in another town.” He looked at the sergeant. “As usual, I’ll give you a third of whatever I get for her.”

The sergeant looked pleased, but also a little worried. “The men who didn’t get a go with her won’t be very happy.”

The chief shrugged. “Arrest a couple of the street girls and share them round. One cunt’s as good as another. Hold the fort here while I’m gone.”

A short while later, Serena was staggering through the streets, wearing a collar and lead, the other end of which the chief had a firm grip on. She was still naked, apart from a cloak he had thrown over her shoulders to make her less conspicuous. The front of the cloak often drifted open, and with her hands chained behind her she could not hold it together. Even without the collar and cuffs, she was still too weak and stiff from the gang-bang to be capable of any escape attempt.

Fortunately, she didn’t have to. As the chief rounded an alley corner, a heavy vase dropped on his head from a first floor window. He immediately collapsed. The man she now knew as Harvey James appeared in the window, and moments later was at her side. He checked to make sure her captor was indeed unconscious, and then found the keys to unlock Serena’s bonds. She was too surprised to make any comment.

He smiled at her. “I’ve got two horses ready to go around the back. Come on!”

“Wait! All my clothes are back at the hotel!” More to the point, so was her sword.

“No they’re not, I collected them. They’re loaded on the horse.”

Indeed they were, and her sword too. They were soon making their way out of the town. Riding was painful for Serena, but she was happy not to stop until they were several hours away. Only when he finally did call a halt and they dismounted did either of them speak.

“You didn’t think I’d let them sell you to some fat old sod, did you?” He smiled winningly. Serena said nothing, but just looked at him. “I’m sorry if they gave you a rough time,” he went on, “but while they did, I was cleaning up. You should have heard the calls for police when they found they’d been burgled, and nobody was coming.” He laughed. “That rogue of a police chief will have a hard time explaining where all his men were. I knew he’d try to sell you to the traders: he always does. So, I was ready.”

Still Serena said nothing, but she had been dressing herself whilst he spoke. She had to do so very gingerly, particularly near her bottom. The weals had hardened: she estimated that she would be in pain for over a week. However, she had recovered some of her energy and strength.

He moved closer. "I got a really good haul: I'll share it with you. Come on, give me a kiss and say you forgive me."

Still saying nothing, Serena held her arms out invitingly. He pulled her gently to him, gentler still after she winced as he touched a bruise, and put his arms around her. She immediately reached for his trousers and unbuckled them, pulling them down to his ankles. He murmured in contentment, and reached inside her tunic to her breasts. Then, he gasped in pain, doubled up, and slumped to the floor. Serena had kneed him very hard in his now unprotected privates. An expertly delivered follow-up chop to the neck ensured that he remained out of things for the next ten minutes.

When he awoke, he found his arms bound behind him. His trousers were still around his ankles, and Serena was standing over him. When he started to speak, she kicked him hard.

"Shut up and listen," she said, and although her voice was as feminine as ever there was a determination in it that he had not heard before. "Look," she said simply, and turned around and lowered her shorts, showing him her heavily welted bottom. "There are plenty of other marks as well," she went on, replacing her shorts, "and I must have been raped by about twenty or so of those swine. I didn't ask to be part of your scheme, so for that I'm going to take all of your little acquisitions." In despair, he saw that the bags of jewels were already loaded onto Serena's horse. "And if you think that I was stupid enough to stay with you long enough for you to lead me to the slavers and make a little extra profit, then forget it. I haven't tied you too tightly: you should be able to free yourself in an hour or so."

She mounted her horse and looked at him, twirling one of the more expensive bracelets he had purloined around her index finger. "But don't take it all too hard, Harvey: I still like you a little bit." And with that, she spurred her horse and was gone.

Chapter Sixteen

Extract from “A Concise History of the 21st Century” by Aaron Svenson:

“Entertainment, in the post-apocalypse world, had of course changed considerably. Such things as television, radio and cinema no longer existed, of course. For the masses, live entertainment came from such things as gladiator arenas, travelling shows and the odd sports fixture. For the wealthy, there were houses of pleasure, offering sexual services or just bathing and massage in waiting on every whim. Unlike the previous, rather repressed century, there was no ignominy in going to such places. Quite the opposite: as they were financially elitist, they were the equivalent of the twentieth century golf clubs. Phrases such as “the nineteenth hole”, of course, carried new and rather different meanings!”

There was a good crowd today, forty or so people, as usual nearly all men. The circus would do well from spectators’ money alone.

Serena stepped from the curtained wing onto the stage. The crowd went wild. Although she had been here only a week or so, she was already a great favourite.

It was not hard to see why. A mane of striking copper-blond hair framed a truly lovely face. Her figure was perfection, but as she was stripped to the waist her flawlessly sculpted, firm young breasts could be seen in all their glory. Tight black tracksuit bottoms accentuated the smooth curves of her bottom and legs. The material was real quality, pre-war as all the best stuff was, but hardly worn. The crowd, of course, would have preferred her naked, but Serena couldn’t have that. Leaving aside the tattered remains of her modesty, going naked would have revealed her slave brand. Whilst she was some way from the city of Torton where she had been branded, the symbol, a simple letter “S”, was fairly commonly used. If it was reported to the city authorities here, they might use the excuse to try to take her for their own. She was not eager to have half a dozen armed city guards knocking on her door to arrest her - after, of course, they had their own fun.

She stepped into the ring, a circular area marked with a piece of rope along the ground, and looked at her latest opponent. He didn’t look so tough. Also stripped to the waist, he was a bit skinny on the arms and chest. When the bell went, he rushed forwards and made the usual mistake of grasping her breasts rather than attempting to seriously subdue her.

She moved fluidly to the side, taking his arm in one hand and leaving her foot out so that he tripped over it and fell into the dust. The crowd loved it. When he came back at her, she performed a similar manoeuvre, and this went on for a minute or two. He was getting a good feel of her breasts, but taking a lot of falls for it, which was what the audience wanted to see. Eventually, as she sensed the crowd begin to get bored, Serena wrapped him up in a wrestling hold she had learned in the arena and threatened to dislocate his shoulder unless he surrendered. Already feeling as if his arm was on the verge of being pulled out of its socket, he did so, quickly.

The crowd applauded, and the man was subjected to some fairly good-natured ribbing as he rejoined them. They saw no great shame, however, in him losing to Serena. She had quickly carved out a reputation as a tough fighter, although usually only challengers below a certain weight were allowed to face her. They paid for the privilege of doing so, of course, but if they could beat her they would win “a night in with her”, as it had been advertised. It had not been mentioned that, in addition to her other talents, she was a trained pleasure slave, because she had not told her employers that. The man who won her, of course, would find that out - anyone who could beat her, as far as she was concerned, would have earned everything she could give for a night - but as yet nobody had qualified. As it would again mean exposing her brand and risking discovery, she did not intend to let anybody do so. One of the top male wrestlers with the show had taken her on in a special challenge match, without the usual prize. Although he had beaten her, he did not do so easily or quickly: she had evaded him well, and also flipped him onto his backside twice, so that afterwards he roared with

delight as he put his arm around her and announced to the crowd that there was no shame in losing to such a warrior. After that, her reputation grew quickly.

She had done her two matches for this afternoon's show, and now the jugglers and acrobats were taking over. Serena went backstage and put her top back on, a white athletics vest that contrasted beautifully with the black bottoms. She replaced her trainers and strapped on her sword, Excalibur. She always felt vulnerable without it. It was uncommon, although far from unheard of, for women to be armed in this city; about half of the men were. Those women who were armed usually carried short knives rather than her very visible and threatening sword. Serena saw her employer and took her pay for the day. She was well paid, her money having doubled as her popularity soared. She needed the money, as she spent much of her free time at a certain house, being bathed, massaged, fêted on and pampered for the first time in her life. She found it relaxing and enjoyable. Selected attendants there had seen her brand - there had been no alternative - but she was popular there too. They would keep her secret.

She had nothing to do for a few hours: she couldn't afford to spend all her time in the pleasure house, and anyway one can have too much of a good thing. She strolled round the shops, and then past the market. It was the day for selling slaves, and Serena could not help but draw nearer to the auction. It had occurred to her that she might just by coincidence see Helen being sold, in which case she could buy and free her friend. (She and Helen had endured several months of slavery together before being sold to different owners. It was several months more before she fought her way to freedom, and there seemed no way to track Helen down, even if she had dared go back to Torton, where she was still wanted for killing the king's brother.)

A pretty young girl stood naked and unhappy on the stage, torn between the need to cover her bare charms from the audience's view and fear of the whip held in the auctioneer's hand. Serena remembered how she had felt and was sympathetic to the girl, but there was nothing she could do. Anyway, it was no concern of hers. She had told herself firmly after that adventure with Paula that she must look out for number one and not go sailing in every time she saw some poor girl being abused.

She wandered around to the less crowded area around the corner, where three more girls and two men were in the pens waiting their turn to go on stage. The girls were all naked, the men dressed in rags. A few men stood around, poking and prodding and groping the girls as they shrunk back. Their wrists were cuffed together, and a single chain running through the eyelet of each pair of cuffs ensured that they were going nowhere. Two guards stood by.

Suddenly clouds of white smoke began to pour out of somewhere. Within seconds the whole area was full of it. Those at the centre were coughing and spluttering; Serena, closer to the outside, was less affected. As the townsfolk panicked, she saw a shadowy figure moving with purpose through the fog. Curious, she moved closer, avoiding the dense epicentre of what was evidently some sort of smoke bomb. There was the sound of a chain being sliced by a sword, and two more dull thuds followed by grunts of surprised pain, then two louder thumps as (presumably) the guards slumped unconscious to the floor. The smoke was beginning to clear a little, and Serena could see a handsome young man leading the five slaves, now free except for the handcuffs, away from the scene.

Even more curious, Serena moved to follow them. Nobody else seemed to have realised what was going on, helped by a couple of men who were screaming blue murder on the other side of the pens and drawing everybody's attention over there. Serena smiled, recognising a staged diversion - no doubt the two men would disappear in the confusion in a moment or two - and continued to follow the escapees.

It was a well planned stunt, and it would have succeeded but for the sheerest piece of bad luck. As the group made it's way down a side street, the slaves still dazed by what was happening, they ran into a group of five guards on their way somewhere or other. The commanding officer amongst them, a bright-witted young man looking for promotion, immediately realised the situation and following his lead the group of them drew swords. The young man leading the slaves drew his own, but the battle was clearly not going to last long. The male slaves tried to get in the way of some of the guards, but with hands locked behind them they were little use. The girls cringed back. There was an opening clash of swords, but the valiant young man had little chance.

“Sod it,” Serena cursed under her breath. This is no business of mine, she told herself. “Damn and blast it,” she said rather louder, as she watched the young man being forced backwards. Against so many swords, having to concentrate on not being surrounded, he couldn’t last another half minute before they skewered him. Serena gave up her inner battle. “Oh, TO HELL WITH IT!”

The soldiers were not expecting another attack from a different angle, and sixty kilos of copper-blond fury, sword drawn, put them off-balance. Serena’s fist crashed into the first’s chin as he looked round. The next one spun around to face her and brought his sword instinctively up, but a single swing from Excalibur knocked it to the side and her heel drove into his midriff, doubling him up. The young man took advantage of the diversion to despatch his own opponent with a thrust of his sword. The two remaining guards tried to fall back and re-group, but the flashing blades of Serena and the young man were on them in an instant. Both backed off from the furious double onslaught, but in addition to still being surprised, they were technically far inferior to their attackers and soon lay in twin pools of blood on the ground.

There was no time to celebrate. The two first guards were beginning to recover, and there were other sounds of pursuit. “Come on, through here,” the young man cried and led the slaves and Serena through a doorway. He locked and bolted the heavy door behind them, then led them down a passageway that emerged into another street. “That should hold them for a while,” he said to Serena. “There’s no other quick way from that street to this, and they won’t break that door down in a hurry. You’re good, whoever you are, but I don’t think either of us wants to fight the entire local police force. Come on, this way.”

“Wait! We can’t go yet! We’ve got to go back!”

Everybody turned towards the young slave girl who had spoken. She quailed a little under the young man’s fiery glance, but insisted, “we’ve got to go back and rescue the other girl, the one on the stage!”

“Now look,” the young man interrupted angrily, but the girl went on, “she’s my sister!”

The young man softened his tone, but replied firmly. “I’m sorry to hear that, but what do you expect me to do? Go and fight the whole city to get her back? There’s nothing I can do, nor this young lady her who’s kindly saved our bacon.”

“Serena,” our heroine introduced herself.

“Vince,” he countered, not taking his eyes off the young girl. She could only have been about seventeen, her sister (it turned out) a year older. “Now you don’t have to come with us, you can go back to her; but they’ll only sell you off to some fat old lecher and you won’t see your sister again anyhow.” The girl hesitated, not knowing what to do and looking very forlorn.

“Wait a minute,” said Serena. “I don’t think the commotion you caused really spread to the auction square. Those guards probably knew me and so I’ll have to get out of town, but the alarm won’t go out for a while yet, and they certainly won’t expect me to go back to the square. I’ll at least find out who she gets sold to: they won’t have finished the auction yet, she was only just starting to be displayed. I might be able to get her away, or we’ll at least know where to look later.”

“But they were going to brand us as they sold us!” wailed the girl, but then she quietened down as Serena glared at her. “I’m sorry; yes, if you could I would be so grateful ...”

Serena quietened her with a gesture; they had no time for such things now. “You’ve obviously got all this planned, presumably including your escape,” she said to Vince. “Where shall I meet you?”

“Outside the old warehouse on Vale Street. There’s an old removal van parked outside.” He smiled briefly. “Guess what we remove in it. No more than half an hour.”

Serena nodded and they moved off in different directions, the escaped slaves following Vince. She hurried back to the auction square. News of the escape, although no details, had got back to them, and the auctioneer had used this to bump up the price of what was now the only slave on offer today. Serena looked at the girl as the bidding was concluded. She could see the family resemblance to the younger sister. They were both dark-haired, with impish upturned noses and similarly shaped apple breasts, but it was the deep green eyes that connected them most clearly. The younger girl had only a thin covering of pubic hair, whereas this one had longer curls contrasting with the straighter but equally dark hair on her head.

The sale concluded and the buyer - who was a middle-aged woman - nodding her consent, the auctioneer and another man grasped the girl and moved her towards a glowing hot brazier at the side of the stage. The girl stared at it, petrified with shock so that she only resisted feebly. Serena, who had been through this ordeal herself, would have liked to have spared the girl this, but there was no way. A few moments later, there was a hiss of hot iron on human flesh and a shriek of pain from the girl. Somehow the method used must be different here, because they didn't need to bandage her leg (the brand was on the inside upper thigh, unlike Serena's which was on the outer side of the thigh); instead she was led, sobbing and limping, to the edge of the stage where a large male bodyguard took custody of her. Evidently the buyer was a regular customer, to be sent the account later. The bodyguard rejoined his mistress and they began to walk away from the square, the limping girl's wrist firmly in the man's paw and thus being pulled along.

Perfect, thought Serena, and followed them.

They moved off down the at first crowded streets, but then into the less frequented alleys, taking a short-cut back to the upper class residential area. With such a large and powerful guard, the woman wasn't worried about being mugged. More fool her, Serena smiled to herself. Neither the guard's size or his sword cut any ice with her.

She took another parallel alley and raced to overtake them. When they turned a corner, they found her lying on the floor, apparently dazed, Excalibur lying by her side. "Help me, please," she gasped in her best defenceless voice.

The woman looked disdainful, but the guard came over. He undoubtedly wouldn't have been so concerned if Serena had not been so beautiful. "What's the matter?" he asked, helping her to her feet.

Her reply was to grasp his arm, push her bottom between his legs and lift with her legs, lifting him into the air and over her shoulder. As he hit the ground very heavily, her hand expertly chopped once to the side of his neck. He grunted and lay still.

In no more than a second Serena was on her feet, Excalibur in her hand. The woman, frightened almost to death at seeing her giant minder so easily taken out, stared at Serena, then turned and fled.

"Well, that's blown any last chance of me staying in this town," Serena observed wryly. Within an hour, this influential woman would have her description being sent out to all the militia, if it wasn't already. Serena turned to the naked girl staring at her. "Come on, you," she said; "I've come to reunite you with your sister."

The girl's eyes opened wide. "You know where Charlene is?"

"Yes, and if you follow me you can join her, and that's as free women, not slaves. Coming?"

The girl, whose name was Lucy, came. She was still limping from her branding, but she kept up gamely. Serena's first impulse was to go straight to the rendezvous, but they were very close to the room she had rented and she decided to go there first. There wasn't much to collect: a few changes of clothes flung into a bag and a couple of water canteens that could come in handy. The most important item was her bag of money, hidden under a floor-board. She found an outfit for Lucy to wear which would cover her brand and make it less obvious that she was an escapee. Then they made their way quickly and discretely to Vale Street. Lucy followed wordlessly: she was still assimilating the events of the day.

Vince was there. The van was an ancient one, the engine long since having packed up and being replaced by a set of horses' reins. Trouble was, there weren't any horses.

Vince looked at the limping girl by Serena's side, and raised his eyebrows. "Is this her?" Serena nodded. Vince again looked impressed. "Quite the little miracle worker, aren't you?" he said with genuine admiration.

Serena smiled. "You're not so bad yourself. Now are we going to swap compliments all day, or get out of here?"

He laughed, and banged on the side of the van. The escaped slaves poured out. Vince or one of his cohorts was obviously good at picking locks, because the handcuffs were gone, although the girls were still naked and the young men still in rags. Charlene spotted Lucy and the two fell into each other's arms.

"I thought I'd never see you again," Charlene said. "I thought - oh!"

The exclamation came as she accidentally brushed against her elder sister's thigh, and Lucy winced with pain, so that Charlene's attention was drawn to the brand, which she hadn't seen before.

"It could be worse," Lucy said pragmatically. Turning to her rescuer, she said, "Serena, I can't thank you enough for what you did."

Charlene joined in. "Yes, you were wonderful. I'm sorry for how I acted before."

Serena was an only child, but she could understand how two young girls, alone and enslaved in this savage land, would become very close. She remembered Helen, her own friend, and smiled. "My pleasure," she said simply, "but don't forget Vince here. It was his stunt in the first place."

All four of the escaped girls crowded around Vince, as did the two male escapees, but Vince waived them all aside. "Later," he said firmly. "We're not out of the woods yet. Now listen: we have to get out of town, and this van is our escape route. However, we can't hide you all inside it; so, the idea is that you are going to pull it." He smiled. "The guards will be looking for escaped slaves: they won't notice slaves themselves."

"Brilliant, if it works," Serena observed. "They'll be in the guards' sight all along, and won't be seen."

"It works," Vince said. "This isn't the first time we've tried it." Two men, who Serena recognised as the distraction-makers, and Vince were busy harnessing the girls up to the van. A long pole led from the front of the van, with four bars going out across it at right angles, so making eight "berths" for the human horses. The two male slaves were put on the front two berths; they were handcuffed to the bar, but the cuffs were fixed in such a way that they were not actually locked, although they looked it. "In the unlikely event of us being rumbled," Vince explained, "we either fight our way out or split up and all run for it." The four girls were similarly attached to the next two pairs of berths, leaving the pair at the back empty. "There is one final thing," Vince said. "If the guards are watching, the drivers may have to act normally. We might have to whip you once or twice. I apologise in advance if that turns out to be the case." None of the girls complained: that had suffered far worse, and this unexpected chance for freedom was priceless.

"And where do we go?" Serena asked.

"Normally, I hide in the back of the van. There's just about room for both of us."

It was tempting, but not the right solution. Serena shook her head. "That's a heavy van, and the extra weight of two of us won't help. You take the one spare berth, I'll take the other."

Vince was a little relieved: clearly he had come to the same conclusion himself. However, there was a slight drawback that he had to point out. "The only trouble is that clothed female slaves are so unusual as to attract attention. You'll have to go naked."

"I know." Not taking her eyes off him, Serena unbuckled her sword belt, then in one swift motion pulled her top off. She was not wearing a bra and her firm orbs swung free. Her fingers pushed into the waistband of her tight shorts, pushing them and her knickers down in one go. Moments later she was naked.

Vince looked at her with frank admiration. His eyes had noted her brand, which had drawn one or two gasps of surprise from the other girls, but he did not mention it. Serena found herself, for once, not minding being nude. She returned his gaze steadily, almost challengingly. With a smile at the corners of her lips, she said mockingly, "you're going to have to take a couple of things off yourself."

Vince returned her smile, and stripped down to his shorts. He had a good body, and Serena didn't bother to hide her own interest. Then they scooped their clothes up, hid them in the back of the van, and the two of them were shackled up to the pole. Vince looked across at Serena, the beauty of her clear sky-blue eyes almost enough to keep his eyes from her full and firm young breasts. "I'll have to be careful not to push too hard, otherwise we'll over-balance," he said.

"Push as hard as you like," said Serena sweetly. "I'll match you." Despite her undoubted prowess, they both knew she couldn't quite do that: but as soon as they got going, she showed that she was not so far away from it.

It was a hard and gruelling journey. Serena was no stranger to physical work like this after her time at the electricity wheel, but it was still tough going, more so since she wanted to come as close to matching Vince as she could. The pairs in front of them kicked up dust, which helped in one way because her eye-catching copper-blond hair was soon a more mousy colour, helping her disguise.

But the guards never queried them, although since this was not a walled town, they had few problems getting out anyway. Even once away from the town, however, they could not relax: out of sight of the townsfolk, the two male drivers took over from two of the slave girls to increase their speed, in case anybody realised and came after them. Serena continued to push for all she was worth, pleased that Vince was in such good shape and at the same time gratified that he was having to work hard to match her pushing. They covered a lot of ground quickly, until they came to a rendezvous about three miles outside the town. A group of men were waiting with a set of four horses to take over the pulling of the van.

The tired band of people piled into the back of the van. Serena moved towards where her clothes were hidden, and dressed herself once more. There was time now for Vince (once he had got his breath back, Serena noticed with a smile) to speak to them.

“When we reach our camp, you are free to go, all of you. We have some clothes you can have, but not much else, I’m afraid. However, although there’s no obligation, you could stay for a couple of weeks, or longer if you want, and help out in return for what we’ve done for you.” Heads were nodding, willingly. “The girls who are not virgins, you might even be prepared to offer something else, but if so spread it around the gang. I and my two distractors here might have done the visible work, but there’s four others backing us up who we couldn’t succeed without.”

A short but lovely young girl nodded thoughtfully. “If you want me, you can have me: you, or any of your team,” she said quietly, with an obvious effort but wholeheartedly. The other girls, some after some consideration, all nodded.

Serena looked at Vince. “And what about me?”

He turned to her and gazed into the azure pools of her eyes. “Apart from being the most stunningly gorgeous creature I’ve ever had the pleasure to meet, you’re one hell of a warrior. Our group goes around freeing slaves, stealing from the rich and generally tweaking the nose of corrupt authority. If you want to join us, you’ll be very welcome.”

Serena looked around at the results of her adventure, and found her spirit stir within her. “I’ll stay with you,” she said simply, and then added, “and if you so much as look at one of those other girls, mister, I’ll scratch your eyes out. You’re mine, at least till I’ve had a chance to show you that you’d be crazy to pick anybody else.”

And before Vince could object - not that he was likely to - her lips were on his.

Chapter Seventeen

Extract from “A Concise History of the 21st Century” by Aaron Svenson:

“In the new civilisation following the Third World War, civic authorities, where they existed at all, had changed quite radically.

“In the towns which now passed as cities (the old cities having for the most part been destroyed), most had their own kings or otherwise unelected rulers. They levied taxes which paid for a police force of some kind, which functioned as much to protect the ruler as the citizenry in general. Few rulers were sufficiently secure to behave as tyrants: they ruled with a loose hand, aware that if they tried to turn it into an iron fist, it would disintegrate into a trickle of sand. Most such rulers needed the support of the citizens and the visits of traders and so made some efforts to enforce law and order, after a fashion. There was no advantage, of course, in helping slaves, or any good political reason to suppress slavery.

“Architecture had changed, too. Town buildings were no longer spread out, but closely grouped in order to facilitate defence against raiders, and also because of the much more limited availability of transport. Many towns without electricity already resembled medieval settlements.”

“Outside the towns, there was in practice no law at all. Only the strong survived, and prospered.”

Vince studied the scene through the binoculars for a moment, then wordlessly handed them to Serena. She found them of little use: they were old and difficult to focus. Still, there was no mistaking the caravan headed their way.

He spoke. “You still want to go through with this?”

She raised the binoculars to her eyes again, as much to escape his searching gaze as anything. “Yes.” Her voice sounded far from certain.

“It’s not going to be very pleasant.”

Serena made a gesture of annoyance, mainly prompted by nerves. “Let’s not discuss it all again, Vince. The trail leads here, and there’s only one way to infiltrate this group. You’re known to them, so are the other men in our band. I’m not. End of story.”

Vince sighed, and gave up the argument. He regarded Serena thoughtfully. She really was stunningly beautiful. The mane of blonde hair, with just a hint of copper, framed a flawless face, a perfect complexion and delicate eyes, nose and mouth that contrasted with the robust but elegant contours of her lithe, athletic and vibrant body. That body was currently hidden by clothes, but he knew it well in all its naked glory, for they had been lovers right from the day they met, some three months ago now.

Aware of his eyes upon her, Serena relented, and just a little of the tension left her. She knew that he was mentally undressing her, and wished they had time for the real thing. She loved Vince, and knew that he loved her. Of the many beatings she had received as a slave, one set she did not resent: those incurred whilst she had been trained as a pleasure slave. She had used every wile and technique she knew to hook Vince. They had been devastatingly effective, but their love ran deeper than that: they respected each other, trusted each other totally, and fought side by side as warriors. She had saved his life on the day they met, and once again since, and he had returned the favour on another of the many wild adventures they had shared since, and which may one day be recounted in these pages.

For Serena, life was very good. They spent their lives in ever more daring exploits, freeing slaves and tweaking the nose of corrupt authority and the bullying bandits. Many of those ex-slaves, with nowhere else to go, had stayed with them, and they were developing a large settlement. The half dozen main raiders in the group, of which Serena was the only female, were revered as saviours, as indeed they were. She respected each of the fighters, and knew that they respected her, treated her as an equal in all things.

But Vince was particularly special. Eventually, Serena wanted to have his children, something he was equally keen on: but that would come later. Right now, life was long days of love-making interspersed with brief periods of glorious mayhem. Long may they continue, was her view.

Still, one loose end had eluded her up to now, and was the reason for their presence here and now. But, if this plan worked, that would soon change.

Serena unbuckled her sword belt, and tossed the belt, sword and scabbard to Vince, who caught it deftly. She dismounted from her horse, and handed the reins to Vince as well. With a last look at him, she began to walk down the hill on which they stood, until she had reached the road where the caravan would soon pass. She looked up to where Vince had been, but he had faded from sight, although she knew that he was still watching.

She didn't have long to wait before the caravan appeared around a bend. There were five men on horses, one of whom was leading a line of naked slaves, each slave chained to the next by the neck and wrist. Most of the slaves were female, about eight or nine in total, with a couple of men, equally naked. There were also half a dozen wagons bearing assorted trade goods. The men on horses, and those driving the wagons, all had rifles. It would have been a dangerous convoy to attempt to ambush - which was why Serena's group had never tried it.

Just before the caravan had rounded the bend, Serena had begun walking in the opposite direction, to give the impression of a chance meeting. The scouts spotted her and were immediately alert, looking for signs of a trap. The rest of the caravan then hove into view, and one of the men on horseback called a halt. The line of slaves, looking forlorn and miserable, stopped, but were not allowed to sit down. Serena gave what looked to be a cursory glance down the line, saw what she had hoped to see, and her heart leapt. However, she gave no outward sign. Meanwhile, the man eyed Serena suspiciously, but also appreciatively.

She went into her planned routine. "Oh, excuse me," she said, "my horse bolted and threw me. He got spooked by a snake. I was heading for Wells Springs: is it far from here?"

"About twenty miles," the man said non-committally. "Your horse hasn't come past us."

"No, he went off in the other direction. I spent several hours trying to find him, but no luck. Of course, my money, water, clothes and everything were in the saddlebags."

"So what are you going to do at Wells Springs?"

"Oh, I've got an old uncle there. He didn't know I was coming, but he'll help me out."

A smile touched the corners of the man's mouth. "Do you come from around here?"

"No, from Torton."

"That's a long way to come."

"Well, I wanted to see this uncle. He's an old man now, and I'm afraid he won't be around much longer. I'm getting married next month, and it's kind of a family tradition to get his blessing."

"It's a dangerous journey for a woman to make on her own."

Serena eyed the coffle of nude slaves as if the same idea had just occurred to her. "I did have a gun," she explained, "but I lost it with my horse. Anyway, I'd best be on my way." She made to walk past him.

He moved his horse into her path, and smiled wickedly. "Baby, you're not going anywhere. At least, not in that direction."

He dismounted and stood in front of her. Out of the corner of her eye, she also saw another of the men, still on horseback, move around behind her to cut off any retreat. The others remained alert, still mindful of the possibility of ambush. The slaves took little notice: doubtless they had seen this scenario several times before, possibly even been in Serena's place.

Serena looked into the man's eyes, and only a fool could fail to read the lust and greed in them. However, there was nothing to do except bluff. She made to walk past him, but he again stepped into her path, and her "excuse me" bounced off him like peas off a city wall. He smiled, or more accurately leered, again.

"Come on, girlie, you can't be that stupid. See that lot?" He nodded in the direction of the line of captives. "They're slaves. We deal in slaves, amongst other things. And we've just acquired a nice new bit of stock."

Serena began to back away, but backed straight into the other man. A pair of male hands grabbed her upper arms. Serena struggled for a moment, then gave up. "Please," she whispered.

"Sorry, baby, but business is business. You'll fetch a good price at auction." He reached out and stroked Serena's cheek. "A very good price," he repeated thoughtfully.

The other man had relaxed a little. Careful not to show all her strength, Serena wrenched free of his grip and made a clumsy run for it. She got less than five yards before her blonde mane of hair was grabbed and she was brought to a halt. The man who had been behind her pulled her back, and the one who had been speaking to her produced a riding crop from somewhere. There was brief swish, and Serena felt a line of fiery pain around her thigh. She squealed in anguish, and she didn't have to fake it. It hurt!

"You'd better learn some obedience, baby, and quick," the man said. "Don't try anything like that again."

"Please," Serena gasped. "Perhaps my uncle could give you a ransom ..."

The man shrugged. "Maybe we'll invite him to the auction," he laughed.

"But I'm getting married next month!"

"Well, marriage or slavery, all the same really. Anyway, you're too sexy to belong to just one man. Are you a virgin?"

"Better give us the truth, kid," the other man smirked. "We can check it easily enough."

Serena didn't doubt it. She lowered her eyes and said "no" quietly.

"Pity, that would have improved your price even more," the first man said. "Ah well, shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth."

"Or a gift slut in the cunt," said the other man, and guffawed.

"Yeah. Now, baby, being a slave's nice and easy. All you have to do is whatever you're told, and always be quick about it, understand?"

"Yes," said Serena hastily as he waved the crop almost in her face. Then she blurted out, "oh, how can this be happening to me?"

"It's happened, so you'd better get used to it. And only speak when you're spoken to, unless you want some more of this." He waved the crop again. "Now, let's get you chained to the line."

Eyes lowered, Serena took a step towards the coffle, only to be stopped by the man again. "Ain't you forgotten something?" he asked. She looked at him, a puzzled expression on her face. "Slaves don't go around dressed," he pointed out. "So get your clothes off. And be careful not to rip them: I can sell them in the market. You won't need 'em any more."

"No, please," Serena said softly, then cringed as he raised the crop threateningly and hurriedly began to unbutton her blouse. She pulled it off and handed it to him. Underneath, she wore no bra, and her excellent breasts got an appreciative stare from several of the men on horseback.

"Not bad," the man said. "Now the shorts."

Serena looked desperate, but suddenly the man behind her grasped the shorts and yanked them down. She felt the warm sun on her pubic triangle, but the men's attention was immediately drawn to something else: her now exposed brand. There was quiet for a few moments, then the man spoke once more.

"I reckon you've got a bit of explaining to do, baby," he said quietly and menacingly. "And this time it had better be the truth."

"Yes, master." Serena used the word for the first time. "I was a slave on a farm about twenty miles away. Last night, the master took me to his bed, as he often did, but he'd had a lot to drink, and he forgot to chain me up afterwards, and also he fell into a very heavy sleep. I was able to steal some clothes and a horse and make a run for it. Then the horse bolted - that part is true. I was heading for Wells Springs when I ran into you."

"Then you've simply exchanged one owner for another," he said.

"Her owner might cough up a reward for her return," the man behind her suggested.

The leader shook his head. "Nah, we'd get more for a looker like her at auction than a reward from some poverty-stricken farmer." Then: "your accent: you're not Ozzie, are you?"

"No, master. I was born into slavery in England. My mother was a slave. I was sold at sixteen, five years ago. My new owner took my virginity, branded me and brought me to Australia with him,

but he fell on hard times and sold me to the farmer in return for some cattle he badly needed.” Actually, Serena’s brand was only a year old, but it was impossible to tell such things. As she talked, she had, in response to his gesture, removed her shorts from around her ankles, and also her shoes. Apparently resigned to her fate, she made to take her place in the coffle, but again he stopped her.

“You lied to me, baby. You’re going to regret that. Turn around and bend over that rock shelf.”

Again without demur, Serena did as she was told. The rock shelf was about waist height, and she felt the dusty rock, warmed by the sun, come into contact with first her tummy, then the underside of her breasts as she lowered herself down. Responding to a further instruction, she spread her arms out at right angles from her body.

He surveyed the magnificent bottom jutting out invitingly. Serena stared stoically at the rock in front of her, listening with awful anticipation to the swish of the crop. Then she jerked and flinched as it bit agonisingly into her buttocks, but she made no sound. An angry red line appeared on her bottom. He whiplashed the crop into her again. Once more she jerked and flinched, and there was the slightest of gasps this time, but she held her position. Serena knew that to break position would only mean greater punishment, but she knew from bitter experience that it was always a dreadful effort to hold yourself in place, feeling the pain of the strokes already received and waiting for the instrument of torture to descend again, and worse still, to hear the whistle of wind as it flew towards her, a split-second before impact ...

The third stroke elicited another gasp, but Serena held her position again. The man who had been behind her, John, watched with lustful interest. He liked nothing better than to see a really pretty girl get cropped, and this one was a real peach. Positioned so that he could see her face, he watched her lovely features contort into a grimace as the crop took its third bite. For a moment, her even white teeth chewed in anguish on her lower lip, then were gone. It was not wise to be biting one’s lip when the crop descended.

Thwack! The fourth blow descended. John saw Serena’s shoulders lift for a moment, then with an effort she forced herself back into position. A faint trickle of sweat was running down from her armpit. He knew that girls often sweated when under the lash: fear and pain seem to stimulate the sweat glands, whatever they were. John liked to see that. Thwack! The fifth blow landed. John watched Serena’s hands clench into small, delicate fists and unclench again. The soft blonde hairs on her forearms, bleached by long exposure to the sun, were standing up, swaying slightly in a momentary breeze.

To John’s disappointment and Serena’s immense relief, the man lowered the crop. “Alright, girlie, get into the coffle. I hope I don’t have to discipline you again.”

“I hope so too, master,” Serena said with genuine feeling and a lump in her throat. Her bum blazed hot: she had experienced worse, but that was no comfort. She straightened up stiffly, the movement bringing fresh pain to her welted arse, and walked gingerly over to the rear of the coffle. Despite her pain, she was careful to avoid passing near the front of the coffle, and equally careful to disguise the fact.

The coffle consisted of a long silver chain with a neck collar every four or five feet. Most of the collars were worn by slaves, but there were one or two vacant ones, including the last but one position, which was where Serena arrived. In front of her was an elfin brunette who could not have been more than seventeen, with small but pert breasts, a flat tummy and a pubic mound covered by a thin layer of curly brown hair. Behind her was one of the two male slaves. He must have been in his late thirties or early forties, thin, slightly wizened in fact, balding and looking rather pathetic. His small penis hung dejectedly between his legs, perking up only slightly as he drank in the sight of Serena’s exposed front. She felt sorry for him: all this nude young female flesh around - not one of the girls in the line could have been over twenty-five - and as a male slave in early middle age he had little chance of sampling any of it.

Serena turned to face the front, and lifted her golden hair so that the collar could be fitted around her neck. She felt the cold steel on her throat, and heard the lock snap shut. As an extra security precaution, the right wrist of each slave was also linked together in a similar chain. Serena held her arm out and felt the metal encase her wrist, and the lock again click into place. The horrible sensations of being a slave were there for her to feel: the chains around her wrist and neck, the

nakedness before all and sundry, the rough ground beneath her bare feet, and (at this moment) the worst of all, a freshly whipped bum.

The two men remounted, and the caravan began to move. Serena began to walk, doing her best to ignore the extra discomfort the movement caused her sore bottom. She could see little ahead of her except for the narrow shoulders, smooth back, slim waist and petite rear of the brunette, whilst behind her the male slave had exchanged that view for the one of Serena's slightly more voluptuous but currently weal-striped form. Serena did not begrudge him that view; she knew only too well how hard the life of a slave was.

And that, she reflected, was so often that in this cruel world. One minute a young woman, a month away from marriage and with few cares in the world: next minute, a stripped and beaten slave, on her way to be sold. Of course, that story had not been true, but it could have been. In a matter of moments, reduced to a mere plaything of men, that status to be your lot quite possibly for the rest of your life. Indeed, that was more or less what had happened to Serena herself, early two years ago now. Except that she had eventually escaped that fate, and recently spent much time and effort helping others to escape it too, only to now be apparently back to where she started.

Hours passed. It was a hard slog, but Serena had been on forced marches before. After a couple of hours, an afternoon break was called. The coffle was allowed to lie down and rest, but a couple of the guards came to enjoy themselves with the slave girls. They didn't bother to release them from the coffle, but just raped them where they lay. Serena noted that the other guards remained on duty, confirming that the caravan would have been a far from soft target for ambush.

The leader came over to her. She had been expecting this, just as she had been fairly certain that she would get a beating somewhere along the way.

He leered at her. "Well, baby, I might get a better price for you if I can give a personal recommendation on what you're like. So consider this a free sample." He began to unzip his trousers.

Serena lay on her back and opened her legs to receive him. He was soon happily thrusting away inside her. He was a good size, but his technique was crude; however, Serena, although she allowed him free access without any least resistance, made no effort to use her considerable skills to help him. After all, he did not know she had been a pleasure slave. One or two of the guards watched, and there were the inevitable coarse comments. Serena suffered the indignity of it all in silence at first, but he did begin to arouse her a little, which she neither resisted or encouraged, and little gasps escaped her, although she did not reach orgasm. It was, of course, by no means the first time she had been raped in front of an audience. She could not close her eyes and pretend it was Vince, because Vince would never have mauled and kneaded her breasts the way this man was doing.

When it was over, his only comment was a sneering "not bad, baby," as he dressed himself and walked off. Serena remained where she lay, resting before the march started once more. The brunette to one side of her pretended that nothing had happened, but the male slave on the other side watched throughout, probably, she thought, wishing he could have been in the leader's shoes. However, when the leader had gone, he did reach over and touch Serena on the arm. When she turned to look at him, there was an apologetic look of sympathy in his eyes which, although it did nothing to help her, raised her opinion of him as the march began once more.

Eventually they came to a fortified building, with a high wall and gate around it. It wasn't that big, but it looked very difficult to get into without the occupiers' permission. It would not be too difficult to reach the wall, as there was plenty of cover; but scaling it was a different kettle of fish altogether. Serena, of course, was going in whether she liked it or not. The gates were opened and the caravan went inside. They closed once more with a rather intimidating clang.

The men began to unload the wagons, whilst the coffle was led to a cell inside the building. Overhearing talk, Serena gathered that they would be marched to another town for auction the next day; apart from her, the others had all been traded for goods currently in short supply, and were now being taken to a town where slaves were scarce and high prices paid.

They were taken inside the cell, and whilst guards watched, the coffle chains were removed. Each slave was then fitted with another ankle chain, which led to a heavy iron ball. Serena had heard of a ball and chain, but never actually seen one before. It was very effective: they could still move

around the cell, but not quickly, and running or fighting would be quite impossible. The cell door was also locked, naturally, and the guards left.

As soon as they had gone, Serena made her way over to the one slave she had been avoiding. The black-haired girl watched her coming, and when she got close said, "Serena? Is it really you?"

"Hello, Helen."

In the dark early days of her slavery, Serena had only one friend. They had talked little, but had been very close as they suffered together. Each had shared everything they had (which was virtually nothing) with the other, and neither had shirked from sharing both work and beatings. Then they had been sold in the market at Torton to different owners: Helen to a wealthy young man who had spotted her bathing, Serena to a tavern owner. Serena had not seen Helen since, whilst she herself had been re-sold to a harem where she was trained as a pleasure slave; then, after refusing anal sex to a customer and making a feeble attempt to escape, she had been sent to the arena where she had learnt, the hard way, how to fight, and found within herself the backbone and determination she never knew she had. Escaping from there, she had been through various adventures before meeting Vince and his band of slave liberators. She had long since wanted to free Helen, but did not know where she was, until very recently when she found the trail by pure chance.

The naked girls met in a long embrace. Only after that did Helen say, "I wasn't sure that it was you. You look very well."

"So do you." Serena surveyed her friend. Helen had jet-black hair, shoulder length but mostly tied in a ribbon behind her. She had been eighteen when Serena last saw her, which was a year ago, but her slightly high cheekbones and small, slightly snub nose kept her looking young and innocent. She had a fine body, with full, round but firm breasts and nice long legs. A neatly trimmed patch of dense black hair guarded the portals of her love haven. Like Serena, Helen was well used to the humiliation of being nude in public, and made no attempt to cover herself. Also like Serena, she had been changed in one respect since they last saw each other. "I see they branded you, too," Serena observed.

Helen's fingers instinctively touched her mark, like Serena's on the outside of her thigh. "The young man who bought me in the market tired of me after a few months. He sold me at an auction, and I was bought by a transport company. They branded me. By day I had to do clerical work, by night I was part of the entertainment at cocktail parties for management or visiting wagon drivers." She didn't have to explain what that entailed. "But they sold me in part exchange for a new wagon from these people. I gather I'm going to be auctioned in another town where they're short of slaves. And you? Why did you tell that story about how you became a slave, and pretend not to know me?"

"It's a long story; I'll tell you later. For now, listen: you're not going to be auctioned in another town. You're going to be free, and these bastards are going to be put out of business."

"Free?" Helen looked puzzled. In their days together, the two girls had come to accept their slavery. It was only later that Serena had discovered that it was possible to shape your own destiny. Helen had meanwhile experienced a further year of servitude to reinforce her acquiescence.

"Free," Serena repeated firmly. "We need to wait until it's dark. Get some rest, and I'll wake you later."

Leaving the puzzled Helen, Serena dragged her ball and chain back to a corner. She had several hours to kill. Most of the female slaves, tired from the long march, were making themselves as comfortable as they could on the stone floor, gathering what scraps of straw lay about to sleep on. The male slaves had not been segregated, and the younger one was rutting with one of the girls in another corner. It was, after all, about the only pleasure for slaves in this life: for her, a rare chance to do it voluntarily, and for him, a rare chance full stop. The other, older and more scrawny male, who had been behind Serena in the coffle, sat alone and miserable: none of the girls showed any interest in him. On impulse, Serena dragged her ball and chain over to him and sat down beside him. "Hi," she said quietly.

He looked up and smiled, and there was a genuine warmth in his smile, although he was also obviously surprised and pleased that any girl would talk to him. Serena did not fancy him in the least, but she had already decided what she was going to do. "Thanks for your gesture of sympathy earlier."

"For all the good it did you, you're welcome," he said. "How's your bum?"

“Still a bit sore, but getting better slowly, thanks.” Serena smiled wryly. “I imagine you had plenty of time to inspect the weals at close range along the march,” she said without a grudge.

He returned her smile. “I admit it, yes. You’ve got a lovely bum, and legs and back, too,” he added candidly.

Serena smiled. She had found that slaves were always more open about complementing each other’s bodies, perhaps because female slaves’ bodies were invariably on show, and also their lives revolved around their sexuality. She was facing him, making no effort to hide her tits and fanny. “And what’s the front view like?” she asked playfully.

“Fantastic,” he said, and she saw his still largely flaccid penis swell a little. She moved closer to him, and her hands reached out to his unimpressive body.

“Well,” she whispered, “now you can see if the goods are up to the packaging,” and she began to climb on top of him.

Some hours later, Serena judged that it was time. Everybody else appeared to be asleep. Holding her ball and chain in her hands to stop it rattling and waking anybody, she made her way over to Helen, who she had told to stay near to the cell door.

On the way she passed Eric, the male slave she had coupled with. He was sleeping soundly and contentedly, and she smiled as she looked at him. Once he had got over the shock of her offering herself to him, he had quickly become roused, but despite her skills he had ejaculated prematurely. However, not surprisingly for his first sex opportunity in several years, he soon recharged himself, although their second bout also ended sooner than it need have done. Eric was apologetic, but she was unworried: she had gone with him for his benefit, not her own. A great lover he was not, but Serena felt the warm glow of doing her good deed for the day.

However, another much larger good deed was about to start.

Serena woke Helen quickly and quietly. Then, as the younger girl watched, Serena reached behind her ear under her blond hair and pulled out a small piece of wire which had been taped there. She inserted it in the lock of her ankle bracelet, jiggled it a bit, and there was a soft click as the bracelet opened.

Helen’s own fetters were removed equally quickly, and then Serena silently led her to the cell door. Nobody stirred, and there was no sign of any guards. Why bother, when they were securely chained and the door locked? Serena went to work on the door lock as Helen watched, bemused. It took a while longer, but eventually she got it open. They slipped outside, and Serena closed and re-locked the door. She began to move down the corridor; although she had never been here before, she knew exactly where she was going.

Helen followed, bemused. “Serena, just what is going on?” she whispered. “If they find us out here, we’ll get the beatings of our lives. And how did you learn to pick locks like that?”

“Simon showed me. He’s the expert locksmith in our band.”

“Your band?”

“I haven’t time to explain right now. Come on.”

They made their way outside. There was a full moon, which gave quite a bit of light. Serena pointed silently to two sentries patrolling a balcony along the outside wall, and Helen nodded. Hugging the shadows, the girls ran barefoot around towards the rear of the wall. The sentries didn’t see them: they were looking out, not in. They came to a small but heavy gate, padlocked and bolted very securely. “Are we making a run for it?” Helen asked in a whisper.

“No,” Serena replied. “You’ll see. Keep an eye out for the sentries.”

It took some time for Serena to open this gate; she also had to stop and hide once as one of the sentries came by on the cat-walk above. But, eventually she was able to quietly ease it open. Within moments, Helen was startled to see two men appear and come inside.

The first of them was Vince. He and Serena kissed full on the lips, briefly but meaningfully. Then he hissed, “any problems?” Serena shook her head. “Was it bad?”

Serena shrugged. “Half a dozen strokes with a riding crop; one rape. No worse than I expected. Hi, Peter,” she added as the second man entered.

The second man surveyed Serena’s naked form in the moonlight. “Well, you needed some work on your all-over tan,” he said drily, and Serena responded by sticking her tongue out at him.

“All right, let’s get moving,” said Vince. “There are two sentries on the cat-walk. I’ll take one; Serena, you take the other. Peter, you sort out the armoury as we planned. Let’s go, people.”

They split up. Helen followed Serena, whispering, “Serena, what’s going on?”

“Shh, no time to explain now. Just keep quiet and out of sight.” Serena spotted the one guard, walking away from them along the cat-walk above their heads. Silently, she moved to the stairs, and moments later was creeping up behind him. Helen watched with baited breath. Serena was almost on her prey when some instinct or faint noise made him turn and see her. Then there was a blur of movement. A long, bare female leg lashed out; Serena’s one hand grasped his throat to prevent any noise and the other struck once, twice, three times. The man went limp, and Serena lowered him to the floor. By the time Helen got onto the balcony, Serena had his rifle.

“Where did you learn to fight like that?” Helen asked.

“The Torton arena, mainly,” Serena whispered briefly. Vince appeared on the cat-walk, also now holding a rifle and signalling that the other guard had been taken care of. They moved to the front gate and descended to ground level. It was the work of moments to open this one. A minute or so later, four more men appeared. The man called Peter reappeared with a handful of guns, which were distributed amongst the men. They took up positions on the cat-walk, facing every entrance to the building.

Peter joined Vince, Serena and Helen in front of the main gate. “All set?” Vince asked.

Peter nodded. “Any moment now,” he said.

Seconds later there was a small explosion. “Scratch one armoury,” Peter said. “The smoke bombs should follow up ... about now!”

Right on cue, smoke began to billow out of the house. The slavers, awoken by the sound of their weapons blowing up, milled around in chaos, then began to pour out of the house, driven by the smoke. They froze as they saw their own guns trained on them. Quickly and efficiently, they were rounded up. When the slaves were released from the cells, which hadn’t caught too much of the smoke, they emerged dazed and amazed into the now lit courtyard to see Serena, still naked, one of a group of commandos keeping the slavers under armed guard.

As the slaves emerged, the leader of their erstwhile owners, who had evaded capture up to then, was brought out under armed guard. His eyes fell on Serena, the girl he had beaten, raped and treated so contemptuously. The look on his face was no longer contempt, but fear and hatred.

Serena gave him her sexiest smile. “I’m afraid we’re going to be putting you out of business,” she said sweetly. “You know it wasn’t very bright of you to keep all your guns in one place when they weren’t being used.”

He scowled at her. “You’re that group that go around freeing slaves,” he guessed.

“Ah, what it is to be famous,” she said. “Yes, that’s us, but for you we’re going to make an exception. There’s a mining company we know that could use a dozen strong male slaves like you.” Her eyes flashed for a moment. “Branded, of course.”

“Go to Hell,” he said. “And your information wasn’t quite correct.” Before anybody could stop him, he pulled a tiny gun from his pocket.

Everything then seemed to happen in slow motion. Serena saw the gun appear, pointing at her, and looked down the barrel at death. There was a flash and bang as he pulled the trigger, but at the same time she could see something else moving at the periphery of her vision. Then she felt herself being shoved aside, and it was someone else who grunted in pain as the bullet struck home.

Reality returned to normal speed. Serena picked herself up off the floor. Two of her comrades had already wrestled the slavers’ leader to the floor, and were babbling apologies for not having searched him. Serena ignored them, concentrating on finding out who had just saved her life.

“Eric!” Her voice broke with anguish. The still naked male slave was lying in the dust, blood seeping from a wound on the left side of his thin stomach. She was at his side in a flash, but another of her group, who had medical knowledge, was there faster. As she clutched Eric’s hand, speechless, the medic spoke.

“It’s a nasty wound, but not critical. He’ll live.”

Eric smiled bravely at her, ignoring the pain. “It wouldn’t have mattered to anybody,” he gasped. “Anyway, I would have died happy after what you did with me last night.”

Serena smiled. "And as soon as our doc has got you back to health, I'll do it again. And there's a dozen pretty girls back at our base who owe me their freedom, and you'll be visited by each one, and they won't be coming to hold your hand," she promised.

He closed his eyes. "I think I've died and gone to Heaven," he sighed.

"You might get there a bit sooner than you expect if I don't get some room to sort you out," growled the medic.

Serena took the hint. After planting a light kiss on Eric's forehead, she stood up and moved away. Passing the man who had shot her friend, who was now securely chained and held, she paused. Still nude, she posed for him for a moment. "Do you like what you see?" she asked him. He glowered at her, but his eyes answered. "Well, make the most of it," she said. "When we deliver these new slaves to the mines, one of them will be a eunuch." She leaned close to the man's face. "Freshly castrated," she added quietly. He shuddered.

She moved back to where Vince and Helen stood, accepting a robe from somebody to at last hide her nudity. She faced her friend. "You're free now, Helen."

Helen looked steadily at her. "You did all this for me, didn't you?"

"You'd have done the same in my place. Come back with us to our base. They're nice people, and there are some good men there too." She put her arms around Vince. "And there's a whole lot more adventures waiting for us in this savage land." ...

THE END