



Kerana - Slave of Atlantis
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Chapter 1

How much further?" Kerana hissed impatiently, still half-convinced they were wasting their time.

"Soon now," Durkan promised.

As her horse picked its way down the rocky defile, Kerana glanced eastward where the rim of the sun just showed on the horizon. She weighed the risks of being on the High Road in daylight against the possible gains, and let the horse continue. "This informant of yours better be right," she said, looking back at the man on the horse behind. "We've been riding all night."

"He's right," Durkan assured her. "Trust me." The defile widened where it met the road and Durkan drew alongside. "To the left."

Kerana turned her horse. Men with coiled whips and long switches hanging from their belts suddenly confronted her.

"What the hell...? Slavers!" She jerked on the reins but sudden pain stabbed the side of her head and she toppled, all the breath forced out of her as she hit the ground hard. Head spinning, she fought the pain and rose to all fours. "Traacherous scum!"

She snatched for her sword to answer the challenge to her leadership with cold steel. The slavers were on her before the blade cleared its sheath. It took three of them to force her into the dust, Kerana fighting with feet and fists, teeth and nails until they pinned her wrists behind her and thonged them tight. Breathless, she was hauled ignominiously upright. A furious toss of her head cleared her thick, copper-streaked hair from her eyes and she stared hatred at Durkan. Her traitorous lieutenant sat smugly astride his horse, rubbing the fist that had sent her sprawling, his hawk-face split by a cruel smile of triumph.

"You'll never find it!" she snarled.

"I already have," he said. "Why else do you think you are here?"

Kerana swore. It had all been too convenient – Durkan bringing news of the caravan at just the time her most loyal men were away disposing of the plunder from her last raid. She could have said no. They were not even certain where it was, let alone its size and strength, but Kerana had been sure she would find it and make a plan to pluck its riches, even with only a dozen men at her back. And it had all been a trap. Her temper flared. "Whoreson, one night you'll wake and find my dagger at your throat."

Durkan's eyes flickered from hers and Kerana knew he was remembering her reputation for cunning and her fearsome fighting skills. She had led King Barca's army a merry dance for more than five years and remained free. Her stomach clenched - until now.

Her betrayer shrugged off the threat. "We'll see." He gestured at the slavers leader. "Our friend here is bound for Olnis. After a three hundred-mile walk, he'll stand you on the auction block and sell you to the highest bidder, who will use you as he pleases. I doubt we'll meet again, Kerana." His triumphant grin returned.

"But if we do, I will be a free man and you will be no more than an obedient slave."

"Never!" Kerana lunged, only to be dragged back by her captors. "You filthy-."

"Enough!" The slavers deep voice cut her off. "I have a long way to go and this is wasting daylight. Strip her."

After more frantic struggling that gained her nothing, Kerana was forced into the dirt again. They yanked off her boots, found the knife hidden there and used it to cut off her sword-belt and leather jerkin, then tore the linen kilt from her waist. Only her breech-clout remained when she regained her feet, flushed and bristling with fury. Then she saw the leers on the faces of her men, the men she had enriched by her skilful leadership. All of them wanted her. Given the chance, they would fuck her like the lowest whore from the streets of Azdagul. She drew in a shuddering breath then stopped abruptly when it lifted her jutting breasts. Cringing inwardly, she fought to keep the humiliation from showing on her face. But she would not bow her head, even if all she could do was glare defiance at those who had plunged her into such awful degradation.

The slaver moved, blocking her from Durkan's lustful gaze. She had been conscious of the man watching her; the only one there whose eyes had never left her face. Summoning her courage, she turned her defiance on him, hating him for the thin smile that hovered on his lips. His hand moved lightning fast, snapping the cord encircling Kerana's hips, tearing her breech-clout away to expose the generous, copper-tinted bush that crowned her sex. Her fighter's instincts responded and she lashed out with a foot to mash his balls into his crotch, only to be amazed when he swiftly side-stepped and caught her by the ankle, lifting her leg high so she had to lean into the men holding her to keep her balance.

His grin was as maddening as Durkan's and her humiliation far greater when she saw his eyes fix on the exposed lips of her sex. She hissed in rage as his free hand smoothed over her calf and up her thigh, his grip on her ankle never relaxing enough for her to break free. He stood close, watching her face as he explored her, tugging her pubic curls until she grunted in protest, then sliding his middle finger down to the fleshy lips below. She fought the pressure, knowing it would be hopeless, felt the yielding of her most intimate place and two long fingers slide deep over the velvety ridges within. Gasping in shock and embarrassment, she turned her face from the slaver's assessing gaze. His fingers moved swiftly, rubbing, probing and teasing the tender flesh until her sex also betrayed her and her juices began to flow. Jaw clamped tight, she endured, silently cursing the outraged squeak that escaped her when his fingers slid from within and delved under her hood to pinch her clitoris. She squirmed, vainly trying to escape the unwanted feelings his touch was provoking, but he only pinched harder and painfully until she ceased her struggles. Only then did he release her.

"She's no virgin," he told Durkan coolly and Kerana knew he was laughing at her.

"Bastard," she swore and tried to head-butt him.

He avoided the attack as deftly as he had her first, and regarded her with one eyebrow raised. "Well you've proved you're a fighter. A real naughty girl, eh? But are you ready to take the consequences?" Kerana's chin lifted. She never refused a challenge. Then the slaver pulled the switch from his belt. "Up with her, boys."

Once more her struggles were in vain. With a brief glimpse of her guards grinning broadly, Kerana found herself in the dirt again, knees beneath her, strong hands on both ankles, one on her neck forcing her cheek into the dust, another lifting her bound hands clear of her bare buttocks. She heard the soft hiss as the switch came down but was unprepared for the fiery sting that scorched a line across her upturned bottom.

"Ow!" Kerana clamped her lips tight and ground her teeth, cursing herself for showing weakness. She had known greater pain, though as each smack added more fire to her tender bottom she could not quite remember when. But the shame burned far worse; to be punished like a mere child - a naughty girl, the slaver called her - in front of men she could easily out-think and out-fight if only her hands were free to wield a sword.

The final stroke was the worst, slashing down with such force that it seared not only the soft skin where thighs and buttocks met but scorched the fragile, fleshy lips of Kerana's sex where it peeped from between her tightly closed thighs. She wanted to leap up to dance on her toes and rub and rub between her legs until the pain went away. But she would not move or cry out, and even when the guards released her she remained in her undignified position, swearing she would kill every one of them. But not now. If she fought now she would only end up dead.

Slowly, she rose to her feet, ignoring the laughter and mockery of her erstwhile followers. Her power over them and the respect she had once commanded as her right were gone. Whatever she did, she could never regain them. Even as she killed the traitors they would only remember her as a helpless slave, kneeling with her bottom turned up for the switch. The smarting of her backside was nothing compared to the hurt that caused.

"Are you going to behave?" the slaver demanded. "Or do I need to show you what this can do?"

He unhooked a whip from his belt and flexed it in his big hands. Kerana eyed the tapering length of leather warily. She did not have to see the thin, whippy, steel rod beneath the plaited strands to know that it was there and that it would cause a lot more pain than any switching. She met his eye and gave the shortest of nods.

"Keep still," he ordered and she smothered the urge to wriggle as his hands roved over her nudity, gauging the smoothness of her skin, the tautness of her belly and

firmness of her thighs. He laughed almost inaudibly at her hissing breath when he tested the weight of her breasts and thumbed their conical nipples, laughed again when she winced and wiggled at the firm grip he used to explore her stinging buttocks. Last, he forced her jaws apart to check her teeth, and only the threat of the evil-looking whip kept Kerana still while the same finger that had penetrated her sex pushed into her mouth. She closed her eyes as her own woman-scent filled her nostrils and she could taste her own juices on her tongue. When he had finished, she spat.

The catcalls and laughter died away as the slaver turned to Durkan. "Not bad. She's a bit muscular for most tastes." He glanced at her, seeking a reaction Kerana supposed and kept her face expressionless. "And she'll need a lot of training. There are some who like their slaves unbroken, preferring to do it themselves. She might sell to someone like that but I wouldn't call her ideal stock. I couldn't offer more than ten crowns."

"Done," Durkan said. Kerana's indignation rose again. He had not even bothered to haggle! He took the coins, tossed one in the air and caught it, cruel triumph creasing his face as his eyes sought Kerana's. "I'll take her weapons too. They're of no use to a slave girl."

He turned his horse with a whoop and rode away with the men Kerana had imagined were her loyal followers. She could only stare malevolently as they disappeared in their own dust. It was no comfort knowing Durkan had sold her far too cheaply.

The chill early morning breeze raised gooseflesh on her bare skin and stiffened her nipples, and she shivered as she looked eastwards. The sun had not yet cleared the horizon. In so short a time, she had been betrayed, humiliated, beaten and abused, transformed from free woman to slave. Why in five years of raiding caravans on the High Road had she never found anyone she could really trust? It was a man's game and she had been only a clever woman, better at it than they were. They had only followed her because of her success. They had never made her feel she belonged. When they sat drinking around their campfires she was an outsider, as much an outcast as she had been when she was an orphan child begging in the streets of Azdagul and later as a thief in the same city, struggling to avoid a life in its brothels. Kerana shook herself. No time for self-pity. She would have her revenge, and then gather a new band and start again. Or she might recover the hidden plunder that Durkan claimed he had found and live a life of comfort in some distant city. But first she must regain her freedom. She eyed the guards and gauged the distance to the nearest horse.

"No chance." The voice was right behind her. Kerana turned, her erect nipples brushing the slavers mail shirt. She scowled up at him. "Instead of trying to run away you should be thanking me," he said.

"For making me a slave?" she asked bitterly.

"For saving your life. You saw the look in their eyes when you were stripped."

"It was you who stripped me," she said indignantly.

"Of course. No one buys a slave unseen."

"You beat me!"

"You deserved it. And it distracted them. If I hadn't, they would have changed their minds about selling you and raped you to death." She had to concede she had feared it when she saw their lusting faces. "Girl, do you really think I am a slaver?" her captor asked. "I guard the sorry wenches. I don't usually buy and sell them."

He did not look like any slaver Kerana had seen. His height and broad shoulders, and the thickness of his well-muscled arms and legs suggested he was a warrior. A faint hope rose inside. "Then you only bought me to free me?"

He laughed. "Girl, first you take me for a slaver. Now you take me for a fool!"

They thonged her ankles, and Kerana had only a brief moment to marvel at her captor's strength as he slung her effortlessly over a horse's neck in front of one of the guards. Then she was bumping uncomfortably on the saddle bow, a hand pressing hard onto the small of her back, another exploring the intimacies of her defenceless sex as the horse broke into a canter. The thudding hooves drowned her furious protests and she fell silent as her mouth began to fill with dust. That she did not suffer the assault for long made it no less demeaning. They rounded the bend in the road and drew to a halt, and Kerana was upended into the waiting arms of two more slave guards.

They made her kneel in the road and she looked around. Durkan had told the truth about the caravan, if nothing else. It stretched up the road before her, and despite her dire situation she could not help but weigh it with a professional eye – size, value, protection and speed of travel. All were about average. It might make ten miles in a day, or more likely eight at this time of year. So she had about twelve days before it reached Azdagul. Kerana knew the land west of the city better than the back of her hand but beyond was the territory of rival bands where she had never dared encroach. Twelve days then, before she lost her advantage.

Two hundred paces ahead was a half-hidden gully beside the road. If she could reach it, she could lose her captors among its twists and turns, maybe even take one by surprise. Just let her get a sword! She eyed the slave-train – ten coffles of six slaves each, maybe thirty guards, four big wagons with their drivers and helpers but they did not count. And there was the one who had bought her. He was talking to one of the drivers, looked up and saw her watching him. "Put her

in one of the coffles," he ordered.

Kerana felt her ankles freed and allowed herself to be steered to one of the lines of slave girls sitting chained neck to neck in the road. "Lord Macro," she heard as another driver joined her captor, "it's not that we can't..." She ignored the rest. So his name was Macro and he was lord of somewhere. Definitely a warrior then, and by far her greatest threat. One of her guards was unwrapping a length of chain from an iron collar. The other was eyeing the naked slave girls on the road, who watched Kerana with undisguised curiosity. She looked at Macro and saw his back was turned.

Then she bolted.

Chapter 2

It was harder to run with her wrists tied behind her than Kerana expected., but she plunged on among the wagons and pack animals, shouldering startled people aside, weaving to confuse any pursuit as she sprinted for her goal. With a surge of elation, she saw her escape route just ahead, glanced back to look for her pursuers and slammed into the flank of a horse with enough force to knock her off her feet.

Macro had dismounted, lifted her with frightening ease, thrown her over his saddle and mounted again before Kerana even had her breath back.

"Not only a naughty girl but a silly one too."

A hard hand smacked down on her upturned bottom, and she growled with fury as Macro's horny palm dealt stinging blows to her already smarting buttocks. He rode slowly past the caravan, spanking her rhythmically while the travellers jeered and laughed at her embarrassment. Burning with humiliation, Kerana kept her head down on the horse's shoulder, biting back the cries she was determined would not escape her as the fiery pain worsened with each loud slap of hand on flesh. One of his muscular thighs was pressing against her own and her left breast rubbed against the other as her body jolted back and forth under the sharp blows to her bottom. To her horrified amazement, her nipples began to harden, and Kerana tensed in sudden alarm as a tingling glow started spreading through her lower belly. The severity of Macro's smacks did not diminish, yet somehow the nature of her pain seemed to change. Her head spun in disbelief. It was almost... pleasant... stimulating! The onlooker's laughter receded as all her senses centred only on the sound of Macro's rhythmically slapping hand, its sting on her bouncing buttocks and the growing heat in her pulsing sex.

Then she was back where she had started and Macro dumped her into the hands of her waiting guards. Stunned and shamed, and still not believing what had just happened, she raised her eyes to his to prove she had shed no tears. His grin as he

met her eye stung her almost as much as his palm had. Her arousal vanished in a wave of humiliation and anger. Suddenly Kerana felt only her pain and badly wanted to rub her poor, sore bottom. She was glad her bound wrists prevented her. She would show no weakness to the bastard, or any mercy either when she wiped the infuriating smile off his face with her sword.

"Should we whip her, Lord Macro?" one of the guards asked.

"The caravan's moving," another called.

"Then get her chained and let's away."

Two guards held Kerana while a third closed the hinged collar around her neck. The faint click as he turned the key in the lock was like the knell of doom to Kerana's ears. "Up slaves," the same man ordered, and the six slave girls rose to their feet. He fixed the chain hanging from Kerana's collar to a ring at the back of the collar of the girl ahead of her, stepped away and uncoiled the plaited leather whip from his belt. "Onward, wenches," he called cheerfully, cracking the whip above the heads of his charges. "Your new masters await you."

The chain between Kerana and the next girl tightened, jerking the collar around her neck and she had no choice but to follow. In utter confusion over her body's unbelievable response to the spanking, with buttocks still burning from her humiliating punishments and the uncomfortable weight of the collar an awful reminder of her new status, Kerana took her first steps as a chained slave.

It was not as easy as she thought. First, she walked too fast, treading on the heels of the girl ahead; then she went too slowly, tightening the chains linking the slaves and jerking their neck collars. The big-breasted blonde in front half turned her head and Kerana waited for her curses. She was surprised when the girl spoke mildly. "You have to keep a steady pace. Try to keep in step and watch the chain as well as where you're going. That helps keep some slack in it. We all have to work together."

Kerana did not reply. She wanted no advice from a slave, and co-operation was not her way. She gave orders. Others obeyed. But, as the morning wore on, she had to admit it was good advice and she began to get the knack of walking in coffer. It gave her time to assess her opponents. The slave-train was near the back of the caravan, with the chained slaves ahead and the wagons following. One guard marched behind each coffer, more to keep up the pace than to prevent escape. The rest rode ahead, behind and at either side to protect against attack. The coffer guards swapped roles every hour – it had just happened. Macro alternately rode in front and circulated among his mounted men, keeping them alert and occasionally sending one to scout ahead. He was efficient, Kerana grudgingly conceded. He was no fool. She would have to be careful.

She stumbled, upsetting the rhythm and provoking a chorus of protests from the

other girls as collars tugged hard at necks because of her clumsiness. She cursed them silently as weak, spineless fools who had let themselves be enslaved, and she regained her balance only to lose it again as something pressed hard into the cleft of her buttocks.

"Watch where you're going, slave," a harsh voice rasped from behind. "If you bring the others down you'll get more than the switch across this round backside."

She flinched from the touch of the coiled whip, somehow miraculously regaining the rhythm without mishap to the rest. From the sudden heat in her cheeks she knew she was blushing, embarrassed that for all her skills she had not yet mastered something as simple as walking in chains. A sudden blaze of pain across her right buttock made her yelp and clutch at where the tip of the guard's whip had bitten her tender skin. Temper flaring, she risked a look over her shoulder and saw him grinning malevolently as he re-coiled the whip and stuck it in his belt. He had been there when she was captured and bore her nail-marks on his face as proof. With his hawk-nose and cruel eyes, he looked unsettlingly like Durkan, and she looked away just in time to avoid disrupting the coffle again.

The sun rose higher, intensifying the heat-shimmer that already obscured the horizon. Without any slowing of the pace, the slave girls were given water. Kerana drank deeply when her turn came, careful not to disturb the dust coating her naked body that was sparing her the added pain of sunburn. Her buzzing bottom was more than enough to deal with.

Three times more she quenched her thirst, and five times the guards changed before Kerana judged they would soon stop. In that time, she learned from observing the other coffles and from painful experience what it meant to be last in line. She had thought the red stripes and bruises on the buttocks of the girl ahead indicated some infringement on her part. Now she knew that when any guard felt the desire to ply his whip it was the last girl in the line whose bottom made the easiest target. Thrice more the guard she had scratched laid the whip's end to her helpless rear before at last she saw what she had been expecting appear above the shimmering desert floor.

The lead girl in the coffle pointed. "Look!"

"Trees!" the second girl cried excitedly.

Kerana sneered. What was there to get excited about? Except that trees meant water and shade, and rest for weary legs. She felt the heat beating down, and the maddening smarting of her backside, and decided that was enough.

"What is it?" the girl in front asked no one in particular.

"Portia's Wells," Kerana answered. "We'll stop here until the worst heat is over."

No one who was sane travelled at midday in the desert summer. Pain blazed across her buttocks, and she clapped her hands to the hurt and only just managed to stifle a cry as the hawk-nosed guard's whip scorched her again. "Quiet, slaves!" he barked. "Get on there."

Kerana's anger flared. She could kick him in the balls and have his own dagger in his throat before he blinked. And what then? Chained by the neck all she could do was wait for retribution. She knew the penalty she would suffer. With a long breath, she quelled her anger and tramped on towards the wells.

The land turned suddenly green, welcome after the greys and browns of the desert. Irrigated fields surrounded three broad pools with stands of trees around them and a village alongside. Kerana watched with narrowed eyes as the caravan made camp. They were staying for the night she saw, and felt a glow of satisfaction. Barely seven miles covered in a day. The odds were well in her favour.

The cuffed slaves eyed the water restlessly, feeling the dust in their parched throats while the tents were raised and the animals unharnessed. Macro rode up. "Animals and slaves to the lowest pool."

Kerana's resentment rose at once. "Bastard," she muttered.

The blonde next to her watched him ride away. "But handsome too, don't you think?"

He might have been if circumstances had been different, Kerana found herself thinking. "Balls!" she said.

Only after the animals had had their fill were the slave coffles taken to the pool. Once they had drunk, without a word spoken they all waded out together and sank under the water. At first it felt good to wash away the sweat and grime from her skin, but soon Kerana noticed a crowd had gathered, men and even boys from the caravan and the village watching the bathing slaves with bright eyes and lustful faces. The other girls noticed too, and hands dropped to cover sexes as arms lifted to conceal breasts.

"Out, slaves," one of the guards called and faced the crowd. "Look, but don't touch. This is valuable merchandise."

Kerana had never expected to feel gratitude towards one of her captors. It was as much a surprise as the acute embarrassment that suddenly overwhelmed her. She was proud of her strong, lithe body, and many men had praised her beauty, but she wished she had neither as the coffles waded ashore and she had no choice but to follow, horribly conscious of the water streaming down her nudity and the provocative swaying of her breasts and hips that she could do nothing to prevent. Her anger flickered but did not ignite as she tried vainly to stare defiance at the ogling crowd. Then she saw a blue tunic among them, and then another and

another, and stared at nothing but the ground. Road Guards! If one of them recognised her...! Throat tight, she waited for the outcry but heard only the lewd catcalls of the crowd, fading behind her as the coffles returned to camp. Thank the gods! Careful of her bruised backside, Kerana sat when she was told to in the shade of a cluster of palms and breathed again. Their guard was the cheerful one who had set them on their way that morning. He had them form a circle and chained the lead girl's collar to Kerana's, then leaned back against a tree and closed his eyes.

"I'll never get used to that," the big-breasted blonde said, looking downcast.

Kerana realised the other slave girls must have experienced it many times during their journey. "How long on the road?" she asked.

"About twenty days, I think."

"Twenty-five," the guard corrected.

Kerana eyed him warily.

"Don't worry about Hordo." The blonde smiled in his direction. "You don't mind if we talk, do you?"

"Just so long as you mind your manners." Hordo propped himself on an elbow and watched them, but Kerana noticed his attention was all for the blonde. He was young and he had clearly taken a fancy to her. That might be useful when the time came to escape.

"I'm Nita," the girl said.

"Kerana."

"This is Reina, Alsira, Suliki, Murina and Yulana." She worked her way around the circle. They were all beauties. Every girl in every coffle was. They were sex slaves, destined for the pleasure of men - any men with the wealth to buy them when they were stood on the auction block. Kerana's stomach knotted. She was facing the same fate.

"How were you taken?" Nita asked.

"Bad luck," Kerana answered curtly. But if she had not been so sure Durkan would never dare to cross her or so eager to meet the challenge of finding and plundering the caravan, she would not have ended up in a position where luck mattered. "Hasn't anyone tried to escape?"

The slave girl's eyes lowered and Nita cast a nervous glance at Hordo. "Hush," she whispered. "No one's tried. How can we, when we are always chained?"

"There are ways," Kerana assured her.

"Not for us," the girl called Reina said. "We are weak. The men are strong." The others nodded agreement and Kerana did not try to conceal her contempt for their weak acceptance of their fate.

"That'll do!" Hordo stood above them. "Don't you go talking these girls into trouble, missy, or yourself either. Just be glad it was me who heard that and not Kirkit, otherwise you'd all be bedding down with striped bottoms tonight." He frowned down at Kerana then at the rest of the circle of slaves. "I thought you had more sense than to talk like this. If that's all that's in your heads maybe you better keep quiet."

Nita's eyes brimmed with tears as he turned away, and the other girls looked resentfully at Kerana. She had antagonised their easy-going guard to no purpose, for she was no closer to gaining her freedom. And Nita's reaction suggested she was as enamoured of Hordo as he was of her. Kerana felt a pang of regret, and then dismissed it at once. Milksops! To hell with them! She had sold plenty like them in her time. She could even tell each of them their value on the black market. But they had enough misery to cope with.

They were fed soon afterwards, eating in sullen silence to begin with, but Nita was a talkative girl and it did not take much to draw her out.

"Barley gruel and cabbage," Kerana said. "At least it's filling."

"Better than just barley gruel," Nita said after a moment's hesitation. "The cabbage will be Lord Macro's doing. He always tries to get us something extra along the way."

"He does?"

Nita glanced at Hordo and took his wink as permission. "He's been kind to us, so far as he can."

Kerana snorted. "He's a bastard. He bought me and chained me, and he-." She cut herself off and vainly tried to ease her sore bottom on the hard ground. She was not going to relive the humiliation of her beatings. Especially the spanking! Her belly flipped at the memory of how the pain had unbelievably sparked her pleasure.

"Kirkit's the real bastard," Nita said. "He was to have led the company but the slaver made some arrangement with Macro instead. I think that annoys him but he wasn't a nice man anyway. Of course, Lord Macro has to follow the rules, but he keeps Kirkit in check when he can. We can thank him things aren't a lot worse."

"You thank him," Kerana said. Given the chance, she would kill him and then settle with Durkan and the others for their treachery. A sudden sinking feeling hit the pit of her stomach. "Kirkkit, he's not...?" She ran her fingernails down her cheek in imitation of scratching.

Nita nodded solemnly then her eyes widened. "He's coming," she said, as though fearful he somehow knew they had been discussing him, but it was only time for the guard change and Kerana relaxed again until she sensed the nervousness in all the others. Kirkkit unchained their circle, formed them into line, and then led them a short way onto a dirt track and made them turn to face him. With the tip of his switch, he separated them until their neck chains went taut. The slaves bowed their heads and shuffled their feet. Kerana did not understand the reason for their blushes and fidgeting, but their disquiet communicated itself to her and her belly began to flutter.

Kirkkit's grin broadened. "Right, you know the drill, slaves, or most of you do." He looked at Kerana. She saw his tongue flicker over his lips and the swelling in the front of his breeches, and looked away. "Stand straight!" he snapped, slapping the switch on his palm. "Now, we don't want any accidents come bedtime, so hunker down, feet touching the slave's beside you."

Realisation was like a blow in the gut. Kerana knew it happened all the time but she had never imagined it would happen to her. She felt the flush of heat on her face, sure it was as crimson as those of the other girls, her shame burning just as fiercely when the collar tugged at her neck until she squatted alongside them.

"Back on your hands. Lift those arses."

Kerana copied the others, leaning back on her hands and lifting her bottom until her hips were level with her knees. She stared ahead unseeing, but aware that Kirkkit was walking the line, gauging each girl's compliance. She hissed in pain as his switch bit the soft skin of her inner thigh.

"I said feet touching," he barked, and she shuffled her foot to reach Nita's, only the feel of the taut chain on her collar preventing her flying at him. The hot desert breeze caressed her sex and she blessed the generous bush of pubic hair that hid it, even as she cursed the pressure in her bladder that would force her to comply with the next order.

Kirkkit stepped aside. "Piss, slaves."

Kerana let go. A trickle of urine pattered into the dust beneath her then spurted high, arcing up into the sunlight before it splashed into the dry desert beyond her feet. Beside her, six more glittering streams gushed forth as her companions pissed, no doubt pushing as hard as they could, just as she was, to more quickly bring the ordeal to an end. Her eyes were closed but she could not shut out the

sound of splattering piss. She felt wretched. It had made perfect sense to her when she had been transporting her own plundered slaves, and she had never given it a thought. It was impossible to unchain individual girls whenever they felt the call of nature and far more practical to make them all do it at the same time. Only now did she understand that it made a shaming public act of the most private bodily function. And Kirkit had deliberately heightened their degradation by making it a game for his own amusement. Kerana had heard tales of guards holding competitions between girls and betting on who would piss the furthest. Now she believed them. Her companions had suffered this same thing every day for weeks. And she had dismissed them as weaklings!

It seemed an age before every girl was done and they were allowed to step back into the shade. Slightly unsteady after her ordeal, Kerana was glad when Kirkit made them kneel, but the nervous glances the other girls were giving him made her heartbeat quicken again. He stepped with exaggerated care between the seven puddles on the track, glittering eyes roving over his naked captives as he slowly unthonged his breeches and exposed his erect penis. With a horrible certainty, Kerana knew his gaze would rest on her. She summoned her courage as he stopped in front of her, hand aiming his thick, dark-veined cock at her lips.

"Suck me off."

Chapter 3

"I'll die first." Kerana pulled her head back, eyes fixed on Kirkit's, heedless of the horrified gasps of the slave girls. The guard drew the whip from his belt and let its coils fall free. She tensed, ready to spring - to end his life and soon afterwards her own. Footsteps approached but Kerana did not turn to see who was coming.

"Lord Macro wants his slave." It was Hordo.

Kirkit's grin became a snarl as Kerana continued to meet his lustful stare. For a heartbeat, she thought he would ignore the words, then his hard eyes flickered from hers to the slave girls kneeling beside her. "Take her then."

Hordo thonged Kerana's wrists in front of her before releasing her from the coffer. His tug on her neck chain had her on her feet and following him as Kirkit pointed at the black-haired girl, Reina. "Open your mouth, slave."

Kerana did not look back.

The tent's interior was dim after the harsh daylight. Hordo stood patiently, Kerana's chain in his fist while she fidgeted and tried not to look. She had never deliberately watched an act of sex and did not want to start now. But Macro's eyes

were fixed on her face, not the slave girl at his feet, and Kerana would not show weakness by looking away.

The slave's head moved rhythmically above Macro's groin, obscuring her actions. But the slobbering noises escaping her lips made plain the task she was performing was the same one Kirkit had just demanded from Kerana. The girl lifted her head, allowing the cock to slip from her mouth, her small hand curling about it to work the rigid flesh while her tongue flickered over its glistening head. Kerana felt her eyes grow wide. The cock was as long and thick as the slave girl's forearm, its shiny head almost as big as her fist. She gulped at how wide the girl's jaws stretched as her mouth took the shaft into it again, her soft, delicate hand moving faster, the wet, slurping noises intensifying. The slave moaned suddenly, throat rising and falling, and Macro gave a grunt that became a long sigh, bright eyes narrowing but never leaving Kerana's. She did not hide her disgust as the slave let the cock slide wetly from her mouth, closed her lips about its tip to draw forth the last of her master's spunk, then licked the shaft clean. While the rise and fall of his chest slowed, Macro stroked her raven-black hair and she turned her cheek into his palm, rubbing against it like a cat. A pet with its owner, Kerana sneered to herself, then tensed as the warrior rose and walked towards her, paying no heed to his nakedness.

"Wait outside," he told Hordo, taking the chain from him and pulling Kerana towards one of the tent poles. She felt again his awesome strength, far greater than her own, as he held her with one hand and fixed her thonged wrists over a hook high above her head, forcing her to stand on the balls of her feet. Eyeing him warily, she tested the pole's strength with her body's weight, knew at once it was too deeply embedded to break free, and saw the flicker of his smile at the tautening of her muscles.

"All right Loura," he said.

The slave gave a little mew of disappointment as, sleek and slender, she rose gracefully to her feet and tilted her head back to look up at him, a pleading expression on her beautiful, perfect face. "Oh Master, please!"

"You are insatiable." He laughed softly as her doe-eyes continued to beg. "Oh, very well."

Smiling broadly, Loura gave a clap of her hands and slipped into Macro's chair, spreading her legs wide by hooking one knee over each of its sturdy arms. Wondering, Kerana eyed the slave's carefully arranged hair, the artful makeup that added to her allure, and her smooth skin untouched by the sun. Doubtless, she travelled in a wagon, not trudging through the dust and heat as the coffee girls must. She even had clothes of sorts – a collarless, short-sleeved jacket of pale blue silk held in place by a big silver button just below her small, pointed breasts, which it left uncovered. A silver chain encircled her hips and narrow strips of more pale blue silk hung from it before and behind, barely concealing her sex or the furrow

in her bottom. Then Macro's hand drew aside the silk in front and Kerana scoffed at herself for the twinge of envy she had felt. The girl's mound and slit were hairless, bare and exposed even to the hood of her clitoris and the fleshy pink of her inner lips. And something was holding those lips apart.

Macro's broad fingers slid a carved ivory phallus from between the wetly glistening petals then slowly eased it back in. Loura moaned softly, wriggling her narrow hips and lifting them to meet the dildo's penetration as Macro worked it in her sex with one hand while a long finger of the other moved rapidly beneath her hood. Her hands went to her breasts, squeezing the hard, fleshy cones, slim fingers pinching her small, pointed nipples as she gasped and mewed in delight. Macro's hand moved faster and Kerana looked away, wrinkling her nose as Loura's woman-scent filled the tent and the girls panting and moaning grew louder. A joyous feminine cry that changed suddenly to a long, shuddering groan dragged Kerana's eyes back in time to see Loura bucking under her master's hand, in the throes of orgasm.

"Oh, thank you, Master", the slave sighed, sinking into the chair, thighs still quivering with her final spasms. Macro waited until her eyelashes stopped fluttering before standing her on her feet, and with a gentle pinch of one still-erect nipple, he ushered her towards a curtained-off part of the tent. Cooing happily, the slave girl pushed through the curtain and with a final wiggle of her tight, little bottom, disappeared. Only then did Kerana notice the fading pink stripes on her buttocks.

Macro came towards her and her breath caught in her throat. His huge cock was erect again, skin drawn tight, the straining, dark head shining redly. Her belly flipped as his hand touched her hip but he only turned her to look at the marks on her backside. "Last girl?"

"You know I am. You arranged it!" she accused. He did not deny it. She flexed her upraised arms, trying to ease her aching shoulders, and then stilled her movements as his eyes went to her swaying breasts. She thought of what she had just seen. "I am not a slave!"

"Bought and paid for." His teeth flashed white. "And any ordinary slave girl should know when she addresses her owner, she calls him "Master". He waited, a half smile on his lips, but Kerana kept silent. The desert would turn to ice first. "But you aren't an ordinary slave girl, are you?" Her heartbeat quickened. Did he know? "Your eyes are green," he said. "I thought they were blue."

"They change. It depends on the light." The irrelevance confused her. She sucked in a breath and her breasts lifted. "I don't belong here."

"Master," he said, and when she ignored it, "Where do you belong? The mountains perhaps?"

Nowhere, Kerana thought. She had never belonged, not with the outlaws or with the thieves in Azdagul or the child-beggars before that. She could rely on no one but herself, her strength, her skill, her wits. And she had better not let them desert her now.

"Do all the girls around here carry weapons?"

The nervous quiver in her belly increased. "Many do," she lied. "Better than ending up like her." She pointed her chin towards the curtain concealing Loura.

"Oh, how has she ended up?"

He was toying with her but it might distract him from his suspicions. "She's a weak fool, all perfumes and silks and jewellery, and no other thought in her head. She gives away her freedom for soft living."

"You don't think she enjoys it?"

"Of course she does! She can't think any further than her body's desires. She's even more a slave to them than she is to the men who use her."

"And you will never be that," Macro said sardonically.

"Never!" Kerana swore.

"We'll see."

She tensed as a hand still wet with Loura's juices stroked her breast. She yanked uselessly at the hook she hung from, twisting and turning, vainly trying to escape his touch. His hands explored her, their palms less rough than she expected, smoothing warmly over the skin of breasts, belly and thighs while he studied her face. Two broad thumbs grazed her nipples, teasing them until they stiffened, even as she willed them not to. She lowered her eyes, breathing hard through her nose with her jaw clamped tight. Her fear was swelling and she tried to focus on it and ignore the prickling warmth spreading over her skin, the blood quickening in her veins and the tingling low in her belly. He stroked the insides of her thighs, and her head jerked up and her sex twitched in response to the sting as his fingertips slid over the weal left by Kirkit's switch. She saw Macro frowning at it, and then his eyes lifted to hers just as his fingers penetrated the moist warmth of her vulva and she looked away, gasping as he began a long, slow exploration that turned the smouldering heat within her to liquid fire. Fear turned to terror as Macro's fingers probed and teased their way to exposing her awful weakness. Just as she had feared it would, her body was betraying her.

She squirmed and writhed, hating the treachery of body and mind as all control was swept away by the overwhelming waves of pleasure surging through her. Her aching shoulders, cramping feet and smarting buttocks meant nothing as her hips

thrust down hard to meet those wicked, wonderful fingers that deprived her of all reason and drove her, unwilling though she was, to surrender. Moaning and thrashing wildly, Kerana felt her sex clamp down tight for an instant then relax in a gush of juices as sudden, ecstatic release overcame her. She heard a cry, half-joy, half-despair tear from her lips, and would have bitten through her tongue to stop it if she could. Breasts heaving, sweat running in rivers down her nudity and lights still flashing behind her eyes, she could scarcely believe what had happened.

Macro had given her more pleasure than she could herself! Then, incredibly, he did it again.

He turned her sideways, his rigid cock pressing hard into her flesh as he held her against the pole with his body to leave both his hands free. Heat still simmered within her treacherous sex as fingers ripe with the tang of her musk closed on one hard nipple. She watched Macro's thumb and forefinger slowly tighten, pinching the engorged cone just hard enough to turn her initial tingle of pleasure to pain. Unbelievably, her sex gave a little flutter of renewed excitement. He pinched her other nipple, and another tremor thrilled within her. His finger found the bud of her clitoris, teasing it effortlessly to full, pulsating erection. Kerana squirmed, her mind demanding she pull away even as her faithless body thrust her wildly fluttering sex forward to seek Macro's wonderful touch. Just as his fingers slid between the swollen petals at her entrance and probed within, he smacked her bottom.

"Oh!" A fiery thrill of intense delight quivered all the way up to her belly. His palm stung her again, and her buttocks recoiling from the pain sank his fingers deeper and sent pleasure rippling the whole length of her sheath. "Oh! Oooh!" She was lost. Pain and pleasure mingled indistinguishably as Macro's hand continued smacking and his fingers continued their exquisite teasing. At every stinging slap her vulva tightened around them until Kerana trembled on the verge of climax. Then he sought the little ridge high up in front she thought was a secret known to no man and she orgasmed harder and longer than she had ever done before. Bucking and thrashing on the hook, she heard her own ecstatic cry as her head spun and her juices flowed to soak his hand and her inner thighs.

Devastated, she surfaced more slowly after the second time to find him holding her, taking the weight from her shoulders and sagging legs. Spasms still quivered within her sex as she opened her eyes, breathing raggedly. There was a strange look on Macro's face, as though something utterly unexpected had happened to him as well as her, though she could not guess what. The hard length of his erection was hot against her bare skin, and fear clenching her stomach drove the befuddlement from her brain. He would take her now, rape her as a man did his slave girl. Kerana took her weight on her legs, turned her eyes from his handsome face and steeled herself for further humiliation. He let go of her and to her intense surprise fastened his breech-clout around his waist then held a cup to her lips. Wine! She gulped it down.

"Hordo." The guard's head appeared through the tent-flap. "Put this slave on a wagon-pole and give her tits a switching."

Hordo might have been young but he was no fool. The pressure of his whip on her bare behind set Kerana in front of him where he could watch her as he steered her to the parked wagons. She cringed inwardly with embarrassment. He had a clear view of her bottom cheeks, which from their fiery glow must have been showing the evidence of her fresh spanking as well as all her past punishments. And he had been within earshot of the tent and must have heard her cries. But that was a minor thing compared to her astonished disbelief at the discovery her body had welcomed not just the pleasure Macro had given her but also the pain. Then that too was forced from her mind by her shock at his last cruel order.

Stunned by it all, Kerana almost stumbled as her neck chain pulled her up short ten paces from the wagons. All of the cuffed slave girls were kneeling before them. The hinged shaft at the front of one wagon stood vertical, braced with ropes to its front wheels. A rope had been run through the iron ring at the shaft's end and tied through the thongs binding a girl's wrists. A pull on the rope hauled her flat against the wagon-pole and dragged her arms above her head until she was stretching her toes to reach the ground. A guard fastened a leather strap around her waist to hold her facing the pole during her punishment.

He took up position behind the slave. Her head turned. Not of her cuffle, Kerana realised, silently congratulating the girl when she won the fight to overcome the fright twisting her lovely features. The sharp crack of the first stroke made Kerana jump. The girl gave a yelp, then a half-stifled cry as the switch bit again, then her will crumpled and her cries filled the heat laden air as the guard hit hard and fast. He ignored her high-pitched pleas for mercy and his switch was a blur as it scored fiery red stripes across her bouncing buttocks. Kerana no longer needed to rely on her imagination to know how her own sore bottom must look.

They untied the slave, and Kerana's contempt for her begging turned to grudging admiration as she swallowed her sobs and walked painfully but with head upraised back to her cuffle. Twenty-five, Kerana had counted when the man's arm finally stilled. Would she get the same? But on the breasts! She shivered in the afternoon heat.

Hordo pushed her forward, and her heart's rapid beating increased as she let the guards fasten the rope through her thonged wrists. She could hardly defeat them all with her hands tied. They strung her up in the same way as her predecessor except that she was bound with her back to the pole. Her eyes flickered beyond the guards to the huddled slave cuffles watching her. She had expected Macro to be watching too but a glance towards the closed flap of his tent showed that he was not. Kerana had hoped he would let the wicked spanking across his horse's neck be punishment enough for her escape attempt. But all along the bastard had intended this.

The rope tightened. Her arms and shoulders stretched upwards until her toes were scrabbling for purchase in the dust and the hard muscles across her belly strained taut under her weight. Her position lifted Kerana's heavy, sweat-sheened breasts so they jutted right and left, nipples uptilted, vulnerable and inviting. The leather strap was cinched tightly around her waist. Forcing her face into immobility, she watched Hordo approach, reaching almost reluctantly, it seemed, for the switch at his belt. He even gave a small, regretful smile as he moved the neck chain hanging between her breasts out of the way.

"Get by, boy. I'll show you how it's done." Kerana's heart leapt as Hordo was pushed aside and she saw Kirkit take his place, his own switch ready in his hand.

Chapter 4

The nervous quivering in Kerana's stomach twisted into a tight knot of fear. Hordo was looking on in consternation – at her, at Kirkit, at the empty mouth of Macro's tent. Ignoring him, the cruel guard let his glittering eyes travel up the length of her nude body until they focused on her own. He raised his head and took a long sniff, grinning malevolently. Breathing hard through her nose, Kerana had also smelled the ripe tang of her juices clinging around her. Pride overrode her shame and she stared back defiantly. Kirkit held his switch at either end, bent the supple wood almost double and released the tip. It straightened with a menacing swish. Kerana flinched.

Kirkit turned to the kneeling slave girls. "Slaves don't escape. If they try, they get this." He spun and lashed down with the switch in one fluid movement. Kerana had seen it coming but was still unprepared for the blaze of pain that seared across her right breast. Somehow she stifled the cry rising to her lips. The switch hissed through the air, landing with a vicious crack on her left breast and a strangled cry fought its way through her clenched teeth. Gods, this was worse than her previous punishments. Far, far worse!

Another streak of fire tore across her right breast then another scorched her left and the growling in her throat grew louder. Kerana dug deep, seeking the strength to resist crying out. But the sixth blow bit hard into the stiff cone of her left nipple, and to her utter disgrace she opened her mouth and cried her pain aloud.

Kirkit did not hurry, allowing time for the hurt of each fiery stroke to sink deep before delivering the next, sometimes slashing down, sometimes against and sometimes upwards into the tender undersides of her breasts. She no longer tensed before each blow. She could not see them coming. Her eyes were shut tight, hated tears squeezing from their corners. But she heard each swish and crack, felt searing agony with every strike and could scarcely believe the same man who had

given her more pleasure than she had ever known could deliver her up to such pain. And at every cruel cut, her own screams filled her ears and she had not strength to stop them.

"That's enough." The words barely penetrated her pain-oppressed mind. She heard Kirkit's voice but not his words, then Macro's response. "I said enough. See to the other slaves."

Footsteps approached. Through eyes slitted against her pain, Kerana watched Macro ease the tension of her rope until the soles of her feet could touch the ground. He stood in front of her, lips pursed, no emotion showing on his face. Her chest heaving and throat raw, she could say nothing. There was nothing to say. His gaze rested on her ravaged breasts, lifted to her face and he gave a small shake of his head and walked away. "Give her water."

They let Kerana hang until dusk in accordance with Slavers Rules – any slave who tried to escape must remain in her position of punishment until sunset. The rope was slack enough to allow her to move her elbows slightly and try to ease her cramping arms and shoulders. But she could do nothing for the lines of fire that blazed across her breasts. She looked down fearfully. Long crimson stripes criss-crossed her soft skin, raised ridges beaded with droplets of blood and her throbbing nipples were purple and swollen. Kerana let out a long, slow sigh. She had been certain her breasts were torn to shreds. Her hurts were bad but not so bad as her terrified imaginings had made them while they were being inflicted. But they were not her worst pain. That lay deep within, cold and dark. She had despised the slave girl when she pleaded for mercy. Yet at the same moment Macro had stayed Kirkit's hand, Kerana - strong, proud, courageous - had been on the verge of begging for the pain to stop. She hung her head.

Hordo did not hurry her back to the coffle. Each step Kerana took brought pain in her aching legs and bruised bottom, and every sway of her tortured breasts was agony. He even helped her ease down onto the thin blanket each slave was given for the night, before securing her chain to Nita's collar. Kerana lay on her side, groaning as she propped herself on one elbow to keep her breasts from touching the ground. She sensed Nita move closer and felt water trickle over her dry lips. The girl was squeezing a corner of her blanket and Kerana drank thankfully. The slaves were in a half circle around her. Reina and Yulana stretched their arms out to her, revealing the barley gruel they held in their cupped hands.

"Eat," Nita said. "You need your strength."

Despite Kerana's pain and fatigue, Nita's advice was too good to ignore. She ate until she had licked every scrap from the slaves' palms then sucked the last cool moisture from Nita's blanket. The coffles had been fed and watered while Kerana hung on the wagon pole. The naked slave girls had saved her share the only way they could. Because of them, she would not hunger or thirst that night. "Thank you," she told them all.

"You are one of us now," Nita said. "We take care of our own."

Kerana sank down, exhaustion overcoming all else. Chains rattled as the girls settled down next to her. As consciousness faded, the irony did not escape her. For once, she had not been treated as an outsider - by a group of helpless slave girls. But she was not one of them.

She woke before dawn. Her nipples had hardened in the chill desert night and were pulsing painfully, and she was stiff and sore. The land was ghostly silver under a moon that had just passed full. She moved a hand to test the fixing of the chain on her collar but stopped because it hurt too much. Tomorrow would be hard but she had been pushed to her limits before. King Barca's men had never caught her but there were times they had come very close.

Something glinted in the moonlight, something small and metallic lying half covered by the sand. It was a small, iron nail. She bared her teeth. Even with her chain pulled taut, she would not be able to reach it. But tomorrow... Kerana's eyes closed. Tomorrow.

Rising next morning was as hard as Kerana had expected, with her aching muscles and abused flesh protesting at every movement. The coffle girls were not surprised when she dropped to her knees after only a few paces and did not complain at the discomfort she caused them.

After their gruel had been eaten, Hordo led them to a secluded spot among the trees where they could piss unseen. He even looked away while they were doing it, and Kerana took the opportunity to slip the nail she had picked up when she stumbled from her palm into her mouth.

Kirkit waited for them on the road, mounting his horse as the head of the caravan began to move. His face looked cruel even when he was not making some poor slave's life a misery, Kerana thought. She looked away as his eyes sought hers, still deeply ashamed that she had almost begged for his mercy even when she had known with certainty he would show none. She turned away from Macro too as he reined in beside her coffle.

"I told you to ride ahead," he said to Kirkit. Kerana glanced up. Kirkit looked as though he wanted to argue, but the warrior's tone and hard stare were warning enough of the likely consequences. He rode off.

"Hordo," Macro pointed with his chin at Kerana. "Not last."

To spare the slaves backsides, the place at the rear of each coffle was usually given to a different girl every day. It seemed Kirkit had intended Kerana to remain at the back. Hordo took Yulana and chained her behind.

"It must be love," some wit among the coffles called, and there were titters of laughter among the slaves, cut off by the crack of a whip and a loud squeak of pain from the girl who had dared make the remark. Macro regarded her sternly.

"Master, I..." She gulped, wide eyes darting to Kerana. "Master."

Her scandalised guard waited for the order that would put her on the wagon pole at the day's end. Then Macro laughed. "No," he told the guard firmly, "never mind."

The girl let out her pent-up breath, tears of gratitude filming her eyes.

Kerana looked up as Macro passed her. His gaze lifted from her red-striped breasts to her face and his laughter faded. Though she hated him and would kill him one day soon, she was thankful he had spared the slave. The merchant's wagons ahead of them rolled forward and whips cracked above the coffles.

"Onward, my pretties," Hordo called.

Kerana would have liked to spend time wondering about the strange contrasts in the warrior's behaviour, but it took all her concentration just to walk, as bruised and stiffened muscles refused to obey her will. The sun was high and everyone well coated with dust before her limbs began to loosen. She still had difficulty keeping the step, and after a while the other girls' patient refusal to complain when she upset the rhythm and made their collars tighten, though intended kindly, had become irritating. Kirkit changed with Hordo and Kerana pretended it had not happened, doing nothing to provoke him, though twice she heard his whip crack and Yulana yelp behind her.

It was almost noon and the heat oppressive when they reached the oasis. There was only one pool and it was for drinking only. By the time the slaves' turn came, Hordo had replaced Kirkit and he gave in to Nita's plea and looked the other way. The girls got down on all fours at the pool's edge, leaning out far enough for Kerana to lower her buzzing breasts into the cool, soothing water while she drank, careful not to dislodge the nail from the side of her mouth. They stayed there several minutes and Kerana felt a stab of guilt for her earlier irritation, for their sexes were on display to any passer-by and their upraised bottoms made a tempting target for any guard's whip.

Too soon for Kerana, Hordo called them out, chained the slaves in a circle and let them eat. Kerana found sitting on her bottom just bearable and her breasts felt a little better, though the weals had thickened and were a deeper red that would soon darken into bruising. She ate slowly, conscious of the metal against the inside of her cheek that would make her speech sound odd, but there was nowhere else a nude girl could hide it. She had dismissed the alternatives at once.

As they chatted, the girls' eyes shied from her battered breasts and they did not

press her to join in, but she listened with more interest than she expected as they talked of how they had been enslaved. Nita was sold by her father to save the family farm. Reina, because she refused to choose between her many suitors, and a handsome young man had duped Alsira into a secret meeting that had turned quickly to enslavement. Suliki had been snatched from the city streets one afternoon, and Murina while travelling to visit her aunt.

Kerana felt a twinge of guilt. She had taken scores like them in her years of plundering and sold them to unscrupulous slavers without a thought for their ultimate fates. Her victims had been no different to these girls, each one with a tale to tell of lost loved ones, thwarted ambitions and dreams destroyed. They had been a source of profit, and she had not cared what they lost when she took their liberty. But the coffer girls had helped and supported her, and it somehow mattered that they would lose those same things.

"I was taken in a caravan not twenty miles from here," Yulana said, "and dragged all the way to Tartris just to walk back again. There is a notorious she-bandit in these parts who has been raiding the caravans for years. King Barca has a price of two thousand crowns on her head and has sentenced her to death, but he can't catch her."

The thin barley gruel was suddenly too thick for Kerana to swallow. Head down, she raised her eyes to Yulana but the girl was not looking accusingly at her; was not looking at her at all. She breathed again, but the tightness in her gut did not go away and only the need to maintain her strength made her finish her food. She was in no doubt - because of her, Yulana was a slave.

The caravan made another three miles before camping for the night. The coffles knelt before the wagon pole to see a girl punished. No one told them why. She cried noisily even before the first blow landed, shrieked with every stroke and was still crying when she had to be half-carried back to her coffer. Kerana found she felt less scorn for the girl than she did sympathy.

As the slave girls slept, Kerana kept her eyes open and watched the stars grow brighter. Patience had never come easily to her but years of lying in ambush along the caravan routes had taught her its value. Gut wound tight, she waited until the campfires burned low. The skills she had learned thieving in Azdagul had not been forgotten. She probed the lock on her collar with the nail's point until it clicked softly. Muffling it with her blanket, she eased the collar open, laid it on the sand and rose to one knee. Her heart leapt as a hand closed around her ankle.

"Free me," Yulana whispered.

Kerana looked at the sleeping slaves. None stirred. She bent to Yulana's ear. "You know the risk," she warned.

At the girl's agreement, she worked the nail until the lock on her collar gave, eased

the cold iron from her neck and beckoned her to follow. They waited for the guard at the edge of the camp to pass, and kept low as they made their way into the desert. A hundred paces in, Kerana dropped to a crouch. "I go north," she whispered.

"South," Yulana said. "There is a man. He will be waiting."

Kerana weighed the alternatives. If she kept Yulana with her, the girl would have a better chance. If she let her go her own way, it would split the pursuit. "Go past the tail of the caravan before you cross the road," she advised, her decision reached. "Be quick. The moon will rise soon."

Whispering her thanks, Yulana disappeared into the darkness. Kerana cast a last look towards the dimly glowing campfires, bared her teeth exultantly and set off into the night.

They found her at mid-morning. Kerana had hidden the moment she saw their dust above the heat haze, crawling behind a rock in a dry streambed and pulling the dusty blanket over her as camouflage. Heart pounding, she listened to hoof beats come unerringly towards her and stop right in front of the rock. The foulest curses running through her mind, she pushed the blanket from her face, sure who she would see.

"Get up." Macro did not look pleased.

She rose slowly. If she could somehow get to his horse when he dismounted to bind her... But he waited until the other searchers reached him. He turned her ungently and thonged her wrists, and then laid her on her throbbing breasts and did the same to her ankles. Sending the others back to the caravan, he pulled her to her knees, took the water skin from his saddle and held it to her dry lips.

"Do you enjoy being made into a public spectacle?" he demanded. "Are you so determined to be hurt?"

Kerana wanted to spit the water into his face but it felt too good and she swallowed for as long as he let her. He remounted, shook the dust from her blanket and folded it into a pad on his saddle. Once more she was awed by his strength as he leaned down and hauled her up in front of him. To her surprise, she did not end up belly down but cradled in his arms as he set off at an easy pace. She stared into the desert, uncomfortably aware of Macro's broad chest near her and the feel of his bare forearms behind her knees and across her shoulders. Memories of their last encounter came unbidden, provoking an unwanted sensation between her legs. Her nipples stiffened.

"What made you think you could get away?"

Kerana kept silent.

"You can answer me now," Macro said, "or I can pinch one of those big, hard nipples until you do."

"Go to hell."

"Master," he reminded.

She ignored it. "The guards wouldn't have found me. I would have escaped but for you."

"I know how to follow a trail," he agreed. "I spent enough time scouting when I was a soldier."

"Now you're a slaver." She said it as an insult, anger building beneath her dejection.

Macro's mouth hardened. "Not by choice. But I don't think you're the one to judge me." Her belly fluttered at the implied knowledge behind the words. Macro sighed. "You know you'll be punished again, don't you, sweet one? Slavers Rules demand it and even a commander can't go against them without provoking mutiny. And that's a risk I don't care to take."

Kerana's mind cowered at the thought of more pain. She looked at his face, surprised at the endearment he had used. Was his regretful expression genuine? How could it be? "You let Kirkit flog my breasts," she accused.

"You tried to run. I have to uphold my authority. But I admit I underestimated Kirkit. I meant Hordo to do it, and Loura would put more strength behind a blow than he would."

"Loura," Kerana sneered, as much to cover her confusion as in real contempt.

"Yes, Loura. A weak fool you called her, obsessed with jewels and silks. Yet I find her highly intelligent. She can read, play music, dance, and she writes poetry. And yes, she does enjoy fucking, but only a fool or an ascetic does not. And she is clean, well fed and protected."

Resentfully, Kerana felt his eyes on her sweaty, dust-caked body and matted hair. "You beat her."

"Several times," Macro admitted. "There are limits to every man's patience and every woman's too. Sometimes conflicts arise."

"And then you always have the final word."

"Of course. That's the way of things. A man has his power to take a woman. A

woman has hers to ensnare his heart, if she can."

Kerana did not understand. Power was the strength to skilfully wield a sword and impose her will. How could it capture a heart? This warrior was a romantic fool.

"Perhaps," he said, "you should be less scornful of Loura and try to learn from her. The gods know, putting you in the coffle has taught you nothing. That was my mistake, I'll admit. It made you subject to Slavers Rules and fair game for the likes of Kirkit. But I didn't know you were going to be such a troublemaker when I did it, and I can't undo it now."

Kerana stared up at his handsome face, not understanding.

"Once in the coffle, you don't leave it 'til we reach our destination," Macro explained. "You don't know anything about Slavers Rules, do you?"

"I know as much as most people," she protested.

"A pity you hadn't troubled to ask the other slaves. Then you might have thought twice about involving them in your escape."

"Yulana knew the risk. It was her choice."

"A choice she wouldn't have had but for you. And you didn't even consider the other girls, did you?"

"They were asleep. They had nothing to do with it."

"Slavers Rules!" Macro shook her. "Every girl in the coffle is responsible if one escapes, so every girl is punished."

"I..." Kerana had a sinking feeling in her stomach. "I didn't think..."

"No, you didn't. Or about the guards either."

"I don't give a damn about them," Kerana said hotly.

"You should," he said and she sensed he was angry now. "What do you think will happen when word gets around they let a slave escape? Their good reputations are what gets them work. You've damaged them. Who do you think will suffer for that? They'll be far more strict with the slaves and punish them for the least infraction, you included."

"But I had to get away," Kerana protested. "I have to be free."

"To do what? Is it worth all the pain you'll suffer? Have you really got so much to go back to?"

"Yes!" Kerana said - revenge and riches that were hers, not Durkans.

Macro lowered his face, fixing her gaze with his own. "Little girl-slave, you have much to learn."

His lips seized hers. Stunned, she tried to pull back but he cupped the back of her head in his palm, holding her mouth to his. His other hand stroked the smooth skin of her thighs, sliding gently upwards, and then his fingers began working their magic and reason deserted her. She turned into his embrace, pressing the weals on her aching breasts against his chest. The pain intensified, and the thrills of excitement coursing through the moist sheath of her sex intensified too. She moaned, wishing her wrists were loose so she could wrap her arms around him and crush her pulsing nipples harder against his broad chest. His tongue was hot in her mouth and her insides were melting. He teased the bud of her clitoris erect with his thumb and probed the velvety heat of her sex, astounding her when his finger again found the little ridge high in front she thought was a secret only women knew. And his rubbing there and the pressure of his iron-mailed chest against her throbbing breasts set her writhing and gasping until she came with a violent up-thrust of her hips and a surging flood of juices. Kerana groaned against his lips, too overwhelmed even to curse her body's treachery.

Ever since their journey began she had felt the hard thickness of Macro's cock pressing against her and been conscious he could throw her down and use her at any moment. Surely, now, with the thongs of his leather breeches strained taut by his erection, he would rape her. With her sex still tingling, she waited, strangely untroubled by what was about to happen. After a while, drained by her furious orgasm and a night without sleep, Kerana slipped from awareness, cradled in Macro's strong arms.

She woke with a startled cry as she was flipped onto her belly and a broad hand pressed her down onto the saddle.

"Sorry, sweet one," Macro said. "I have to uphold my authority again."

Chapter 5

Even before she was re-collared and chained at the back of the coffle, Kerana sensed the changed atmosphere in the slave-train. None of the girls even looked back when Kirkit's whip cracked across her backside to set them going. She cried out hoarsely as the fiery bite of the lash seared her tender skin still striped and bruised from her earlier punishments, and guessed her pain would evoke more satisfaction than sympathy among the other girls. All of the slaves marched in silence. There was none of the chatter that the guards had sometimes tolerated

before, none of the banter they had occasionally engaged in with their charges, and the crack of the whip was much more frequently followed by a yelp of pain from some unfortunate slave.

It was her doing and she did not care. They were cattle! If she had escaped, she would not even have known about the consequences for the others. And she had been so certain she would escape. Macro was good, she grudgingly admitted. Not only had he tracked her down across an unfamiliar and almost featureless desert, he had unwaveringly found his way back to the caravan.

He was attractive, she conceded. The sight of his broad shoulders and strong limbs awoke strange, disturbing feelings in her that she did not recognise and definitely did not want to confront. His touch was frightening, effortlessly crushing her resistance, yet it aroused her as nothing ever had before, even - shame filled her as she was forced to admit it - especially when pain came with the pleasure. It struck her she had felt no stirring of desire when Kirkit had switched her breasts, and that was just as well with the whole slave-train looking on. But she had just orgasmed twice when that happened. Or perhaps the pain of the breast whipping had been too overwhelming. Or maybe it was Macro alone who somehow had the power to provoke the incredible and frightening blending of pain with pleasure that inflamed her arousal to heights she had never known could exist.

She did not understand him. He seemed genuinely regretful about her punishments, but even if he had not meted them all out himself, it was he who had ordered them and told her she deserved them. He understood her desire for freedom, yet he was the one preventing her being free. Why was he so determined not to let her go? Even with slave prices rising after the end of the war in the north, she would not fetch much over a hundred crowns at auction. What was that to a warrior? Unless - the apprehension that had been tightening Kerana's stomach ever since her recapture turned to cold fear - unless he planned to take her to Azdagul and trade her to King Barca for the reward. She almost stumbled and earned another bite from Kirkit's whip. No, she told herself, Macro knew she rode with rogues but he was just a stranger travelling the High Road. There was no reason he should have heard of an outlaw named "The Dove" and certainly no reason he should suppose it was she. But the thought nagged Kerana as much as her aching breasts and burning bottom while she marched, for she knew if she fell into Barca's hands her fate would be far worse than anything the slavers did to her.

Face down over the neck of a horse, Yulana returned with the guards sent to find her, and the hollowness in Kerana's belly increased. A buzz of conversation rose from the other coffles, swiftly whipped into silence, but Kerana's companions said nothing. She did not turn her head as she felt the chain being fastened to the back of her collar. Kirkit's whip cracked to set them moving and Yulana cried out, and Kerana knew Macro had been right.

The day dragged on in heat and dust, sweat and anxiety. The other girls must

have felt it as much as she, tramping through the fierce mid-day sun, pushing for the wells at Sostris, Kerana guessed, nine miles closer to Azdagul than she had been the previous night. It was clear soon after they arrived that the caravan was going no further that day. It seemed the Caravan Master was prepared to risk spending longer on the outlaw-infested stretch of road for the advantages of camping beside water whenever he could. Well, Kerana thought bitterly, he had nothing to fear from her now.

When the time came to piss, Hordo made the slave girls squat at the roadside alongside all the others, in full view of the rest of the caravan. He took the coffle separately to the smallest pool to drink and ordered them to bathe. When the inevitable audience gathered, the other slaves paid them scant attention and Kerana barely noticed her embarrassment through her growing apprehension.

They were chained in a circle to be fed and finally she had to face her companions. None met her eyes. They sat with heads down and the food, even the plump figs Macro had doubtless provided from his own pocket, went untouched. Cattle, Kerana told herself, but she knew it was not true. The girls had cared enough to help her when they could simply have turned away from her surly contempt. They had supported her through her first difficult days when she needed it more than she cared to admit, and though she had not wanted it, they had accepted her as one of their own. That was something no one had ever done before. She could have laughed at the irony, but the feeling that came through her anxiety was one that seldom troubled her. It was guilt.

"I'm sorry," she heard herself say, surprised how much she meant it. "I didn't know about the rules. If I could do something..."

Their heads lifted and Kerana looked into the girls' faces, expecting to see resentment or even hatred. But all she saw was fear. Next to her, Yulana shook her head, tears brimming in her eyes at the thought of the unknown punishment that must surely come soon.

They did not have to wait long. Hordo and Kirkit herded them to the centre of the encampment where the other coffles already knelt facing three wooden crates twice as long as they were wide, standing evenly spaced a short way from the mouth of Macro's tent. As they were made to kneel in front of them, Macro appeared from within and surveyed the crowd with narrowed eyes.

"I won't drag this out," he said. "It's been a bad day and you all know why. Some of you are going to suffer because of it." His gaze flicked over Kerana and her companions. "But when it's over, it's over, as long as there are no more escape attempts. And remember, however bad the punishment might seem, I could have made it a lot worse. As for you guards, I know it rankles that some silly girls thought they could run, but don't forget to mention that you got them back next time you're hiring out. There's many a slave-guard can't list that as something he's got any experience of."

Murmurs of agreement among the guards told Kerana Macro knew how to turn adversity to advantage, a skill she had needed herself on many occasions. For all the warning signs, she had still underestimated him. She swallowed. And now she was going to pay for it.

At a nod from Macro, Hordo thonged Kerana's wrists behind her. Macro took her from the coffle and, his big hand around her neck chain, drew her into the shade in front of his tent. "Kneel," he ordered and when she did, "Look at me." He let the chain drop to the dust, holding her eyes with an uncompromising stare. "You will not run." Looking up at him, Kerana felt a tingle of excitement between her legs despite her stomach's quivering. He took a bundle of spears, and she watched his strong arm thrust one deep into the ground at the mid-point on either side of each of the crates. "Give me the chain." This was not the time to rebel. Kerana put the end into his open hand, watching his thick-muscled forearm flex as his fingers closed around it. "All right," he told the guards.

Kerana caught her breath. Each girl was separated from the coffle in turn. Nita was first to be pulled to a crate by her chain, and wailed in despair as her guards laid her on her back upon it and bound her wrists to the upright spears on either side. She wailed louder when her ankles were seized and tied higher on the spear shafts until she was almost bent double, thighs well spread and her sex and the whole curve of her bottom exposed. Kerana's heart thumped as she tried to understand what was happening. Surely they did not mean to switch her between the legs? That would be unbearable. Gods, what had she got them into?

Reina was next, weeping as she was fixed in the same position on the crate next to Nita, and Alsira was bound on the third one. Macro beckoned the three remaining coffle girls and their guards let go of their neck chains. Desperate to please, they ran to kneel at his feet. He reached into his belt pouch, producing three sets of bronze tweezers and put one into the hand of each girl as they looked up, uncomprehending.

"I want every hair below their waists removed," Macro said sternly, gesturing towards the bound slaves. "Do it properly or your bottoms will suffer. And remember, you are next."

Kerana breathed again. Thank all the gods. No, thank Macro! The slave girls were going to be plucked, not whipped. She looked up at him as Suliki, Murina and Yulana set about their task. She wanted to thank him, but her mouth was too dry and her chest too tight for words. He pulled her to her feet as the first squeaks and gasps came from the bound slave girls. It may have been better than a beating, but Kerana guessed there would be nothing comfortable about having all her pubic hair pulled out.

"Yes, it will be done to you," Macro confirmed as though guessing her thoughts. "But you know I can't let you or the other girl off so lightly, don't you?" Belly

knotting, she nodded. "Now, we have business at the wagon pole."

Kerana thought he meant to punish her there, but he only made her kneel beside him and watch as three girls were switched one after another. Two got thirty strokes each on their backsides and the other twenty on her breasts. Kerana stared down at the sand, wincing at each crack of the switch on bare skin and the cries and shrieks of the tormented slave girls. It was obvious she was not watching and she was grateful that Macro did not make her.

"You understand this was your doing?" he demanded when it was over. She could only nod her agreement.

It was well into the afternoon before the depilation of the six slaves was finished and five of them were re-chained and kneeling with the other coffles. Kerana had kept her eyes down the whole time, kneeling by Macro in front of his tent, not wanting to see the malice in the slave guards' eyes or the sullen resentment of the coffles sweating in the sun. It seemed her heart had been racing for hours, but its beat quickened further as she felt the tug on her collar she had been dreading. She rose to her feet, chin lifting with all the defiance she could muster. One of the crates had been removed and Yulana was kneeling by one of the two that remained, her chain held fast in Kirkit's meaty paw.

Macro scooped Kerana up and laid her on the bare wood, securing her wrists with his own hands. Hating him for the degradation he was putting her through, Kerana did not understand why her skin should still tingle at his touch as he bound her ankles high on the spear shafts. She heard him snap his fingers and Yulana appeared, framed between her upraised thighs. Kerana's eyes flickered to Macro's as she grunted in protest at the humiliation and discomfort of her awkward position.

He raised an eloquent eyebrow. "Begin."

"Ow!" The exclamation was out before Kerana could clench her teeth. She felt as if an ant had bitten her mound. Her hands jerked reflexively against their bindings, trying to reach down and rub her hurt. But the spear shafts went deep and barely moved under her tugging. The ant bit again, and then again, on and on, an increasingly maddening irritation she could do nothing to stop. Yulana worked with a film of tears in her eyes, wincing every time Kerana did as another hair was plucked from her sex. Kerana put her head back and had an upside-down view of Macro sitting in his chair in the mouth of his tent, arms folded, face impassive. Bastard, she thought, but did not say it. If she once unlocked her jaws, she would be mewling and whimpering as the other girls had done.

Breathing hard through her nose, she endured, trying hard not to squirm at each painful tug of the tweezers while sweat ran down her upraised thighs and made the stinging between them worse. And it was worse again when Yulana finished her mound and began plucking the hairs from the even more sensitive skin

around the lips of her sex, and then made Kerana's shame and discomfort even more acute by working her way down the tender furrow between her buttocks. When she finally sat back with her task completed, she seemed reluctant to announce it, and then Kerana remembered this was just the first stage of their punishment and her stomach shrank.

Macro bent and examined her. Cringing inside, she cursed him silently as he pulled and stretched her skin, and even spread her buttocks to satisfy himself no hair remained unplucked. Content, he untied her and made her sit on the end of the crate, facing the coffles and most of the guards. "Knees apart," he ordered. Kerana looked at him resentfully. The flash in his eyes and a jerk on her neck chain made her obey, and the sudden heat in her cheeks told her she was blushing furiously. "Wider!"

Grinding her teeth, she spread her feet further apart and looked down at herself. Her sex was totally bald. The dark slit bisecting her plump outer lips, the pink hood of her clitoris and the petals that peeped out below it were all bare and on display. Knowing a crowd from the caravan stood watching from the edge of the camp intensified her humiliation, but she had no time to dwell on it.

"Up." Macro handed her chain to Hordo who drew her forward to stand beside Yulana, trembling in Kirkit's grasp. There were noises behind them but Kerana dared not turn to look. A muscle twitched in her knee. Macro took Yulana's chain from Kirkit. The girl followed meekly, without protest or struggle and, hopelessly outnumbered, Kerana knew she would do the same. She turned her head enough to watch from the corner of her eye. One of the crates had been moved so the spears embedded in the ground on each side were now an arm's reach closer to the tent than it had been, and a saddle had been placed crosswise on its other end. Macro made Yulana lie belly-down over the saddle with her head beyond the end of the crate, and he secured her wrists to the spear shafts. He took another spear and thrust it into the ground several paces beyond the end where her stomach pressed into the saddle, then roped her ankles together and tied the rope low around the shaft, pulling it taut so only her toes touched the ground.

Yulana was breathing fast and seemed unable to keep still, her head continually turning as though she was seeking a way out, or perhaps just trying to see what was being done to her, since her position left her such a limited view. Not so Kerana. She had not noticed Kirkit move away but she saw him return. Her tongue seemed to thicken in her mouth until she could not swallow her fear. The guard carried two rattan canes a good four feet long. Wordlessly he handed one to Macro and went to stand behind Yulana's helplessly bound figure. As guards of the coffle involved, it fell to Hordo or Kirkit to punish the girls. Macro had chosen Kirkit. As he had said, Kerana thought with her belly tightening further, Loura would hit harder than Hordo.

"Thirty for this one," Macro told Kirkit.

Kirkit looked at him in surprise. "Sixty is usual."

Yulana wailed and pissed herself. The yellow stream squirted onto the sand beyond her feet, gradually weakening to splash over her heels and calves, and then become no more than a dribble in the dust beneath her newly hairless slit. Kerana's belly squirmed. Oh gods, she silently prayed, don't let me do that.

Macro waited until the jeering crowd fell silent. "The number of strokes isn't laid down in the Slavers Rules. Thirty will do." His tone was reasonable, but the hard look in his eyes as they held Kirkit's seemed to invite a challenge. It seemed for long moments that the guard would take it up, and then he looked away with a shrug and took a firm grip on the cane in his hand. It was an ugly thing, so long, so thick - Kerana's belly did another flip - so frightening! She felt Macro's hand on her neck chain, close to her collar, and he turned her to face the guard and the helpless girl.

"You will watch this," Macro said softly into her ear. "This time you will not look down or close your eyes, or turn away." He did not need to add "or else". Kerana steeled herself. The cane whooshed through the air as Kirkit gave it a practice swing, and the sound was enough to provoke a terrified cry from Yulana. A heartbeat later, it was pain that made her scream as the cane landed hard across her upraised buttocks with an awful crack and her whole body leapt forward under the impact.

Kerana thought she would choke. With the girl's screams echoing inside her head, she stared aghast at the fiery red streak that was scored into Yulana's tender bottom. The cane struck again with the same sickening crack of hard wood on soft skin, and Kerana saw the two firm rounds of flesh yield beneath its force then bounce back as if inviting another strike. Each cruel blow that followed did the same, its force indenting the poor girl's buttocks, biting deep. Each time they bounced back with another crimson weal scorching their delicate skin, and Yulana writhed in her bonds and screamed until it seemed her lungs must burst. Kirkit took his time, letting the agony soak in between each vicious stroke and sparing Yulana nothing of his strong arm. The gloating grin on his face and the outline of his erection in his breeches showed how much he enjoyed hurting the defenceless girl. Kerana hated him.

A look at Macro's frowning face confirmed she had not miscounted the wicked blows when Kirkit finally stepped back and lowered the cane. He had given Yulana thirty-one. The slave girl's screams ceased, but she kept up a continuous sobbing and groaning that was just as unnerving. The hollow emptiness in Kerana's gut was the worst she had ever known. She was no stranger to fear and danger, but in the past she had always had a fighting chance. She stared at Yulana's ravaged bottom. Purple bruises were already forming beneath the raised red ridges on her tormented flesh, worse on the right buttock where trickles of blood were running from the split skin and over the back of her thigh. She could not keep still, rocking from side to side as though that somehow helped her deal

with the pain.

I will live, Kerana told herself. A flogging will not kill me. But still the fist clenched tight around her heart would not let go. With a long, unsteady breath, she obeyed the tug on her collar. The second crate had been arranged in the same way as the first. Though Macro released her chain to reposition the saddle, Kerana made no move, just stood fighting the weakness of her knees and smelling the sweat of fear coating her nakedness. There was no thrill at Macro's touch as he tilted her forward over the saddle, no tingle of excitement between her thighs when he bound her wrists and ankles and stretched her legs taut. She could not stifle a groan as her bruised breasts and tender nipples pressed down on the rough wood. Chin over the end of the crate and hair hanging about her face, Kerana could see nothing but the ground below. She found herself turning her head, just as Yulana had done, in an effort to catch a glimpse of what was happening and saw the slave girl, still bound to the crate next to her and Kirkit standing by her head, the long cane still in his hands. Was it Hordo who would punish her then? But had not Macro said Hordo...? Her belly suddenly shrank. Oh, gods! Macro was going to do it himself!

Chapter 6

Kerana strained vainly against her bindings, horribly aware of her bare bottom arched high over the saddle, hardly recovered from its switching and spanking and now about to receive far worse. She heard footsteps behind her, a frightening hiss of air as Macro tested the cane, and she clamped her jaw tight. She was still unprepared for the appalling shock of the first stroke.

The whoosh and crack and blazing pain all seemed to come at once. Kerana's whole body thrust forward under the weight of the blow, breasts scraping the crate, belly forced against the saddle, wrists and ankles jerking against their ropes. A low grunt fought its way through her clenched teeth. With scarcely time for her to draw breath, a second streak of fire flared across her buttocks and tore a strangled cry from her throat. The third and fourth and fifth struck with equal ferocity and she writhed, tugging hard at her bindings, her belly squirming on the saddle as she fought uselessly to avoid the vicious strokes. Defiance and courage melted away under the blazing agony the cane inflicted. With blistering lines of fire searing her tender skin, Kerana screamed aloud and once the first cry tore from her lips she had not strength to stop the rest. They poured from her, each one increasing in intensity until they almost drowned out the meaty smack of the cane against her bottom. And along with the agony she felt a despairing ache in her heart at surrendering to such weakness.

Yet she still fought, clenching her buttocks tight to hold back the piss that would deepen her humiliation if she let it go in front of all the onlookers, and her rekindled hatred for Macro fuelled her determination. The rest of her body was

beyond her control, continually jerking forwards under the force of each stroke then back again to meet the next. She could feel the cheeks of her bottom flatten as the cane scored them deeply, just as Yulana's had, then bounce back as it lifted, only to yield once more in fresh agony as Macro flogged another crimson ridge into her tortured flesh. The bastard had made certain she watched Yulana's punishment just to make her own worse. But surely it could not last much longer?

"How many, Hordo?" she heard, and then another crack of the cane on her defenceless skin was followed by more searing pain.

"Forty four."

Gods in heaven! Kerana thought she was to get thirty. He would tear her bottom to shreds! Her belly turned over just as another blazing stroke wrenched a scream from her and an involuntary spurt of piss jetted from between her legs.

"I win!" Kerana heard a voice shout above the cheering crowd. "Who'll give odds she shits herself next?"

The bastards had been betting on how soon she would piss herself. She screamed in pain as another blow drove her belly hard into the saddle and another uncontrolled squirt of piss splashed her ankles. The jeers of the crowd seemed to shrink into the distance as each savage stroke of the cane forced another jet of urine from her and she was helpless to stop it. Suddenly her torment was unbearable. Kerana wanted to plead, to beg for it to stop before all the flesh was shredded from her tormented bottom, but nothing could get past her screams. It was not any lessening of her pain that finally brought them to an end, but the realisation that she could no longer hear the vicious smack of hard wood on soft skin. She cut off her cries and drew a long breath into her burning lungs, releasing it with a shuddering groan. Her bottom blazed and throbbed and ached all at the same time, and every muscle from her jaw to her toes was cramping. It seemed impossible to keep still despite her exhaustion, and she rocked from side to side though it did nothing to ease the pain.

Only gradually did she take notice of her surroundings again, heard the sound of the camp returning to its routine, sensed the onlookers had gone and she and Yulana were no longer the centre of attention. With a shiver and a moan, Kerana let the last dribbles of her piss escape and tossed her head to clear her hair from her eyes. Yulana was whimpering softly on her crate, face invisible behind her own hair. They would remain there until sunset as an example. But sunset was not far off, judging by the long shadow Macro's tent was casting. The depilation of the slave girls had used up most of the afternoon. Had that been Macro's intention, to spare the caned girls hours of being bound in place on the crates? But the bastard had hit so hard - at least as hard as Kirkit - and she was sure he had given her the sixty strokes that Kirkit said was usual. Something trickled down the back of her thigh and her gut tightened as she remembered Yulana's bloodied backside. Hers must be twice as bad. Painfully, she raised her head, but the flap of Macro's tent

was closed and there was no one in her limited field of view. No doubt he was inside, relaxing after his exertions with his little slave-pet sucking his cock. Kerana forced the image from her mind and groaned.

It seemed a long time before she heard movement nearby and Yulana grunting and groaning, and knew the girl was being released. The noises faded, replaced by the sound of approaching footfalls and the toes of someone's boots appeared. A hand lifted her chin and another brushed her hair aside.

"Sorry, sweet one," Macro said. "I had no choice."

"Bastard," Kerana said thickly.

"Bastard, Master," he corrected.

"Fuck you." It was all she could manage.

Hands loosened her bonds. "Up, slave," Kirkit ordered. Kerana tried, but every step was an agony of pain and cramping muscles, and half the time her feet dragged as Hordo and Kirkit took her to her coffer. She sank to her knees on her blanket, heard the click as her chain was fastened to someone's collar, and then screamed as a hand smacked her tortured rear. "Down, slave," Kirkit snapped.

"That'll do." It was Macro's voice. "Make sure they drink."

Water cool in her throat was the last thing Kerana felt before she sank into an exhausted faint.

She woke in darkness, lying on her belly, her pain all she recognised at first.

"Gently, slaves. No need to be afraid." Macro's voice again, softly reassuring. Kerana heard wet noises, a groan and sigh from Yulana. There was movement close to her and something cool and wet was laid gently onto her throbbing bottom. As the awful pain eased a little, Kerana surrendered again to her fatigue.

* * *

The moment she tried to rise to her knees in the cold dawn, Kerana knew the day was going to be hell. The slightest movement worsened the throbbing of her buttocks as she forced bruised muscles and torn skin into motion. When the other slave girls sat back on their heels to eat their morning gruel, she and Yulana remained stiffly upright at either end of the coffer. They exchanged bleak looks over the heads of the others. Kerana was next to Nita who chanced to look up as she looked down.

"Is it bad?" the blonde asked. She at least was willing to talk to her.

Kerana nodded. "I'm sorry I got you punished. I didn't mean any of you to suffer for what I did."

"It could have been worse," Nita said with surprising generosity. "Lord Macro only did what would be done to us anyway before we are sold. At least you did not know the consequences for the rest of us." She looked resentfully at Yulana.

"Don't blame her too much," Kerana urged. "It was my talk of escape that put the idea in her head and it was I who unlocked her collar." She realised she was repeating Macro's words and that they were true. She lowered her voice. "Yulana is from near here and she has a lover she is desperate to be with."

Nita glanced at Yulana, kneeling stony faced at the other end of the coffle and her own expression softened.

Kerana spoke loud enough for them all to hear. "I promise I will not involve anyone else next time."

Nita's shocked gaze turned to Kerana's battered buttocks. "You really intend there to be a next time?"

"There has to be!"

Yulana was chained next to Kerana for the march, which made her lead girl and left Murina last. They started badly with Kirkit plying his whip sharply to Murina's bottom to set them on their way. It was all Kerana could do to keep going, and she could see Yulana was faring little better. The sight of the girl's buttocks turned her stomach. They were a mass of purple bruises, overlaid with criss-crossing, dark red ridges and thin, blood-crusts cuts. And Yulana had received only half the number she had!

For the first hour, the two beaten girls struggled to keep up. Kirkit showed no tolerance, switching them on the backs of their thighs only because he knew striking their bottoms was more likely to slow them down than speed them up. But Murina suffered most for their tardiness as her bottom bore the brunt of Kirkit's impatience.

Gradually Kerana's muscles relaxed a little, though her pain increased as salty sweat ran into the wounds in her buttocks. It was late in the morning before she could concentrate on anything but walking and pain and how ugly her punished bottom must appear. Then she began to puzzle over Macro. He had ordered the beatings yet had ignored Kirkit and ordered Yulana receive a lesser punishment than usual. He had caned Kerana himself and it did not feel, then or now, as if he had spared her anything. But the only alternative had been to allow Kirkit to do it, and she knew that he would somehow have managed to make it worse.

She could not have been more shamed by what she had suffered. Why then was

the flame of hatred she had felt as Macro flogged her now no more than a spark? And why had he come in the night to ease her pain? He was clearly not opposed to slavery – Kerana doubted any free man was – and she had not objected to it herself until Macro enslaved her. But he was not indifferent to the slave girls like most of the guards, or deliberately cruel like Kirkit and some others she had seen. The girls seemed to respect him and were grateful for his usual leniency and the extra food he gave them. That little bitch Loura appeared to adore him and he seemed to like her for more than just her sexual abilities. Kerana's resentment swelled. The pointy-titted little slut would be lounging comfortably in a wagon with her clothes and perfumes while she was trudging through the dust with her bottom split and throbbing. She was probably playing with herself and dreaming about her next chance to suck her master's cock. Kerana almost stumbled, shocked that despite her pain there was warmth and tingling between her thighs as the image of Macro's rearing erection filled her mind. Urgently, she pushed it away.

The sun was low by the time the caravan camped. It was just Kerana's luck that the day she could least manage was the one they had to travel furthest to reach water. It was nearly dusk by the time the slaves were fed and watered, and Kirkit led them to the far side of the pool, beyond the last straggling palms and into the desert. A grin creased his face as he made the slaves adopt the position. "Now, get those bald cunts up where I can see them." He slapped his coiled whip against his palm.

Leaning back on her hands like the others, Kerana discovered new sources of pain in her poor, throbbing bottom. Shame and hatred mingled as Kirkit walked down the line pausing to peer between their well-parted thighs at each of the slave girl's hairless sexes. He lingered over Kerana's then looked into her eyes. She held the stare, very conscious of his lust. Macro had admitted his mistake in chaining her in the coffle. He had made her subject to Slavers Rule,s and they included giving the guards use of any girl not virgin. That did not happen as often as Kerana had expected – the nature of the job seemed to make many indifferent once the novelty wore off, and they had to march every day just as the slaves did, as well as stand guard at night. But that did not stop Kirkit, who took as much pleasure from humiliating the girls as he did in sexually abusing them. Apart from her one close call, he had not included Kerana in the sex, but she had the feeling it was only his uncertainty about how Macro would react that prevented him. She finally blinked as he moved on to study Yulana.

"Piss then, you sorry bitches."

They obeyed with the usual blushes and embarrassment. It never seemed to get any easier. Afterwards, Kirkit moved them back to the edge of the trees, the hand rubbing the bulge in his breeches clearly indicating what would follow.

"Kneel."

The girls knelt. Kerana and Yulana remaining stiffly upright when the others sank back on their heels. Kirkit eyed each in turn as he walked slowly along the line, unthonging his breeches. None of the girls looked at him, and none was relieved when he passed them by, since he often turned back and chose a girl who thought she had escaped. Eyes down, Kerana saw his boots pause opposite her then take another step to her left.

He had picked Yulana! From the look of horrified disgust on her face, she had never been his victim before. His hand closed around his thick cock and aimed it at the girl's lips. "Suck!"

Kerana felt her collar jerk as Yulana cowered to the limit of her chain, wildly shaking her head. Kirkit raised his switch but Yulana was beyond seeing the threat. Her mouth was twisting and her wide eyes rolled up in their sockets until only their whites showed. It was clear she was on the verge of losing control. When it was gone she might do anything, even lash out at her tormentor, with dire consequences for herself and the rest of the coffle. Slavers Rules, Kerana thought.

"Wait!" she said. "I'll do it."

Chapter 7

The instant she spoke Kerana regretted it. Her stomach felt hollow and her heart was hammering as the swollen cock turned towards her. She gave in to the pressure of Kirkit's fingers under her chin and raised her head, seeing surprise and suspicion on his face as he studied hers.

His tongue flickered over his lips as caution battled with lust. "Hands behind your back and keep them there. Any tricks and you die, and this one with you." He gestured at Yulana.

Kerana could whip the dagger from his belt and cut his disgusting shaft from him in the blink of an eye, but her life would be forfeit and probably those of the rest of the girls. Cursing her impulsiveness, she quelled her heaving stomach, and with the shortest of nods opened her mouth. Her eyes dropped from Kirkit's triumphant grin and she found herself staring at his fat, plum-coloured cock-head.

"Wet your lips."

She ran her tongue over them and he thrust his cock at her, and she had no choice but to let the ugly thing push into her mouth. It felt hot and greasy, and stretched her jaw. It was frightening! Never in her life had she sucked a cock. With her

nausea came panic at the feeling she was now somehow completely under Kirkit's control. She wanted to close her eyes but that would make things worse. She gagged as he thrust again and his hot meat caught in her throat.

"Come on, slave," he said impatiently, "You can do better than that." His hand grabbed the back of her head as she pulled back from his thrusts. It was a struggle to keep her hands behind her back. She longed to reach up and push him away, but she was too afraid of the consequences for herself and the others. All she could do was endure as best she could while his thick cock slid back and forth over her lips, never fully withdrawing from the hot moistness of her mouth, rubbing the length of her tongue and forcing itself nauseatingly to the back of her throat. Labouring to breathe, Kerana watched Kirkit's hairy belly heaving before her eyes, heard his obscene grunting and, for all her recent suffering, she had never felt more humiliated.

Suddenly her mouth filled with more than just Kirkit's cock, and she ignored his warning and lifted her hands, but she could not prise loose the grip on her head that kept his spunking shaft inside her mouth. She almost bit down but reason overcame her shame and anger and she waited, concentrating hard on not swallowing until he finally let his shrinking cock slide from her mouth. Salty slime overflowed her lips. She spat it out, but inevitably some ran down her throat and her stomach revolted and she vomited, just missing the guard's boots. The tip of his switch slashed into her right breast and she yelped.

"Hopeless," he snarled. "If I owned you, I'd whip you for that performance." His switch forced her chin up. "You swallow, bitch, and then you lick your master clean." As she had seen Loura do with Macro, Kerana realised, and her stomach gave another heave. But Kirkit was waiting, hard eyes fixed on hers. "Or should I get this one to do it?" He flicked his switch towards Yulana trembling beside her, whose fate Kerana knew lay in her hands. Slowly she leaned towards the half-flaccid penis and put out her tongue. Somehow suppressing the urge to puke again, she licked off the wetly glistening mixture of her own saliva and Kirkit's slime. He waited until she drew back and forced herself to swallow then grabbed a handful of her hair and wiped his sticky shaft with it before putting it back in his breeches.

Kerana kept her eyes down, too stunned to even wipe the gobbets of spunk from her chin, knowing that she had brought it all on herself and unable to understand where her uncharacteristic impulse to help her fellow slaves had come from.

The night was endless. Kerana turned gingerly onto her other side, careful of her throbbing bottom and pulled her blanket tighter. But it was the soul-deep chill of shame that kept her from sleep, not the cold desert night. She stiffened at the pressure of a hand on her shoulder, but it was only Nita.

"She would have snapped," the girl whispered, "and we would all have suffered for it but for you. Kirkit wouldn't have spared her for anyone else."

"I know." The knowledge she had saved herself as well as the others from more pain did not make her feel any better.

"Don't dwell on it," Nita urged. "Most of us have had to suck him. And worse. It won't seem so bad next time."

How she had fallen, Kerana thought gloomily, in a few days from bandit chief to cock-sucking slave. But one thing she vowed – even if it cost her life there would be no next time.

* * *

Sore, stiff and sleepless, Kerana trudged through the dust, trying hard to think of nothing but keeping up. The gritty sand chafed her inner thighs. When Hordo had taken the slaves for their morning piss, Kerana just could not bring herself to do it. The guard had not forced her and now she was paying for his latitude. With acute embarrassment, she had had to let go in the coffle as she walked and the dust raised by the caravan stuck to her wet skin, finding and chafing every crease. She could try to brush it off but she did not want to be seen with her hand between her legs and was reluctant to touch the unfamiliar bareness of the skin around her plucked sex. At least the pain in her bottom had lessened a little, though it must still be ugly judging by the dark-blue bruises decorating Yulana's swaying buttocks ahead of her. The girl had mouthed her silent thanks at breakfast. Poor creature. She had only delayed the inevitable.

A cry from behind ended her train of thought. Suliki was last girl and had just felt the sting of Kirkit's whip. Kerana had not even glanced at him all day, nor would she. From the moment they assembled on the road, it had felt as if every eye was upon her, slave and free, all knowing she was the one who had volunteered to suck the bastard's cock. She recalled how Loura's throat had worked as she swallowed Macro's seed and how she had licked him clean with every sign of pleasure. How could she? The memory of Kirkit's spunk sliding down her throat made Kerana's gut lurch. But her cold despair of the night before was gone, replaced by an even fiercer determination to escape. If they thought a caning would deter her, they were wrong. But it needed careful planning, and in eight days at most they would reach Azdagul. Time was running out and she did not even have an idea, let alone a plan. Yet, her confidence did not waver. She would come up with something. She always did.

Macro was sitting on his horse at the roadside surveying his charges, and she looked up at him as she passed. Did he know what she had done? She thought she read disapproval in the unwavering stare he turned on her and her cheeks grew hot, not only with shame but at the betraying warmth low in her belly that the memory of his teasing hands suddenly provoked. He's a bastard, she reminded

herself. It was those same hands that had swung the cane. But her sex still fluttered in prickling arousal for most of the morning.

Kerana managed to avoid meeting Macro's forbidding gaze again until after they stopped at Durafa, late in the afternoon. Once more the Caravan Master's liking for camping at water holes had slowed their progress - to just seven miles by her reckoning. She was lying on her left hip, propped on one elbow among the circle of chained slaves as they ate the juicy plums Kirkit had grudgingly doled out after they finished their gruel. Her backside might have been improving but it still buzzed painfully, and could not bear contact with the ground. Yulana lay in the same position next to her.

There was little talk. They were all too conscious of Kirkit nearby, toying with his switch and watching them with lustful, impatient eyes. They had not been taken to piss yet and Kerana knew that when they were he would demand one of them suck him. And she had the awful certainty he was going to pick her again. Belly taut, she passed her untouched fruit to Yulana and brooded over the questions plaguing her thoughts. Pride had made her swear she would not let Kirkit use her again, but was she really ready to die horribly rather than repeat the degradation of the previous day? What would happen to the other slave girls if she killed Kirkit? What would happen to her? There were so many ways of causing slow, agonising death. She shivered in the warmth of the sinking sun.

It was then she noticed Macro coming in the coffle's direction. Kerana had been aware of him for a while, walking slowly beside the pool with his chin on his chest, apparently deep in thought. Now his stride was purposeful, as if whatever problem was troubling him had been resolved. Her heart gave a leap when he walked straight up to her and unchained her from between Nita and Yulana. Kirkit had risen to his feet at Macro's approach. His face showed confusion and suspicion as he took a step towards the warrior, while Macro pulled on Kerana's neck-chain and the pressure of her collar forced her to stand. Without a word, he led her away.

"The slaves haven't pissed yet," Kirkit told him, twisting the switch agitatedly in his hands.

"Never mind, I'll see to it." Macro's narrowed eyes and the hard set of his jaw made Kerana's belly flutter anxiously as she had no choice but to follow him.

"It's a bit unusual," Kirkit protested, and she guessed he resented being deprived of another chance to humiliate her.

Macro laughed without humour. "The guards take girls all the time, you included, so don't try to tell me what I can or can't do. Especially when this one belongs to me." He strode towards the guard, dragging Kerana with him and his right hand went suddenly to his sword hilt. "And it's "Sir" or "Lord Macro" when you speak to me, understand?"

Kirkit's shock was plain on his face and he recoiled from the warrior's aggression. Kerana saw hatred in his eyes but knew there was fear in his belly. "Yes...sir," he said, looking as if he would choke.

Macro spun on his heel and Kerana could only stumble after him as he stalked off towards the pool. She was sure Kirkit had never experienced the warrior's true anger before. Neither had she. He did not speak or even glance at her as he made his way around the pool's edge to its far side. Two boys throwing sticks into the water stopped and stared wide-eyed, and Kerana laid a forearm across her swaying breasts and a hand over her sex, feeling heat flush her cheeks. Her finger brushed the swell of her vulva, and a little thrill of excitement ran through her as she watched the movements of Macro's broad shoulders and his hard-muscled buttocks in their tight, leather breeches. They were alone among the trees, out of sight of the camp and the mean hamlet of Durafa. She wondered if he had taken her to spare her having to suck Kirkit again, and cringed in embarrassment. Then he must know she had already done it once. But when he stopped and turned to face her, he was as full of anger as when he had faced Kirkit. And this time it was directed at her.

"I think you have something to tell me," he said sharply.

Gods, he had found out who she was! Kerana drew back to the limit of her chain eyes widening in fear. She was unable to speak, and it was a struggle to breathe through the sudden constriction in her throat.

"Well, what have you to say?" Macro demanded. Her neck chain went slack and dragged across one breast as he closed in. She winced, much more from fear of his daunting anger than from the sudden hurt. He would turn her over to King Barca for sure. "You sucked Kirkit's cock. Is it true you offered to do it?" Kerana breathed again, but her relief was short-lived. Macro gripped her shoulders and shook her, pushing his face into hers. "Answer me. Why did you do it?"

Her temper flared. What right had he to demand she answer? It was he who had caused all her troubles in the first place. She tilted her head up to stare defiance, and his mouth came down hard on her lips – the same lips Kirkit had forced her to open for his filthy meat. Stung, Kerana bit him. Macro jerked backwards, pressing a hand to his mouth and Kerana's belly shrank in fear as she realised what she had done.

"You little minx! If you've shed my blood...!"

But there was no red stain on his hand when he lowered it. Kerana drew scant comfort from the fact. Macro's cheeks were flushed with fury. Her instincts screamed at her to run but she was transfixed by the anger flashing in his eyes. "I... I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"You did! You've done nothing but push me to the limit ever since I first set eyes on you." Iron fingers dug into her flesh as he gripped her shoulders. "You have nothing but scorn for everyone - your fellow slaves, Loura, the guards and me! What the hell do you think makes you so superior?" He shook her again, rattling the chain hanging loose between her breasts and Kerana quailed before him, struggling to understand what she had done to provoke such rage. She really had not meant to bite him. It was the memory of Kirkit pushing his cock into her mouth that had made her lose control. But even if she tried to explain, it would make no difference. There was much more than the pain of a small bite behind his furious reaction. She almost fell when he thrust her away with a snort of disgust at her silence and snatched the switch from his belt. "Do you need to piss?"

She wanted to deny it, but her need had become urgent and she gave a short nod. Macro knelt and scooped a hole in the sand. Run, Kerana's mind cried insistently, but she knew he would catch her in ten paces. He stood up and flexed the switch. She eyed it nervously – near three feet of peeled willow tipped with brass, its appearance less intimidating than the cane, perhaps, but only to anyone who had not felt its bite on breasts and buttocks.

"Kneel," Macro snapped, emphasising the order with a slash of the switch through the air and Kerana obeyed at once, wincing at the memory of the last time she had heard that soft, menacing hiss. "Straddle the hole, back straight, hands behind your neck, elbows back, head up, push those tits out." The deluge of staccato commands set her head spinning and Kerana struggled to obey, kneeling upright and intertwining her fingers at the back of her neck, the posture thrusting her breasts forwards. Macro slapped the switch against her arm. "I said elbows back! Come on, I want to see the jut of those tits. Look at me."

Cringing inwardly, she heard his stern voice, followed his humiliating instructions and felt her nipples begin to stiffen. Dread filled her.

"Ow!" The switch stung her left breast. It was just a tap, but it struck one of the weals on the taut globe and reawakened its throbbing.

"I said look at me!" Macro rasped, and Kerana raised her eyes and saw the outline in the front of his breeches expanding as his shaft swelled to erection. Despite her bewildered anxiety, a little thrill of excitement made her sex twitch. Then the switch bit her right breast and the flash of pain sent little tremors rippling the length of her sheath. "Look into my eyes," Macro ordered. Reluctantly, she met his gaze. "Now, make a puddle."

Kerana trembled in cowering embarrassment as she surrendered to her compelling need and loosed a stream of piss for the first time under his gaze. It gushed into the hole in the sand, droplets splashing her inner thighs while Macro held her eyes with an uncompromising stare that dared her to look away. Tangled emotions warred within her – outrage, shame, disgust, repulsion. And fear, not so much of Macro, though his anger was frightening, but that she would be unable

to hide her body's betrayal from him and that he would despise her for her perverseness. For, incredibly, the painful pulsing of her breasts and Macro's imperious commands, which she had so spiritlessly obeyed, were arousing her, and shivers of anticipation teased her sex. Scarcely believing it could happen, Kerana heard the last dribbles of her piss drip into the puddle Macro had ordered her to make and searched his eyes for the smoky desire that had always been there before. But they burned with nothing but anger.

He grabbed her chain, pulling it down and forwards so she had to crawl from the pool of piss soaking into the sand. "Back in position!" he ordered, draping the chain down her back and flicking sharp, smarting taps of the switch against her arms and back and belly until she was once more kneeling stiffly upright with her hands behind her neck, elbows well back and breasts out-thrust. "Knees wider!" The switch stung the insides of her thighs until he was satisfied, and then he dropped to one knee and his hard eyes stared into hers. Half her senses seemed numbed as Kerana struggled with the bewildering shock of the transformation that had overtaken her captor. Yet, her sex still sparkled as Macro slowly slid the switch's length along the underside of her right breast. The supple wood bent slightly under its weight as he lifted it, then pulled the switch quickly away. Her breast dropped, its weals and bruises buzzing as it bounced heavily back into position. Kerana gasped, shamed by the surge of pleasure that ran through her.

"Is this the way you like it, slave girl?" Macro demanded. "You like a bit of proper slave discipline? Maybe I should have done this from the start. Then perhaps you'd have sucked my cock instead of Kirkit's, eh?" Kerana shook her head, heart pounding as Macro unthonged his breeches. "Well, you can suck me now. Kirkit's telling everyone you need the practice."

His penis sprang out of his breeches, almost into her face, and Kerana pulled away but he seized her head and pushed his broad cock-head against her lips. She twisted, pressing them tightly together.

"Not good enough for you?" he rasped, tightening his grip until her head was immobile. "You only volunteer to suck Kirkit. Is that it?" He grasped the base of his cock and smacked her face with the thick baton of flesh. She flinched and closed her eyes, feeling his hard shaft slapping repeatedly against each of her cheeks in turn. The thrill of her arousal had vanished. It could have been Kirkit defiling her this way, delighting in degrading her, making her into nothing but an object for his cruel lust. Tears of humiliation and despair ran down her cheeks.

Macro stopped abruptly. There was no sound except his hard breathing and Kerana's half-stifled sobs. She opened her eyes to find she had dropped her hands from her neck without realising, and the cock that had been rearing above Macro's belt buckle when she last saw it was now pointing downward as his erection faded. He dropped to his knees beside her. "Ah, sweet one, I'm sorry. I was... It's just that... You're mine, you know? I mean..." He faltered into silence.

Kerana blinked away her tears. Now was the moment to explain. Now was the time to mollify him. "Bastard!" she heard herself say. "I'm not yours. I'm not anybody's." And she slapped him.

Chapter 8

For once, his lightning reflexes deserted Macro and she felt her palm sting as it struck his face. He shot to his feet, and her gut twisted as his anger blazed anew. What the hell had she done that for?

Macro snatched up his switch. Too stunned by her mad impulse, Kerana did not even try to stand. He dragged her to her feet. "You're my slave," he hissed through clenched teeth. "Say it, or by heaven, whatever state your backside's in, it'll feel my switch again."

"Go to hell!" Kerana's curbed resentment surged up inside her. "You put me in the coffle. You can't blame me for..." His hand gripped the back of her neck and bent her forwards. He kicked her neck chain in front of her. "Stand on that." She obeyed reluctantly, her anger simmering beneath the logic that told her she had no choice. He released her, but her foot on the chain attached to her collar held her bent at the waist, and she knew if she moved she would only antagonise him further.

"Do you think I need you to tell me what a fool I was?" he asked harshly. "You think those reproving looks you give me all day long aren't enough? Well, I told you, I'm tired of your scorn, slave girl. If the coffle hasn't taught you anything I'll do it myself. Now say the words or suffer the consequences."

Kerana's breasts hung heavily beneath her, aching. She stared at the sand that was all her position let her see, and pride and defiance overcame common sense, "I am not a slave." The switch cut the air and stung the backs of her thighs. "Say it," Macro insisted. Kerana remained stubbornly silent and braced for the next blow.

"Oooh!" It slapped across the lower curve of her bottom, and she breathed rapidly as the heat of its fiery bite spread across her skin and reawakened her earlier hurts. Guilt filled her as the tingling in her lower belly began again, and she prickled with fresh arousal that she knew she would not be able to control.

"Anything to say?"

Kerana shook her head, sore breasts swinging, and Macro hit her again. His blows were far lighter than she expected and it was only the weals and bruises already decorating her upturned bottom that gave her pain. And the pain was somehow coalescing with her shameful arousal and fuelling the desire that was sending ripples of pleasure through her sex.

"I can keep this up for as long as I have to," Macro warned, but there was no longer an edge of anger in his voice. Kerana tensed for another stroke, hating her sex tingling with anticipation, despairing because she knew she would welcome the switch's sting. But it was not the shock of a blow that nearly unbalanced her but the sudden frightening, thrilling touch of Macros hot, pulsing cock pressing against the crease of her bottom. She knew she was lost. Her treacherous body and that part of heart or head that was in league with it filled her with the urgent longing to feel his thick cock deep within her and his hard belly slapping against her throbbing buttocks. He was rubbing against her, the thick ridge on the underside of his shaft sliding between her crease and over the seeping moisture coating her sex lips, sending sparkling delight coursing the full length of her eager sheath. Kerana moaned breathily and felt Macro's fingers dance across her belly and slide under her hood to tease her bud. She heard a cry of passion from somewhere in the gathering dusk as a slave girl found pleasure at the hands of one of her guards.

"No!" Macro pulled away abruptly. "I won't rut with you among the trees like Kirkit would. Stand up!"

Kerana lifted her foot from her chain and straightened, the surprise and relief in her logical mind struggling with the other part of her that felt suddenly dejected and frustrated at being deprived of the release of her pent-up passion. Absurdly after how he had treated her, she wanted to rush into Macro's arms and feel them close around her. But his face was blank and he did not even look at her as he picked the end of her chain from the dust and led her wordlessly back to her coffe. She was silent too, bewildered still by all that had happened, guilty and more than a little afraid of her body's betraying eagerness to welcome the pleasure-pain Macro gave her. But through her shock and confusion she understood this had been one of those times of which he had spoken, when man and woman had run out of patience with one another. And at last wisdom had prevailed and she had let him have the last word.

Macro continued to avoid her eyes as he re-chained her in the coffe, and he walked away without a backward glance. She sank to her blanket carefully, breasts and buttocks still buzzing, but the stinging of her thighs was already fading, proof of how lightly he had plied the switch. For all his anger, he had never completely lost his self-control. It was more than Kerana could have said about herself.

"Where's Nita?" She had only just realised there was no one on the blanket next to hers. A chill of fear ran through her at the thought she had escaped.

"Off fucking with Hordo again," Alsira, who was next-but-one, said. "Second time in a week."

It was strange, Kerana thought, how they all seemed to talk and think using much cruder terms than they would have elsewhere. She saw two fresh, red weals on

Alsira's breasts, standing out vividly despite the fading light and guessed she had been Kirkit's latest victim. Macro, even in all his fury, was preferable to that. She lay on her right side, moved her chain from under her shoulder and covered herself with her blanket. Her sex was hot and prickly with unfulfilled desire, and she pictured the great, straining length of Macro's penis rubbing against her and had to clasp her hands together to stop her fingers straying between her legs. She had the disturbing feeling that if he had been just a little less angry with her, her shameful, lusty response to him would have happened from the outset rather than at the end. The thought kept her awake for hours.

She woke with dawn just breaking and her chain clinking as Hordo fastened it to Nita's collar. "Soon," she heard him say as he left, and Nita lay belly down on her blanket and propped herself on her elbows. Her smiling face seemed to glow in the grey light and she smelled of sex.

"He says he loves me," she told Kerana. "At the end of this journey he'll have enough to bid for me when I'm sold. He really needs the money for something else but he says I'm more important."

"Do you love him?" Kerana asked, in no doubt what Nita's reply would be.

"Oh, yes!" Nita clapped her hands happily. "I'm going to be his forever."

Unless someone outbids him, Kerana thought, but kept it to herself. "Did he do that?" Her eyes flickered to the fresh, rosy blush on the cheeks of the blonde's bottom.

Nita pulled a face. "Hordo gets jealous sometimes. I shouldn't have mentioned Kirkit. The bastards used me twice since we set out, I'm sure just to annoy Hordo." She lowered her voice. "Lucky for the rest of us he mostly goes for Alsira, poor thing." Kerana's mouth hardened. In build and hair colour, she and Alsira were very alike. The blonde gave a self-conscious giggle. "Besides, I wouldn't tell just anyone this, but a spanking really seems to get me juicing, at least when it's Hordo who's doing it."

So it was not just herself, Kerana thought, more shocked than reassured. Was it being in the cuffle or the feel of the collar and chain, or the knowledge everyone saw her as a mere slave to use as they pleased? Or was it something that had always been inside her, only needing the stimulus of Macro's touch to force it to the surface? But at least it was perhaps understandable that Nita would respond to Hordo that way. They were in love. She had no such excuse for her behaviour with Macro. Yet his reaction to her sucking Kirkit had been much the same as Hordo's jealousy about Nita. Was Macro jealous? Because she had offered to Kirkit what she withheld from him? If he was, it was the same jealousy he would feel if someone unsheathed his sword or touched his horse or any other of his possessions without permission. Warriors were renowned for their stiff-necked pride. "You're mine," he had said, and she had felt like a toy to be played with

until he tired of it, and then put away until next time. Maybe if she had told him why she had sucked Kirkit he would not have been so uncompromising, but her pride was as precious to her as his was to him. She had no need to justify herself to Macro. Yet, pride was a costly thing for a slave to cling to. He could have used her on the first day if he chose to and at any other time since. Several times Kerana had thought it was going to happen and this time he had almost forced her. She understood the effort of will it must have taken for him to put his cock back in his breeches, and he had done it in spite of his anger and she had been spared the degradation of rape. Was that what it would have been?

* * *

Kirkit was in the foulest of moods. He herded the coffle onto the High Road with indiscriminate slashes of his switch, randomly scorching the slave girls on buttocks or thighs. Even when they were assembled and could do nothing but wait for those ahead to begin moving, he continued to ply the switch and both Yulana and Kerana took stripes across their hands and forearms as they tried to protect their ravaged bottoms from more hurt. At last, they moved off with Murina, as blonde as Nita but more slenderly built, as last girl. There was a vicious crack and she fell with a shrill scream, writhing and clasping her hands to the livid weal across her buttocks left by Kirkit's whip. She brought down the rest of the coffle as chains dragged on collars and pulled each girl to the ground in turn. Kirkit's arm swung the whip back then forward, and the long, plaited leather lashed across the girls buttocks, its weighted tail wrapping over her hip and biting deep into the tender skin across her abdomen. She screamed again, and as Kerana rose to her hands and knees she saw even some of the guards were looking at Kirkit with shocked disapproval. He drew his arm back again but had not seen Macro riding up behind him from the wagons. As the whip arced over Kirkit's head Macro slewed his horse to a stop, caught the end in his hand and jerked it from the cruel guard's grasp. He dismounted and faced Kirkit, coiling the whip and throwing it at his feet.

"Is your memory so short?" he demanded, as angry, Kerana thought, as she had seen him the day before. "What did I say about plying those whips?"

Kirkit bristled indignantly. "Slavers Rules -." he began but Macro cut him off.

"Slavers Rules don't allow you to cripple the slave girls, you fool. They need to be able to climb onto the auction block themselves, not be carried to it. Now get your horse and ride ahead."

"But I -."

"Slavers Rules have something to say about mutiny too."

Kirkit hesitated only a moment, and then did as he was told. Kerana knew Macro could see the guard's hate as clearly as she could. It struck her that it was Macro's benign treatment of the slaves that most of his men took as an example for their

own behaviour, just as she had exerted her influence to restrain her own followers. As Nita had told her on her first day, things would be a lot worse but for him.

He ordered Murina put in Loura's wagon where the little slave could tend her and set a guard Kerana did not know to take Kirkit's place. Suliki became last girl by default and the new man spent most of the morning chatting and flirting with the dark-haired beauty, as if she was strolling in Azdagul's main square, not marching in a slave coffle on the High Road. He did not even crack his whip, let alone hit anyone with it.

Kirkit did not reappear until after the noon halt. He gave Kerana a malevolent stare as if she was somehow responsible for his humiliation, and soon after he cracked his whip across Suliki's swaying backside. She cried out and rubbed her hurt, but it was not as hard a blow as he had dealt Murina. Macro's words or his anger seemed to have had their intended effect.

Murina was returned to the coffle when they reached Garanud with the sun four fingers from the horizon. It was not a place Kerana knew well. The desert was especially flat and featureless around the oasis, and the palm trees were too close to the busy settlement to give good cover to outlaws.

As usual, the slaves had to wait until every other living thing was watered before they had their chance. Kerana spent the time trying to think of a way to contrive her release from the coffle so her escape would not bring punishment down on the other girls. She had not succeeded by the time Kirkit relieved Hordo and smacked his whip across the last girl's bottom to drive the coffle to the water's edge. He made them bathe after their drink and it was only when he called them from the pool that Kerana saw he had brought Hordo along. That was unusual, and from Hordo's expression he thought so too. When Kirkit began walking straight towards her, Kerana's curiosity turned to apprehension. She flinched as his hand reached for her collar, and he gave her right breast a stinging slap.

"Still, slave," he snapped as he unchained her from the coffle. Kerana watched from the corner of her eye as he shortened her chain by winding it around his hand. His other hand unfastened his sword belt and held it out to Hordo.

"What's this?" the young guard asked.

Kirkit shook the sword belt at him. "Take this and get these others back to camp."

"I asked what you're doing," Hordo said, taking the weapons.

"I'm going to teach this slave the right way to suck a cock. Then I'm going to fuck her. Front and rear."

Kerana's head jerked up. "No!"

Kirkit's second slap to her breast made her cry out. "Shut up! You've no say in this."

"Macro will have," Hordo warned. "He didn't -."

"To hell with Macro!" Kirkit snarled. "He put her in the coffle. That means she can be used."

"But that was never what he intended!"

"Then he's a fool. That's more proof he isn't fit to be in command. Now do as I tell you." Kirkit's yank on her chain almost had Kerana on her face in the dirt. She had time for a fleeting backward glance at Hordo's worried confusion and then he vanished as Kirkit dragged her deeper into the trees.

"Now, you bitch," he said, "Don't think I haven't seen how quick you can be. But I've no weapons you can snatch and my fists are a lot bigger than yours, so you'd better behave." His teeth bared in a wicked grin. "Once I've got my cock up your arse, you'll know your place." He wound the chain shorter until his fist was almost touching Kerana's cheek.

She turned her head, biting hard into the flesh behind his thumb. Grabbing her neck chain just above where he was holding it, she ran full tilt at the trunk of the nearest tree, dragging Kirkit with her. His startled cry ended abruptly as Kerana pulled up short and he kept going, slamming his forehead into the trunk. His weight pulled her down and she unwound the chain from his hand and stood up, panting. The key to her collar was on the belt he had given Hordo.

She swore at sight of the blood running from his hand and the jagged wound in his forehead. She had meant to escape in darkness after careful planning and at a place of her own choosing. Now Kirkit had left her no choice. But there was no way she would let this scum rape her. He belly shrank in fear. She could finish him, but the sun was not even touching the horizon. In the east, the sky was only just beginning to darken. She could hide among the trees or in the reeds at the edge of the pool but they were the first places they would search. In time, they would find her. And they would make the time. Slavers Rules! Even she knew that one - shed the blood of a free man and die.

Kerana stared at the flat desert beyond the oasis and balled the neck chain in her fist. There was nowhere to hide. She longed for nightfall, turned her back to the sun and began to run.

Chapter 9

"Are you completely mad?" Macro did not even wait until Kerana's guards had

pushed her to her knees and left the tent. She stared at his feet, despair a much heavier weight than the collar around her neck. She was close to terror, but she would not let him see it.

She had run just five miles before they caught her. They did not need Macro to track her this time. All they had to do was to follow her footprints in the sand. The tight ball of dread that had been inside her ever since Kirkit had unchained her from the coffle had swelled with every step as they ran her back to camp roped behind a horse. Its rider had barely slowed when she fell, and she had arrived with skinned knees and elbows, her mouth full of grit and her hair a ragged mess. They had dragged her into Macro's tent just as night, which might have saved her, finally fell.

"Answer," Macro ordered, jerking her neck chain. "What the hell did you think you were doing?"

"He was going to rape me! In... in an... unnatural way."

"Was he, by heaven? And who put that idea in his head?"

Kerana met his accusing stare angrily. "Not I. I hate him!"

He leaned back in his chair and gave a thin smile that did not reach his eyes. "You sucked him off a couple of days ago. You know it; I know it; and the whole company knows it, so why did you risk your neck to deny him the rest of you? Or are you so hell-bent on escaping you can't resist seizing every half-chance that comes up, however hopeless?"

Well aware it was a subject that roused the worst of his temper Kerana was not taken in by his attempt to speak casually about the matter. She could not imagine why he would even try, but it was not something of importance when death was staring her in the face. She saw the slave girl, Loura, slide sinuously from behind her curtain, all red lips and rouged nipples.

"Master..."

"Not now, Loura," Macro snapped.

"Master, it is about the slave before you."

"What about her?"

"It is true she served the one Kirkit with her mouth."

If this was Loura's revenge for her undisguised contempt, she was a little late, Kerana thought bitterly.

"But you know Master, a cuffed slave is forbidden to refuse a master's demands. This slave did what she did to prevent another girl panicking and refusing the order, which would have brought down punishment on all the slaves."

"Is that true?" Macro asked, suddenly leaning towards her. Kerana nodded, surprised but grateful to Laura for saying the words that she could not. It seemed the slave knew more than her master. Kerana thought she saw a smile flicker across his face as he reached out and brushed the hair back from her face, but when he looked into her eyes his expression was one of regret. "Ah, sweet one, when I first saw you I thought you far too arrogant and self-assured. I could see your contempt and your certainty you would soon be free of me. Without thinking I put you in the cuff, hoping you might learn something." He smiled bleakly. "It seems you have."

If she had not been bone-tired and aching, Kerana would have told him to go to hell. And there was that knot of fear ever tightening inside her. She was going to die, slowly and horribly.

"But too late, Master, unless you do something," Laura said.

"What the hell can I do? Kirkit's blood was shed. There's only one penalty." Macro eyed Kerana grimly. "And I thought I was saving you from it when I bought you."

"Master, this slave is not like the others. She is already owned by a single master. You! In such cases, Slavers Rules allow the owner to demand an arbiter consider the offence and decide on the penalty. It need not be death."

Macro leaped from his chair. "The Slavers Rules say that? Are you sure?"

Laura nodded. "I live by them. I am a slave."

"You are a diamond," Macro said, taking hold of her cheeks and planting a kiss on her lips. "Who can I choose as arbiter?"

"Anyone with authority, Master."

"Right!" He called for Hordo. "Keep an eye on her and for the gods' sake don't let her run. She wouldn't get a mile in her state. I'm going to see the Caravan Master."

* * *

Kerana jerked upright, half-certain it was her own cry that had awoken her. Her exhausted sleep had been filled with images of the death she had always feared. Years ago, as a girl in Azdagul she had witnessed an execution. She had turned and run, and vowed never to look upon another. There were four standard

methods of execution in the kingdom – the same four used to kill a slave who shed a master's blood. All in their different ways were horrible means of causing painful, lingering death. Part of her fear had been never knowing which one she might have to face.

But it had always been no more than a distant threat, easily pushed to the back of her mind when she knew her skill and cunning were more than equal to outwitting the Road Guards. It would have taken a serious stroke of bad luck for the danger to become reality. Like being betrayed and enslaved, she thought sombrely. The sweat coating her nakedness felt like ice in the desert night and she shivered.

"Do not despair," Loura said, kneeling beside her with a bowl of water and a cloth. "Kirkkit's wounds are trivial. I have known cases like yours. The slaves did not die."

"What happened to them?"

Loura's eyes dropped quickly to the cloth in her hand. "They did not die."

The little slave helped her wash and was combing the sand from her hair when Macro returned.

"It's not death," he said as they turned to him. "The Caravan Master agrees it's not serious enough for that, but he wants to talk to Kirkkit before he'll discuss it. There'll be a punishment. After all, you did run away again. But you're not going to die."

The knot in Kerana's belly loosened a little, though the certainty of another beating when she had not yet recovered from the last one was a bleak prospect. But she would live!

"A caning's the best we can expect," Macro said, kneeling and smoothing a finger down her cheek. "The gods know it's not what I want to do to you." She saw desire gleaming in his eyes as he looked at the swells of her breasts, and in spite of everything a spark kindled inside her. He stood abruptly. "Damn it, this isn't even about you. It's a way for Kirkkit to get revenge for me taking what he thinks should have been his command. I wish I'd never agreed to it. Maybe it would have been better for you if I'd refused your henchman when he offered you."

Durkan should have killed her. She would have in his place. Perhaps some of the outlaws had been loyal enough to balk at that. More likely, he just did not have the courage. But he would have found it if Macro had refused to buy her, and she would have been raped and murdered by her own men. "No," she told Macro. "It wouldn't."

"Slavers Rules?" Kerana asked sourly.

Thin-lipped, Macro continued to fasten the iron belt around her waist then clipped the short chains on her manacled wrists to the metal loops at either side of the belt. She tugged on them as soon as they were in place, growling her frustration at the confinement. Macro met her resentful look, made a sound of annoyance and scooped something else from the box that had held the belt and wrist cuffs.

"Don't. I'm not in the mood for your petulance this morning." He held up the iron strap in his hand to show the two long prongs on the inner side of its sharply curving surface. "Just be glad I haven't made you wear the rest of the contraption."

Kerana swallowed, easily imagining how the metal band he held fitted to the belt on her waist, and where those iron prongs would go if it were. Macro had been moody ever since he had shackled her ankles together the night before and covered her with a much thicker blanket than she was used to. His annoyance had simmered while she ate the bread and fruit he gave her when she woke, still half worn out, with the soreness of her buttocks a reminder of what he had already done to her. Her gratitude had dissipated in the harsh daylight slanting through the open tent-flap as the prospect of more punishment stirred her resentment and the weight of her new fetters brought home to her how impossible now was her chance of escape. And Macro's annoyance had turned to anger.

"Don't look away!" he snapped. "It's easy for you to blame me for your troubles but I'm not the one who betrayed you. I'm not the one who didn't have sense to see I'd be better off as the slave of a good master than risking my neck living rough in the hills. And I'm not the one who grabs every half-chance to run away and gets nothing but pain in return." His strong hand lifted her chin. "Look at me."

Kerana looked, not hiding her resentment. "I have to be free."

"To do what? Die in the mountains?"

"I am not a slave."

"You are! You're my slave. That's why I went meekly to a greedy merchant and begged him and bribed him to intercede on your behalf. And that's the only reason you're not going to die."

She might have known - his pride was hurt. He blamed her because he had compromised his warrior's honour. Yet, most warriors would not have done that to save a slave. Why would he? She swallowed her own pride to soothe him. "Thank you."

"Thank you, Master," he corrected with no trace of a smile. Kerana was silent. His hand still gripped her jaw. "Say it, or by heaven, I'll make you wear the rest of that belt." Her belly flipped but she did not speak. His lips seizing hers were sudden and startling. His hand smoothed over the jutting firmness of her breast, teasing the pointed nipple erect, provoking a tingling that spread over her skin and swiftly centred in the place between her legs that his fingers suddenly sought. Her defences collapsed. Even if her hands had been free, she could not have tried to fight him. It was Macro who finally drew back with the evidence of his desire straining the thongs of his breeches.

"By the gods, I ought to take you here and now as a man should take his slave girl."

"Do your worst," Kerana challenged, unsure if she spoke in defiance.

"One of these days I will," Macro said, then suddenly smiled. "But daylight's wasting and that was sufficient reminder of why I spent my money. For now."

Only when he called for Hordo did Loura appear from behind her curtain.

* * *

"He's not here," Hordo said, seeing Kerana look around as they left the tent. "He's in a wagon with a sore hand and a very bad headache. And the other guards don't care that you got away again. It was all Kirkit's fault and no one cares about him any more. We're sick of him complaining about Macro's leadership and how he should be in charge. It's good he got taken down a peg." He laughed. "Bested by a slave girl. He'll never live it down."

Which was not good for her, Kerana thought. Kirkit would fight tooth and nail to make Macro's arbiter change his mind. She could only hope Macro had more leverage. But the journey was far from over and Kirkit would soon recover. All the more reason to escape. But how the hell could she do that in manacles? For the first time self-doubt sapped her confidence.

She was made first girl so all could see the added humiliation of her wrists chained to the iron belt around her waist. The confinement of her arms and the uncomfortable weight resting on her hips made walking awkward. It took all her concentration to set a steady pace the others could keep to without mishap. Perhaps it was as well. It gave her no time to dwell on the uncertainties of her future.

The day passed like all the others in heat and glare and dust, except there was no oasis at the end of it. Kerana knew the next water-hole was nine miles ahead. They would be lucky to reach it the next day. Her belly tightened. Lucky was not the word. Azdagul came ever nearer and her situation was worse than when she

had begun. She looked south to the foothills of the mountains, only a few miles distant. Let her reach them and not even Macro would find her. She licked her dry lips, almost tasting the freedom that beckoned, and her heart sank. Those hills might as well be on the moon.

Avoiding the pitying looks of her companions, she followed without protest when Hordo, who seemed to have been made her keeper, took her from the coffle to Macro's tent. The warrior had already ridden off earlier with Kirkit, watched by the entire slave-train. They all knew his destination. Kerana's anxiety increased as she sat leg-shackled in the tent while a man she had never seen decided her fate.

She wondered again why Macro was prepared to go to such lengths for her. The warriors' creed of honour was everything to them. Asking for help from anyone other than another warrior was an anathema, and paying someone to give it must have been a huge blow to Macro's pride. But the warriors code of responsibility for their followers did not extend to slaves, and that was exactly what he continually told her she was. Doubt gnawed her. More than once Macro had hinted he knew she was outlaw. Had he guessed her identity? Did he know about the price on her head and that King Barca would only pay it if she were delivered alive into his hands? Her stomach suddenly felt empty.

It was well past nightfall when Macro returned, bringing Hordo into the tent with him. Loura had joined Kerana during her wait and knelt as Macro entered the tent. Kerana remained seated, dismayed if not surprised by his anger.

"Devious bastard," were his first words. He drank off a tumbler of wine then eyed Kerana. "Take her for a piss, Hordo."

Kerana hobbled in her ankle chains to a place behind the tent where Hordo let her squat then helped her back inside. Incongruously, with her fate in the balance, Kerana wondered why his touch on her skin caused none of the strong reactions Macro's always did.

The warrior's expression was even more forbidding on her return, and Loura, standing next to him with a small flask of oil in her hands, was anxiously chewing her lower lip. Then Kerana saw the sharply curved piece of iron in Macro's hand with its two long prongs catching the lamplight.

"No!" She would have recoiled, but Hordo's hands tightened on her waist and her manacled ankles and wrists prevented her lashing out.

"I'm sorry," Macro said. "Kirkit complained the belt wasn't properly fitted. The Caravan Master agreed."

Hordo lowered her onto her back. Kerana rolled to one side but he leaned on her, pressing her shoulders flat. Macro gripped her ankles and pulled them up towards her head, parting her legs to the limit of her chains. "Loura," he said.

The little slave's eyes were glazed with moisture as she knelt and tilted the flask she held over the bare lips of Kerana's sex. Oil ran into her slit and down the cleft in her buttocks.

"Bastards!" Kerana tried to lift her hips but their strength was too great. She gasped as Loura's fingers gently penetrated her sex, smearing it with oil and the ripe scent of her own musk mingled with its perfume. Kerana wailed, not wanting to believe her body's response as the unnatural touch of another woman began to arouse her. But worse followed. She bucked wildly when the fingers probed the tight, little knot of her anus. Never in her life had anything entered there!

"Try to relax," Loura urged. "I will not hurt you."

It was too horrible. Kerana clenched her muscles tight and resisted until the little slave's finger stopped pushing. Loura turned her attention to the twin prongs on the iron band. Kerana watched her smooth oil over the shafts until they shone in the lamplight. One - the rear one, Kerana guessed - was only a little shorter and narrower than the other. She balked at the thought of them penetrating her.

"I'm sorry," Macro said, "But if I don't follow the ruling to the letter you're to be breast-hung at the next execution site."

She stared. "B...breast hung!"

He nodded gravely. "Now will you try to co-operate?"

"Perhaps if she was pleased, Master," Loura suggested.

"No!" Kerana cried.

"You'll have to do it," Macro told Loura. He was standing by Kerana's right hip, both hands still gripping her shackled ankles, holding her buttocks off the carpeted floor and her legs apart. Hordo knelt with his knees on either side of her head, his fingers on the upper swells of her breasts as he continued to press down on her shoulders. A small finger smoothed over the outer lips of her sex.

"Nooo!" Kerana began wriggling frantically. But she could barely move in the grasp of two strong men and it did not stop the little slave's fingers sliding between the petals of her inner lips or the sudden tremors they provoked within her. Breathless, she stopped struggling and felt her body slick with sweat from her exertions. Its odour, mingling with the oil's heady perfume and her own woman-scent, filled her flaring nostrils and hung heavy in the air confined within the tent, evidence to all of her body's weakness. Shamed by the heat that spread through her lower belly at the touch of one of her own sex, Kerana stared wide-eyed into Hordo's upside down face above her, cringingly aware her nipples were erect. He looked away. She gave a wail of despair, half-stunned, half-sickened that her body

could react so, even in the presence of strangers.

Yet, react it did as Loura stroked and rubbed the sensitive membranes inside her sex, and shivers of excitement coursed through them. A smooth-skinned forearm slid over the top of her thigh and the fingers of Loura's other hand traced teasing circles on her hairless mound before sliding beneath the slick, oily skin of her hood and closing on her clitoris. Kerana tensed in sudden shock then gave a deep, breathy moan, thighs trembling with anticipation. Her head jerked at the thrill as Loura pinched her swelling bud, and she saw Macro towering above her watching her face intently while she squirmed in inescapable pleasure under Loura's skilful fingers. She snapped her eyes tight shut just as the slave girl lowered her head and ran the warm wetness of her tongue over Kerana's stiffening clitoris. Rouged lips closed upon it, tugging and sucking the tingling nub of sensitive flesh to full, throbbing erection. Small white teeth drew gasping cries from her as they nipped it playfully, sending intense flashes of pleasure through nerves strung taut and tender by their teasing.

In despair and delight, Kerana gave herself up to it. Her last thought as logic deserted her was that somehow she was betraying Macro as well as herself, then she was swamped by the overwhelming delight of Loura's mouth on her bud and fingers in her sex. The slave girl knew about the secret place within her too and strummed it fervently, filling Kerana with a pleasure so extreme every fibre in her body seemed stretched taut as a bowstring. Even the feel of the strong hands holding her helpless seemed exciting and she no longer wanted to break free. A sudden longing rose up inside her - to feel the fiery sting of the switch across the soft skin of her buttocks, and in that moment she climaxed with an intensity that made her cry rapturously in sudden release. Lights flashed behind her closed eyelids and ripples of delight sparkled up and down her sheath.

"Now, Loura!" she heard Macro say. She felt weak. The muscles of her sex and anus had slackened after her orgasm. There was no fight left in her when Loura's finger pushed into her rear entrance to coat it with oil, and she only wriggled a little as the slave eased the two thick iron prongs on the belt inside her. The slick, cold metal made her shudder and the last afterglow of pleasure faded as she felt the sensitive membranes in her sex and rectum clamp tightly around the unnatural hardness filling her. Front and rear she realised, just as Kirkit had intended to use her. But the true horror was the image that immediately forced its way into her mind - of herself being hauled into the air to hang in agony from ropes fixed to the ends of the long skewer that pierced both her breasts. From one hour after dawn to one hour before dark was the rule and every moment must seem a lifetime. A few survived the ordeal. Most of them went mad.

She needed Hordo's support when they stood her up, and Macro fixed the hooks on the band between her legs through rings at the front and back of the belt around her waist. Kerana saw him through a blur of tears, sobbing at the grossness of her humiliation. They had raped her, were raping her still for as long as the unyielding iron violated her. She should have submitted to Kirkit. At least

his abuse would have been over quickly. But the truth was that that would have been even more abhorrent. She slumped to the ground in despair when Hordo released her, the horrible sensation of fullness inside making her want to strain to expel the intruders, even though she knew it would be useless.

Loura knelt beside her. "Forgive me. It is better then death."

"She's right," Macro said. "I know it's unpleasant but it's only until you receive the rest of the punishment."

With a huge effort of will, Kerana regained control. "What is it to be?"

"I can't tell you. That's part of the punishment. You can't know until it happens." He made a sound of disgust. "The Caravan Master used to be a slaver. He's as big a bastard as Kirkit but he stuck by his decision you should live." He stroked a finger down Kerana's tear-stained cheek. "That's about all we got for my flattery and money, sweet one. I'm afraid it won't be pleasant."

Kerana swallowed. "When?"

"Soon," was all he would say.

The next day was an ordeal of crushing debasement for Kerana. From the moment she was led from the tent to her cofle, all eyes watched her and the atmosphere around the slave-train was charged with tension. Even though no one could see the harsh iron penetrating her, they all knew it was there. But none more so than she. With every step, the two shafts moved uncomfortably and unnaturally within her, inescapable reminders of the punishment to come. They and her chained wrists made her ungainly and her fellow slaves had difficulty adapting to her odd gait, especially when the caravan increased speed. Slaves' bottoms stung as the guards urged them on, and the morning stretched into a torture of cracking whips, shouting guards and yelping slave girls.

They halted at noon only long enough to eat and piss. Kerana had to do it in her belt, spraying those closest to her for there was no opening to let it escape. Despite the haste, all the girls found an opportunity to show her their sympathy before the whips set them moving again. Having friends who cared was something new for Kerana, and though they could not alter her fate, it was oddly reassuring.

By the time the trees of Bahmel came in sight, the slaves were all tired out and Kerana's belly was fluttering wildly. She had the frightening suspicion it was more than just the desire to camp at the oasis that had made the Caravan Master continue through the worst heat of the day. As soon as she had bathed with the other slaves, Hordo took her to Macro. Kerana felt herself blushing at the memory of how her body's wantonness had revealed itself at their last encounter,

but her embarrassment was forgotten when she saw the grave expression on his face.

"It's time. Sit there." He indicated a low stool. Kerana sank onto it slowly, the soft hiss of her breath escaping the only sign the iron shafts were probing deeper inside her. Loura appeared holding a tray of cosmetics and Kerana looked questioningly at Macro. "You are to be made up as though presenting yourself for use by your master." His mouth twisted. "It's part of the Caravan Master's ruling."

Puzzled by something so unexpected, Kerana sat stiffly while Loura darkened her lashes, coloured her eyelids and rouged her lips. Only when the girl's finger smeared rouge on her nipples did she flinch, but she did not pull away. There was worse to come, and the sooner it was over with the better. After her hair had been piled and pinned artfully on top of her head, Macro helped her to her feet.

He caught his breath. "By heaven, I thought you were beautiful before." He grimaced. "Sorry, this is hardly the time."

She looked away from the outline of the erection in his breeches and saw her reflection in the mirror Loura was holding. It was like a blow in the gut. She looked like a whore. Worse, she looked like a slave! Only then did she understand why it had been done to her.

Someone entered the tent and Kerana gulped. It was the first time she had seen the Caravan Master, a grizzled veteran with a grey-flecked beard and eyes as hard as flint.

"Is this the one?" He eyed Kerana appraisingly. "I see why you don't want her killed. Good tits. Well let's get on, only two hours to nightfall." He went outside, clearly expecting the rest to follow.

"Lord Macro?" Hordo said tentatively when the warrior did not move.

Kerana met Macro's sombre stare, fear gnawing her insides.

"Listen," he said, "I still can't tell you what is to happen but this much I will say: the last thing they will do is whip you." He picked up the steel-cored whip he had threatened her with at their first meeting. "Twenty strokes with this. The owner of the slave-train gave it to me as a symbol of my authority. I swear I never thought to see it used." As her lower lip trembled he put his arm around her shoulders. "You understand? When the whipping is done it will be over. Keep your courage. Hold on to that pride and spirit I admired so much the first time I saw you and you'll come through."

Throat tight, Kerana nodded. He was trying to persuade himself as much as her. Gods, how bad was it going to be?

Chapter 10

A cheer went up as Kerana stepped from the tent. She cringed inwardly at sight of the large crowd gathered to watch her suffer. The whole caravan must know of it. Hordo's tug on her collar set her in motion and she eyed the sword on his belt. She could snatch it easily and go down fighting. But if they overpowered her she would hang by her breasts until she died or went mad. Pride made her raise her head and she quickened her pace so her neck-chain went slack, showing the jeering onlookers she did not have to be dragged to her punishment. Macro, Kirkit and the Caravan Master fell into step behind her. A quick look back at Kirkit revealed the bloodstained bandages on his head and left hand, and his snarling satisfaction at what was to come.

Kerana's heart thudded hard and fast as they approached the wagon poles. Two had been prepared. The guard standing beside one – Mardek, she thought was his name – freed her wrists, only to immediately thong them tightly in front of her, fasten the rope to the thong and drag her arms above her head. She gulped. Her back was to the pole. An iron spreader bar came next and Kerana earned a stinging slap on her inner thigh when her ankle reflexively pulled away from the hand fastening it into its shackle. Her hope that this time she would have her feet on the ground was quickly dashed as the guard hauled her so high up the pole not even the tips of her toes could reach the dust. She gasped as her weight and that of the iron spreading her ankles strained her arms and shoulders, and she struggled to hide her grimace from Mardek's indifferent glance.

She gasped again as he unhooked the metal band between her legs from her waist belt and carelessly pulled free the iron shafts filling her. His grin showed he had caught the musky scent of her arousal. Kerana had fought hard, but the constant rubbing of the iron in her sex had forced a response from her traitorous body. She raised her eyes from his knowing look, staring past the slave coffles kneeling before the wagons and the crowd beyond them to the mountains. She felt the belt being removed from her waist, sensed the guard step back, and knew by the crowd's cheer his switch was in his hand. With a ragged breath, she tensed for the first blow.

It tore in savage agony directly down onto her right nipple. She clamped her jaw, strangling the cry in her throat, and a heartbeat later her left breast blazed with scorching pain, and then again the right as Mardek laid on twenty swift, alternating strokes. Dangling from her rope, Kerana swung back and forth with the weight of each blow, jutting globes bouncing excruciatingly under the onslaught, fighting the moment when she would weaken and cry aloud her pain. She was still fighting when the switching stopped and no more than a rasping growl had escaped through her clenched teeth. Blinking away her tears, she looked down at the thick, crimson ridges across her cruelly throbbing breasts then glared at the three instigators of her torture.

Another guard approached and she eyed uncertainly the goatskin water-bag he carried. The crowd booed when Mardek pulled on the bar holding her legs apart and turned her to face the pole. Fear twisting her belly, Kerana groaned as the wood pressed into the fresh weals on her breasts.

"We want to see her tits," someone in the crowd called.

"No, thrash her arse," another responded, and the crowd split, some chanting "tits, tits" and others "arse, arse".

Her own weight forcing her hard against the pole, Kerana hung helpless, hating them all for deepening her humiliation and desperately afraid of what was to come. She had seen the slender ivory tube at the neck of the goatskin, and a horrible suspicion was distracting her from her pain. The pressure of two hands pulling her buttocks apart confirmed her fears, and revulsion surged up inside her. She bucked and wriggled, jarring her shoulders painfully, but the hands thrust her belly hard against the wood, tightly squeezed the cheeks of her bottom and stretched her wide again. Two large fingers pressed at either side of the tight pucker of her anus, and she groaned in shame and despair as something else pushed against the opening itself. The crowd's noise subsided and she knew they were all peering closely as, still slick with oil, her knot surrendered and the ivory tube slid up into her rear. Then the cold water began to fill her. It felt like ice to the tender membranes within and made her catch her breath. And it hurt! The guard must be squeezing the goatskin with all his strength, filling her bowels quickly, the volume of water making her swell until the skin of her abdomen was stretched drum-tight. Mardek loomed beside her and held up something else carved from ivory – a round-headed thing the size of a small pear with a narrow neck at its base that widened into a short handle. She guessed its purpose. Her new torment was not intended to be brief.

"Now girl," he said, "you're going to squeeze you arsehole tight when the tube comes out then loosen it just enough to let this in. If I see so much as a trickle you'll get twenty more on your tits and we'll do it all over again, right?"

Grunting at the pain of a sudden belly-cramp, Kerana nodded.

"Right, nip that arse tight."

The tube slid out with hardly a dribble. Fighting her urgent need to expel the liquid churning in her bowels that forced her distended belly painfully against the wagon pole, Kerana clenched her anus until she felt the broader head of the plug force its way into her. The two guards turned her to face the crowd again, and she could not hide her pain as the water sloshed heavily inside her, prompting more gut-wrenching cramps. The onlookers chanted "tits" again until the appearance of two more guards with a naked slave girl distracted them and they changed to "arse" as the girl cried her way through twenty strokes of the switch across her

bare bottom. A second girl replaced her, her more obvious suffering continuing to divert the crowd from Kerana.

Her pain and cramps were getting worse. She could no longer suppress her moans and was horrified by her massively bulging belly that gave her the appearance of being heavily pregnant. Oh, gods, she prayed as the second slave girl was led away weeping, don't let there be a third. She looked towards Macro, certain his eyes had never wavered from her. Neither had Kirkit's, she knew, and turned from his cruel exultation and the obscene swelling in his breeches, hating him more because her pain excited him. She should have killed him when she had the chance but she had known even then that she would not escape, and some slim hope had stayed her hand. And the hope had been fulfilled, so she was hanging there in agony and humiliation and in terror of the unknown tortures awaiting her. But you will not die, she told herself, swallowing rising panic, though she was sure the added weight of the water gnawing her guts would soon tear her arms from their burning sockets.

As if they knew it too, Mardek and his companion each took an end of the spreader bar and lifted Kerana's ankles above her waist. The whole cleft of her buttocks and bald sex was exposed to the crowd but Kerana was past such minor embarrassments. Mardek gripped the handle of the plug in her anus. "One!" he called.

"Two!" the crowd yelled back. "Three!"

The plug jerked free. With a massive effort, Kerana held back for a moment, horribly conscious of the depth of humiliation ahead of her. But her bowels could bear no more. In cramping, surging agony, they let go. Water gushed from her, bringing the contents of her intestines with it, splattering into a swirling puddle beneath her and raising another raucous cheer from the onlookers. The sudden easing of pressure relaxed her bladder, and an involuntary stream of piss arced up from her and pattered into the dust between the two guards. The crowd roared. Kerana cringed and lowered her head, but her hair was still firmly piled on her head and could not hide her red-faced shame from them. Jeers and witticisms continued as Mardek sloshed a bucket of water over her backside and wiped her with a rag before untying her.

With aching and unsteady legs, this time Kerana did have to be dragged, back to the space before Macro's tent. An empty water barrel, chocked to prevent it rolling, had been placed there, side on to the kneeling slaves and the crowd, a balk of timber lifting one end higher than the other. Still griping from the torment of the enema, Kerana's belly tautened. This had to be for the flogging. Her mouth went dry as she thought what the inflexible steel beneath the leather would do to her wretched bottom. Bear it, she told herself, and stiffened her back. Just let it soon be over.

Pride made her raise her head despite her tears. She saw Macro, grim and angry,

Kirkit gloating, and the Caravan Master coming towards her with his breeches strained taut, another who had been excited by seeing her suffer. His hands lifted to her face and she shied from them, stumbling backwards onto Mardek.

"Ow!" Shock and pain made her cry out as the Caravan Master slapped the raw weals on her left breast.

"None of your nonsense, slave," he warned and as Mardek grabbed the back of her neck the pressure of the Caravan Master's fingers forced her jaws open and he pushed a big, brass ring into her mouth, lodging it firmly behind her teeth.

"Gu..u..uh" was all the protest Kerana could make as Mardek buckled the thin straps fixed to the ring behind her head. Mouth forced wide, she swallowed awkwardly and fearfully eyed her new tormentor. Was it he who would flog her? He was not young, but his shoulders were broad and his forearms were thick cords of muscle. He untied her wrists. "Put these on." In his outstretched hand were four iron cuffs - two for wrists, two for ankles. Kerana's spirit shrank. He was making her an instrument of her own humiliation. Every instinct told her to run, but common sense stilled her trembling limbs and she fastened the heavy irons in place, the click of each catch echoing in her brain as she sealed her own fate.

At a nod from the Caravan Master, Mardek pulled her by her chain to the barrel where more guards seized her and forced her face down onto it. Its iron bands were hot from the sun, burning her skin as she was positioned with her chin on the rim of the barrel's lower end and the mound of her hairless sex pressing painfully on the rim of the higher. Her weight forcing her whipped breasts against the rough wood hurt abominably, but her efforts to ease the pressure were easily overcome as the ropes beneath the barrel were threaded through iron rings on her wrist cuffs, drawn tight and knotted. She was left embracing the barrel, arms pulled tight around its curve with her fingertips a few inches from the sand but her ankles were still free, and she straightened her legs to ease the discomfort in her lower body.

"Down, girl!" Mardek snapped and dealt a vicious cut to the backs of her thighs with his switch. She lowered herself quickly, an inarticulate cry escaping her widely stretched mouth. Drool overflowed the ring-gag, dribbling down her chin as she swallowed with difficulty, her jaw starting to ache. Raising her eyes she could just see as far as the tent and thought incongruously of Loura, safely insulated within its canvas walls. A guard crossed her line of sight carrying a hammer and four long nails. If her bladder had not just emptied, she would have pissed herself in the sudden terror that gripped her. She tried to twist her head to look behind, but her chin was too tightly held against the barrel's rim and she only made her aching neck worse. Heart racing, she sensed the guard at her side. If they nailed her ankles to the barrel, she would never walk again!

She heard the thud as the hammer struck, waited for the blinding agony and would have pissed with relief, if she could, when it did not come. She drooled

again as her breath escaped in a rush. The barrel shook as the nail was driven into it and another followed in the same place before the guard moved to the opposite side and repeated his actions. Hands gripped Kerana's calves and lifted her legs out then forward, forcing her mound back into contact with the hot iron. She felt pressure against the backs of her bent knees and guessed it was from the nails. They and the hands still gripping her held her thighs parallel to her body and the ground, her hip sockets almost cracking with the strain. A pair of boots appeared.

"Look at me."

She could just raise her eyes high enough to see the Caravan Master's face. She waited for him to say more but he was only checking she could not move her head. He tested the tautness of the ropes, then Kerana's heart leapt as his two hands pushed against the cheeks of her bottom. She moved forward a couple of inches then slid back.

"Good enough."

With the Caravan Master satisfied, the guards fastened Kerana's ankles, the shafts of the nails biting into her hamstrings as the ropes tightened. She groaned at her heightened distress and drooled over the ring gag while her heartbeat quickened further and her belly shrank into an ever-tightening knot. She was fixed, immobile with her bare, defenceless buttocks raised high and jutting out over the end of the barrel. The moment she dreaded most of all had arrived. But it was the last, Macro had promised. After the flogging, it would all be over.

"This slave shed the blood of a free man," she heard the Caravan Master say. Oh, gods, he was giving a bloody speech to the crowd! She barely registered the rest, her innumerable pains and discomforts seeming unbearable as the agony of waiting for the first fearful blow stretched on and on. Another pair of boots appeared and she was suddenly confronted by Kirkit's cruel grin as he squatted in front of her. He held up two fresh nails, each as long as her forefinger.

"See these, slave-bitch? If I was you, I wouldn't pull away when we get started."

Kerana blinked in confusion as he stood up and disappeared behind her. She was suddenly even more afraid. She tugged at the ropes holding her wrists but they did not give a fraction. She stiffened in shock as a finger and thumb tightened on one of the fleshy outer lips of her sex and stretched it downwards.

"Noo..o..o!" The gag garbled the word as she cried desperately. They couldn't! A fierce, crushing stab of pain followed at once by piercing agony made her head spin, and the thud of the hammer was drowned by her scream. Again she felt the grip, the stab and blinding pain, and screamed once more as the hammer drove the nail through flesh and wood. They had nailed her labia to the base of the barrel. Her mind revolted at the horror of it as the crowd cheered, drowning out the end of the Caravan Master's speech.

Suddenly, Kerana was raking through her pain-flooded brain for his last barely-heard words. Only one stood out, a silly, harmless-sounding word she had never heard before. Yet it was not hard to guess its meaning, and the sweat on her forehead was like ice and her blood seemed to freeze in her veins.

"Proceed," the Caravan Master ordered.

She saw Macro's knuckles turn white on his sword hilt as Kirkit left this side and walked towards her, unthonging his breeches. A new dread filled her, enough to distract her from the raw throbbing of her beaten breasts and nailed labia. Kerana had thought Macro and Kirkit were not to be involved in her punishment. Now she knew the wicked guard was to enjoy a personal revenge for the wounds she had inflicted. And she knew he would enjoy it only because it was going to hurt her. She sensed him behind her and jumped as the hot thickness of his cock rubbed along the crease in her bottom.

Bumming – that was what the Caravan Master had said, and Kerana knew she was about to learn the awful meaning of that innocuous-sounding word. Meaty paws roughly parted the cheeks of her bottom.

"Are you dry, bitch? I hope so. It'll hurt all the more."

"Ash-tud," Kerana gurgled, the insult turned to nonsense by her gag.

A broad finger pushed against her anal bud and she jerked away from its touch, thrusting herself forward the few inches her bonds allowed. Instant tearing pain as her nailed labia stretched further made her immediately push back onto the finger. She was dry, she learned. The oil that had lubricated her had washed away with the enema, and Kirkit's cruel stab only just managed to force his fingertip into her. He worked it brutally, twisting and pushing hard until he had widened her anus enough for his finger to penetrate to the knuckle. Kerana felt the little knot of muscles at her entrance tighten involuntarily around it, and then he pressed hard against the tender membrane within and she made inarticulate noises through her gag and vainly tried not to squirm and stretch her nailed sex lips again.

Kirkit laughed. "Nice and dry. Now you get my cock."

The crowd yelled encouragement to him as Kerana felt the fat head of his penis press against her sphincter. She tried to follow Laura's advice and relax, but Kirkit's thick shaft was nothing like the slave's slender finger nor even the smooth, well-oiled iron she had only taken in with such difficulty. Grunting like an animal, Kirkit pushed his hard meat against her anus, and though she was willing it to yield, still it clenched tight and denied him entry. The pain and pressure were becoming unbearable, and Kerana was sure her labia would soon be wrenched from the nails when she felt something tear and her anus suddenly stretched. Her

rectum expanded excruciatingly as Kirkit's cock ploughed its way into her, ripping a cry from her drooling lips. Even as her senses reeled at this new source of pain, Kirkit pulled out then rammed hard in again, over and over, each time wringing fresh cries from her. Only when he was satisfied her sphincter had been sufficiently ravaged by this assault did he force the full length of his thick cock into her narrow rear passage and begin to take her with short, hard thrusts. He deliberately laid his weight on her, increasing the torment in her breasts and the bite of the iron barrel-rim into her mound.

"Enjoying it, bitch?" he grunted, the crowd's noise drowning the words for all but Kerana. "I am! I'll fuck your asshole raw. And when I'm done the ones who brought you back get their turn."

Gods, let it not be true, Kerana prayed. It felt as though her insides were already being torn apart by Kirkit's vicious onslaught. She could not possibly endure three more such agonising rapes. She turned her eyes to Macro but he gave no response to their desperate plea. The last spark of Kerana's courage died. Pride, dignity, self-respect were all just meaningless words, and all that mattered was the horror of her torture, the torment of the cock pounding into her anus and the fierce pain as each lunge tore at her nailed labia. Seconds passed like hours before the hot, sickening splash of Kirkit's spunk within her bowels told her he had finally come and she heard his triumphant cry.

"Ah, good, slave! That's how an arse fuck should be." His cock pulled free with an audible pop, his hard palm slapped her bottom and he appeared in front of her. Knowing how much pleasure he had taken from her suffering was just another among Kerana's innumerable hurts. Lost in despair, it took several moments before she realised what he meant to do as he knelt before her face. She tried to turn away but her chin was jammed against the barrel.

"Look at me," he growled, but she would not. "Taste me then." He slid his flagging, spunk-slimed cock through the ring-gag and wiped it on her tongue and the inside of her mouth. Her empty stomach heaved at the nauseating taste and the knowledge of where it had been. The crowd cheered. Kirkit stood up. "Your turn, Mardek."

Bitter tears dripped from Kerana's eyes. She could no longer endure, only suffer. Kirkit's spunk leaking from her anus eased Mardek's entry a little, but his shaft was thicker and ravaged her innards terribly while his belly slamming against her buttocks with each forward lunge intensified the agony in her burning breasts and cruelly stretching labia. After he had come, he also wiped his still-leaking cock revoltingly inside her mouth, and had barely withdrawn it when the second of the three guards who had recaptured her stabbed his hard shaft deep into her bowels.

She must have fainted at some time during his assault, but a bucket of water in the face quickly brought her round to ensure she avoided none of her suffering. Again the pounding was wickedly hard until hot come sprayed her tortured tube

and fresh gobbets of spunk coated her mouth and tongue to replace those the water had washed away. And still it was not over.

"Lord Macro, I won't do it." It was Hordo's voice. Vaguely through her pain, Kerana recalled he had been one of those who recaptured her.

"You have to," the Caravan Master said. "The punishment must be carried out in the agreed manner."

"No. The poor girl has been punished enough. Aye, and more than enough. I won't add to her hurts."

"Then I must," Kerana heard the Caravan Master say and her tormented guts twisted. The crowds booing turned to cheers as he stepped forward, unfastening the bulging breeches that showed he had no need of their encouragement. Kerana's anguished cry was half-stifled by the ring-gag as his broad cock plunged into her and her agony intensified again. For all his years, he hammered her as hard as the others had and with the same dire consequences for her poor, abused backside and ragged labia. When he spunked in her, he gave a long, drawn-out snarl of satisfaction and when he knelt to wipe his shaft in her mouth his face was flushed with the same exultant cruelty she had seen in Kirkit's. She lowered her eyes and saw the slime of come coating his cock was tinged with pink. Her heart shrank and fresh tears brimmed her eyelids. Kirkit had kept his promise. They had fucked her arsehole raw.

Kerana watched through a haze of tears as the Caravan Master rose and went to Macro. The warrior reluctantly passed something into his hand. Kerana's stomach lurched and a wail of utter misery came from her constricted throat. The punishment and the pain had been far worse than she imagined but still it was the whip she feared most. And the Caravan Master was coming towards her, holding it in his hand.

Chapter 11

The Caravan Master loosened the ring-gag and pulled it from Kerana's mouth. "Got to let them hear you scream, pretty."

She barely heard the words, barely felt the release of her cramping jaw muscles as all her attention focused on the terrifying whip – three feet and more of leather, plaited tightly around a thin, hard rod of steel. Every hurt she had suffered so far, great and small combined, would be nothing compared to the pain it would give her.

Hating herself, scarcely able to believe she had sunk to such depths, Kerana

formed the words. "Pl...ea...se, no..o..o." Through her dry throat and stiff jaw, they came out as a hoarse whisper. But they came out. For the first time in her life, she had begged for mercy. And she knew the answer before it came.

"You done the deed, you pay the price." Her tormentor's grin was as evil as Kirkit's. With a final reflexive flash of desperation, Kerana jerked on the ropes holding her wrists and ankles. It was useless. All the strength had gone out of her and all the fight too. She sagged on the barrel, beaten before the first blow had landed. From the corner of her eye she saw the Caravan Master limber his arm with a few practice swings, each fierce hiss of the whip through the air heightening her terror. She prayed someone would take the nails from her sex before he began, but it was a futile hope.

The crowd roared, and the blazing fire of the first stroke scored deep into her out-thrust buttocks. Kerana screamed, and coherent thought deserted her. With a sickening crack, a second stroke landed in the same place, exactly on the apex of her bottom, then another a little lower and another lower still. She screamed at each flaring cut that scorched her skin as the Caravan Master worked his way down to the tender place where buttock met thigh, frighteningly close to the helplessly parted and nailed lips of her sex. And he hit her there, striking upwards with such savagery that the flesh where legs and bottom joined indented enough for the hard, leather-cased metal to bite into the gaping entrance of her sex. Flashing lights filled Kerana's eyes and blackness hovered at their edges as she shrieked with the hideous agony blazing between her thighs. Her head spun and she hung for a moment on the verge of consciousness, longing for darkness to take her. Then the whip's next fiery stroke blazed across her buttocks and dragged her back to full awareness of her torment. The Caravan Master worked his cruel blows upwards, lashing the whip viciously against already burning flesh. And each time he laid on another stroke, the weight behind his arm drove her forward on the barrel and the nails wrenched at her stretching labia in tearing, throbbing torment.

All Kerana could do was cry her pain and long for it to end. And suddenly, after one last, wicked stroke, it did. She breathed raggedly between sobs. Her buttocks were blazing, aching and throbbing all at the same time. Yet, the whipping had not been the terrible torture she had dreaded. It hurt. Oh gods, how it hurt! But not so very much more than the sixty strokes with the rattan she had taken from Macro. She cracked her eyelids open and saw he was coming towards her.

"That whip of yours might look impressive but it's a poor thing to swing," the Caravan Master told him.

"I wouldn't know, I've never swung it," Macro replied shortly. "Is the punishment completed?"

"Aye, it's done."

Kerana felt two flashes of pain and the lips of her sex were no longer cruelly stretched.

"What are you doing?" the Caravan Master demanded.

"She's my property. I don't want her cunt misshapen."

There was silence soon afterwards as the crowd drifted away and the slave-train went back to normality, apart from the lone slave bound to the barrel, waiting until sunset allowed her to be freed. She drifted, the hurts and cramps that were everywhere keeping her from losing consciousness but robbing her of true awareness. There was no room in her pain-racked mind for emotions, only the obscure and disturbing feeling that during her terrible punishment she had lost something, and maybe gained something too.

* * *

The wagon jolted over another bump, and Kerana winced as her bottom jiggled and all her hurts re-awakened. A small hand pressed hers.

"We'll stop soon. It's nearly mid-day," Loura said.

Kerana had woken that morning in the cleared space at the back of the wagon where the little slave usually travelled alone, to discover one ankle chained to a ring-bolt in the wagon bed and that she was so sore and stiff she could not use a piss-pot without help. She remembered nothing between lying on the barrel and waking in the wagon, but learned from Loura she had slept for a night, a day and another night. Yet, the hurt was still deep when she shifted restlessly on the feather mattress of Loura's cot and thought of Azdagul coming closer and herself barely able to stand unaided. She must escape! But the fire the knowledge usually kindled in her belly did not come. Instead, it felt cold and empty and a leaden weight lay over her heart. Her complete humiliation before the jeering crowd, the brutal anal assaults and her abject terror of the whip had sapped her spirit. Her old, self-assured belief she would always succeed in the end had shrunk with every cruel thrust and wicked blow, and vanished, never to return, when she made her cringing, contemptible plea for mercy. She had begged. Like a slave!

Hordo brought them food at the noon halt. "Nita and the others send their love," he told Kerana, looking embarrassed.

"Thank them for me." She managed a weak smile for him, remembering how he had refused to participate in her degradation. It took courage to risk Kirkit's wrath.

He eyed the angry weals across her breasts with sympathy, not lust. "I hope you're feeling better."

"Laura has a soothing salve. It helps a lot." Her poor backside throbbed inside and out as she spoke but she still had enough determination to refuse to admit it to anyone but herself.

"You're awake." Beneath the wagon canvas Kerana had not seen Macro approach. She looked away, thinking of her silent plea that he had ignored. "I was beginning to worry I gave you too much opiate," he said, confirming her suspicion she had been drugged. How else could she have slept through the worst of her pain? "Not so bad now, eh?"

"Not so bad?" She met his eye and her anger flared. "It was hell! You watched it! Without lifting a finger! How could...?" She broke off, shuddering.

"Gently," Macro said softly. "It could have been worse."

She had heard that before. She gestured to the near-black bruises on her buttocks, criss-crossed with raw, blood crusted stripes. "This isn't enough?"

"Lord Macro is right," Laura said. "It would have been much worse if he had not altered the whip."

"Altered?" Kerana saw the slave's mischievous smile and turned in puzzlement to Macro. Her belly fluttered as he held up the vicious implement she still secretly feared.

Macro leaned over the wagon's tailgate and spoke quietly. "It's a small thing but all I could do. The rest had to happen or you wouldn't be here to lose your temper with me again. We pulled the steel rod out through the handle and put in a copper one, still hard but with a bit more give in it than steel. The Caravan Master bent it over your behind but thought it was just poor workmanship."

"It was Laura who sewed it together so well no one could tell," Hordo added.

"And Hordo who smuggled the copper into my lord's tent," Laura said.

Hordo laughed. "No wonder the Caravan Master complained what a poor thing it was."

It had still hurt like blazes and ravaged her poor bottom horribly, Kerana thought, but it was a minor victory, something to clutch at amidst all her defeats.

"No one mentions this again," the warrior warned. "If the Caravan Master or Kirkit hear of it, there'll be hell to pay." He looked at Kerana. "And you have already paid that once."

She watched him stride away. Now he had sacrificed more of his precious honour by conspiring with a caravan guard and a slave girl for her sake. She wished she

knew why.

As the wagon trundled into the afternoon, Loura spread more salve on Kerana's varied hurts, expressing dismay over her split and swollen anus as she gently dabbed it with the cooling cream. "It was sheer wickedness to do it that way. It should be a gentle thing with perfumed oil and pleasure from a master's fingers to ease the entry."

"You've done it?" Kerana asked in amazement.

"Of course, it can be fun," Loura said with no sign of embarrassment. "But not like this." She gave Kerana a last dab and sat facing her in Macro's chair, carelessly hooking a leg over one of its arms and trapping the narrow silk strip that should have hidden her sex in the crease where thigh joined hip.

Distracted by her sudden view of Loura's bare slit, Kerana let slip a question without thinking. "Has Macro ever bummed...?"

"Me? Gods, no! He would tear me apart. He knows that. His cock is too big even for my sheath." Loura pulled a face. "I cannot please him as I should. He needs a bigger woman." She smiled, "Like you."

The outlaw girl lowered her eyes. "How long have you belonged to Macro?"

"Heavens, I don't belong to Macro! He doesn't have any slave girls. He is escorting me to my new master." Sadness clouded Loura's face. "My last master fell ill on a journey. Before he died, he wrote to Macro to come and fetch me, and paid the slave dealer to care for me until I was collected."

"The same dealer who hired Macro to lead his slave-train?"

Loura nodded. "My new master is cousin to my previous one. He inherited me with the other property but couldn't fetch me because he was wounded in the war."

"In the north? Between Aquinon and Mardiana?"

"Yes. He and Macro fought in it together. Macro says my new master is recovering well."

"But you've never met him," Kerana said, disturbed by the girl's meek acceptance of her unknown future. "What if he's a monster?" She spoke the thought aloud, immediately regretting sowing the seed of fear, but Loura just smiled.

"He's not. He is Macro's friend, a fellow warrior. Macro says he is as kind as my old master was. And lusty too."

"But isn't Macro cheating him? I mean the first time I saw you, you were su..." Kerana shut up. She could not match Loura's openness about the duties of a sex slave. She noticed the girl's hand had moved from her knee to her stomach and her fingers were fidgeting above the plump swell of her mound.

"Sucking him," Loura finished for her. "Naturally, he can pleasure himself with me while I am in his care. He feeds me, clothes me, and keeps me warm and safe. I do what I do best in return."

"But he beat you." Kerana remembered seeing Loura's red-striped bottom during one of her times in the tent.

"Yes," the little slave agreed, laughing. "It is not always best to be obedient. A man can grow bored. He may not want to pleasure a girl. He may even sell her." Her look said no man would ever be so foolish where she was concerned. Her grin was all mischief. "Sometimes it is a good thing to be a little bad. Men like bad girls."

Was that what Macro had meant when he talked of a woman's power to ensnare a man? Kerana wondered.

"Besides," Loura said, "A little pain can be pleasurable too, when given by a strong, handsome man that a girl finds pleasing." Kerana looked down as heat rushed into her face but Loura had seen her blush. "Ah, I see it is that way for you with Macro. Don't be embarrassed. He has the same effect on me, and so did my old master when he plied his switch."

"But it's wrong," Kerana said. "It's unnatural."

"Nonsense! How can it be either when it gives you pleasure? And it is proof that a master cares and feels affection for his slave if he punishes her with his own hand, especially if he knows it excites her. Then he will take her afterwards, and the pleasure for both of them will be all the greater. Now what could be wrong with that?"

"I don't know, but something is," Kerana replied.

"Only in your mind, I think," the little slave said. "Your body follows its nature but you fight against it."

"It's not right," Kerana insisted.

"No, it is this that isn't right." Loura gestured at Kerana's ravaged buttocks. "Did you feel pleasure when they did this to you? Did it excite you?"

"Of course not!"

"Then you need not be afraid. Macro was on the verge of committing murder

when he heard the Caravan Master's ruling. He was ready to kill him and Kirkit, take both of us and flee. Only his honour and his word to the slave-train's owner stopped him. You see? He would never choose to beat you like that. You need never worry you will be forced beyond your limits. Pain can become a dangerous drug. I have known slave girls whose juices dripped from them at the mere threat of the switch and who could come from a caning alone."

And that was the trouble, Kerana knew. Loura was speaking of slaves. She was a free woman. She said no more, though the idea a girl could enjoy even the bite of the cane was not as big a surprise to her as it would have been just a few days ago.

Loura gave a long sigh. Her fingertip was alternately tracing little circles on her mound and flicking down to the hood of her clitoris. To Kerana's surprise, the bud slowly began to emerge from beneath its protective folds and she saw a sudden flash of gold.

"Is that a ring?" she blurted, astonishment overcoming embarrassment.

Loura's fingers unashamedly pulled open her hood. "You mean this?" It was a ring about the same size as might fit her finger, Kerana saw, cheeks flushing hot as her sense of propriety returned. And it pierced exactly through the centre of the pinkly glowing bud of Loura's out-thrust clitoris. Surely she must have been aroused when it was done for it to be so precise. Kerana swallowed. Just as she was now!

"Didn't it hurt?" she asked to hide her discomposure.

"A bit, at first. Now I hardly remember it's there except when the chain is on it."

"Chain?"

"Only a little gold one," the slave said, glancing at Kerana's thick shackles. Oblivious to the outlaw girl's discomfiture, she shuffled her bottom forward and hooked her other leg over the unoccupied arm of the chair, revealing an identical ring piercing the rearmost part of her outer labia. "It hangs between them. Of course, I'm not wearing anything else at the time. And there are little weights that can be hung from it. When I walk they tug at my clit and it feels delicious."

Kerana looked away.

"Oh dear, I've embarrassed you," Loura said. "Excuse me. I'm used to the company of masters and others like myself, where these things are commonplace. And I usually pleasure myself around this time of day. It distracted me from realising I had shocked you."

That revelation shocked Kerana more. She saw Loura had assumed a normal position on the chair but her finger was already straying towards her belly.

"I could try to pleasure you," the little slave offered, "but I don't expect you'd enjoy it much at present."

"You mean you often do it with girls?" Kerana asked in surprise, then gulped and wished she had remained silent as she reluctantly remembered the effect the little slave's touch had had on her.

Loura had no such qualms. "Of course. You were hardly my first." When Kerana blushed she looked dismayed. "Oh dear, now I really have shocked you. But masters sometimes wish to see girls perform together. Besides, masters aren't always around, and we girls still need to be pleased." She raised one eyebrow, smiling as she regarded Kerana through her long eyelashes. "And I think maybe you quite enjoyed it, in spite of everything."

Kerana felt her cheeks grow warm again. It was not something she could deny with any conviction.

Loura's finger was circling her mound again. "But men are better," she said and wrinkled her nose. "Good men, anyway. I love them all, but there is one man I will love above all others."

"Who?"

"I don't know but when I meet him, I will. Here and here, and here." She put her hand to her heart, her head and her sex. "I will know." She smiled. "You will know too when it happens."

Kerana did not love men. Any men. Her sexual encounters had been few, always with strangers who would not recognise her and she would never see again. And her right hand, of course, though even that infrequently with her grip on her followers to maintain. Unbelievably, she felt a tingle of arousal between the throbbing lips of her sex. Loura's fingers were back to her own slit.

"Oh, do it if you like," Kerana told her.

Chapter 12

"You don't mind?" Loura asked, suddenly brightening.

"I wouldn't be here to mind or not if it wasn't for you. Go ahead." Kerana put her face into the pillow as the petite slave began moaning and panting her way to orgasm, and tried to ignore the growing excitement in her own sex. It was distracting her from her pain just as the sounds and scents of Loura masturbating

were. Kerana's fingers twitched, and she realised she was on the verge of reaching down to touch herself. She tentatively raised one eye above the edge of the pillow.

Loura's head was tilted back and her eyes were closed. The end of an ivory dildo peeped from between her well-parted thighs, and as Kerana lifted her head to see more clearly the pink petals of the little slave's inner lips swelled and darkened, glistening with the moisture of her flowing juices. Guiltily aware she was willingly watching an act of sex for the first time in her life, Kerana tried and failed to make herself look away. Loura's left hand was rubbing hard on her clitoris while with her right hand she clutched at the firm pinnacles of her small, pointed breasts and pinched her hard little nipples. Kerana's thighs trembled, and the tingling warmth of her own arousal spread the length of her sheath, dimming the pain of her tormented bottom and hard, pulsing nipples.

Surely, she told herself, there was nothing more unnatural or perverse than secretly watching another girl pleasuring herself. Yet, she continued to stare in sinful fascination as Loura strove to bring herself to her peak. The girl's sex was rhythmically tightening and relaxing upon the dildo as she clenched and unclenched her sheath around its hardness while her fingers flogged her redly gleaming bud and she gasped and whimpered under their stimulus. Too afraid of aggravating her own torn sex lips, Kerana could only watch with mounting excitement and frustration as Loura's hand raised above the up-thrust cone of her right breast then smacked down on its upper curve and nipple. Kerana's sex twitched at the sound of the slap and the sight of the flesh yielding to it then bouncing back into place. Loura smacked herself on the left breast. Not hard, Kerana knew, and wriggled. Just enough to sting! Her hand smoothed down to her belly, more encouraged than deterred by the throb of her red-striped breasts. Soon she would be unable to keep her fingers from her fluttering sex. The pain in her bottom, so close to the source of her quivering arousal was melding with her excitement into that frightening, thrilling feeling she had thought only Macro could create in her. Yet seeing Loura giving little stinging slaps to her own breasts and hearing her soft, gasping cries at the pleasure-pain was having exactly the same effect. Guiltily but eagerly, Kerana slid her finger over her erect clitoris and shivered with delight. Loura gave a high-pitched cry that became a long, shuddering groan and Kerana looked on, astonished as the girl's sex began spasming uncontrollably around the dildo. Head rocking back and forth, with her whole body bucking and trembling, Loura orgasmed in an ecstasy of release.

Kerana quickly pulled her hand from her sex and hid behind the pillow as Loura's eyelids fluttered open. The slave's breathy moans and panting continued, and there was a wet, sucking sound that Kerana guessed was the dildo being pulled from within her. She risked looking up.

"Oooh, that was good," Loura said, smiling at her without a trace of self-consciousness. "I'm glad you didn't mind."

Kerana smiled back through her sexual frustration, and hoped the pulsing of her

clitoris and the heat in her sex would soon subside. They did eventually, and though the air was charged with Loura's woman-scent for the rest of the afternoon, Kerana found she did not mind at all.

By the time they camped for the night, Loura was her usual self – perfect face and hair, perfect figure, perfect pointed breasts, perfect poise and grace. Even if she wanted to, Kerana knew she could never equal her. But of course, she did not want to.

Before she left for Macro's tent, Loura leaned close. "I'm not really quite so forward as I seem, you know. But it did take your mind off your troubles, didn't it?"

If it did not hurt so much, Kerana would have laughed.

Loura's experience of slavery had been so different from her own, she thought as the light faded. But she was still a chattel, always at the beck and call of her master, required to perform when he wished in whatever way he chose, with the ever-present threat of punishment ensuring her obedience. Kerana needed the independence of the mountains where she ordered and others obeyed, where she could do as she liked and go where she pleased. Except to those places where she would be recognised. There were more and more of them as time passed. And, the Road Guards searches were ranging deeper into the hills, threatening discovery and capture, increasing the risk she would suffer the awful death to which she had already been condemned. She might kill Durkan and recover her plunder. In a distant city where she was unknown she could live in comfort. But she would be alone and friendless, knowing she did not belong.

As the chill of night penetrated the wagon, Kerana pulled the light blanket, which was all her buttocks could bear, tighter, and sank her sore breasts into Loura's soft mattress. She wondered where the little slave was sleeping while she had her bed. With Macro? She felt a twinge of envy. But it had turned out Macro did not even own Loura and she had made it plain she did not love him. She need not be jealous.

Kerana's belly tightened. What the hell was she thinking? What possible reason could she have to feel jealous over Macro? She ought to be concentrating on figuring out what game the bastard was playing with her.

* * *

"So you got your own way in the end and he didn't even realise it." Kerana laughed then put a tentative hand on her bruised bottom. "I think your salve is finally working, Loura. I don't have half the pain I did yesterday."

"Then perhaps you would like me to pleasure you later?"

Kerana's healing sex lips twitched. "Er, I don't think so." She blushed until she saw the slave girl's impish grin. Macro was right, Loura was intelligent and quick-witted and, in her own way, she was as cunning and skilful as Kerana. And she could talk about much more than sex and slavery, Kerana had learned during a morning listening to a series of amusing tales mixed with astute observations on a woman's capacity to manipulate a man. Macro's words about women having power over men were starting to make more sense, and Kerana could not remember when she had last laughed with genuine humour before today.

"I despised you when I first saw you," she said suddenly.

"You did not hide it." Loura met her gaze.

"I was wrong and I am sorry."

"No matter, we are friends now."

"More than friends. I owe you my life."

"Oh, hush," Loura said. "Let me tell you how I persuaded my master to take me to the Governor's party. It was one of those all-male affairs, you see?"

"I'm sure you had no trouble," Kerana laughed.

It was not until the noon halt, when Loura stood, sighed contentedly and slid the ivory dildo from inside herself, that Kerana decided she just had to accept the girl was addicted to masturbation. Her time with the slave had been a totally new experience, and despite the way they had been brought together, not entirely unpleasant. Never before had Kerana pondered on her sexual desires. They had always been something to give in to or resist, depending on the circumstances, but she could not ignore her startling discoveries about herself since being forced into slavery, any more than Macro could ignore the Slavers Rules. Tomorrow or the next day she would be recovered enough to be returned to the coffer. Before that happened she needed answers to her questions, that only Loura could provide. Kerana brooded a while after the slave-train set off again, then screwed up her courage.

Loura was cupping her breasts with her hands and looking down at them. "Do you think I should ask my new master to have my nipples pierced? They might look nice with rings in them."

"I... I'm sure they would." Kerana's courage deserted her. Even talking to someone who admitted having the same feelings was not easy.

The little slave let go of her breasts and looked Kerana in the eye. "You want to ask me something." She smiled at Kerana's look of surprise. "You've been avoiding my eye and fidgeting for the last half-hour. It's about pain and pleasure,

isn't it?"

Kerana nodded, heat rising to her cheeks. "Has it always been like that for you?"

"No, I never felt it with my first master, though he was much older than me and I wasn't his favourite. I passed to his second son when he died, my last master. He was nice and I was fond of him. But one day I was... obstinate, and he punished me along with another girl. He didn't bind us or anything like that. He made us strip and stand touching, face to face with our arms around each other's waists. Then he stripped and took his switch, and began walking in a circle around us, continually appearing and disappearing. It seemed to last hours but I'm sure it was only a few minutes. I kept seeing his hard cock and how he toyed with the switch, and waiting for it to land every time he disappeared behind me. I got more and more nervous and so did Elina, the other girl. She was warm and smooth, and trembling against me. Her nipples were hard against my breasts and mine got hard too, and as I trembled I started feeling warm and moist between my legs. Then my master smacked my bottom and I felt the strangest tickling and prickling in my sex as it stung me. He kept on circling, sometimes switching us and sometimes not, so we never knew when he disappeared if we would be stung again. And we got more nervous and excited."

Kerana recognised the feeling and her belly gave a little flip as she imagined standing as Laura had described, feeling her quivering uncertainty increasing as her master circled her. Her sex twitched.

"Our master made us lean our hands on the wall with our bottoms jutting out," Laura continued. "He called his steward in and had him switch one of us soundly while he took the other from behind, swapping between us after a few strokes. I just got more and more excited. One minute I was feeling the pleasure of my master's cock and the next the pain of the switch. You know, I never came so hard before in my life, and Elina said the same when we talked about it afterwards." Laura smiled. "That was the first time. It has come over me often since."

"Don't you feel guilty?" Kerana asked.

"I never have. It feels too good. And if it is in my nature to respond that way, I cannot prevent it." She met Kerana's eye. "And neither can you."

"I'm certain Macro knows," Kerana said, thinking that it should not matter, but it did.

"I'm sure he does. I was watching when he hung you from the tent pole and made you come, then spanked you and made you come harder. I think he was surprised but pleased too."

"Pleased?" Kerana could not believe it.

"It is good for a man's pride to see such a response to him. It tells him he is a man. I don't understand why he didn't take you then instead of having you punished."

"Neither do I," Kerana admitted. She had been cringing inside with embarrassment since plunging into the conversation. The knowledge Laura had spied on her should have deepened her humiliation, but she was determined to have her questions answered. "Has he said anything about me? He must think me so perverse and unnatural."

"You are no more perverse than I am," Laura told her, which was not entirely reassuring. "Macro has never spoken of you but I'm sure he doesn't think you unnatural. He must have seen it before with girls other than you or I."

"You said he has no slave girls."

"Not now, but he has owned slaves in the past."

Kerana felt a twinge of jealousy and scoffed at herself. It was absurd. Macro meant nothing to her. But those broad shoulders and skilful fingers, that big, upright cock.... Her sex quivered.

"You weren't excited when Macro caned you in front of everyone, were you?" Laura asked.

Kerana had a suspicion the little slave had somehow managed to see that too. She wavered, but this was not the time to hold back. "When he picked me up to lay me on the crate I felt... something. But after that it was all just pain."

Laura nodded approval. "It's as well. I've already told you it can be as dangerous as a drug."

"But I did feel it another time," Kerana confessed, astonished by her own daring.

"Not with Kirkit and those other bastards?" Laura looked alarmed until Kerana shook her head and lowered her eyes. "Oh, I see. When you were watching me yesterday."

"You knew?" Kerana's blush flamed again.

Laura laughed. "Of course. The point was to distract you from your hurts. I would have been very disappointed if you hadn't watched after everything I did to encourage you." She slid a finger between her legs and it glistened with moisture when she held it up. "Oh look, I'm getting wet just talking about it."

Kerana gulped. "So am I."

Chapter 13

Kerana was sure her blush had reached even the tips of her ears, but her need had come swiftly and strongly upon her. She held Loura's assessing gaze, trembling as the tingling in her sex increased.

"Sooo, that's how it is!" The little slave said, a mischievous smile parting her full lips. "Then we had better do something about it."

Kerana's belly fluttered wildly as Loura rose from Macro's chair and reached into a box behind it, withdrawing her ivory dildo and a slim white wand. The slave girl braced her thighs against the end of the cot to keep her footing in the rocking wagon. "Take off my belt." On her belly in the cot, Kerana stared up at her, mind whirling with conflicting thoughts. The sudden sternness in Loura's expression made her press her thighs tightly together. "I said take it off," Loura said softly and insistently.

A powerful thrill of arousal teased Kerana's sex as she heard the commanding tone in the little slave's voice. Her belly quivered with that feeling that was more than excitement but less than fear, and a delicious wantonness overcame her as she reached out and her trembling fingers released the silver chain holding the strip of silk before Loura's sex. Her bare lips formed a dark, narrow slit between her touching thighs, but already Kerana could see the folds of her hood swelling and the glint of gold showed beneath them.

"Look at me!"

Kerana met her gaze and felt compelled to follow it as the slave moved to stand beside her.

Loura held up the wand. "This is whalebone, Kerana. From far to the north. Made for punishing naughty girls." It was a short handle and a foot long sliver not half the thickness of Kerana's little finger. "Are you a naughty girl?" Loura demanded.

Macro had called her that and spanked her for it, Kerana remembered, and the heat filling her sheath intensified. Gods, what was she doing? Her belly fluttered with excitement. What was she going to be made to do? Her sex clenched tight as Loura laid a hand on her bottom and stirred its dull aching to a buzzing throb.

"I think you can bear your weight on your bum for a little while," she pronounced. "Let's have you on your back."

Breathing fast through nostrils flaring at the scent of arousal, Kerana rolled over, moaning softly as her sore buttocks pressed into the mattress. A shudder of

excitement thrilled her as she felt the pain and pleasure entwine. Loura's hand flashed downwards and it seemed a bee had stung the fronts of Kerana's thighs.

"Ow! Oh! Ooh!" It was like a drug, Kerana realised, stripping away all sense and logic. She was The Dove, scourge of the caravan routes, strong and proud, bowing to no one and feared by all. And here she lay panting and moaning in hot, helpless, lusty submission, allowing a slender young slave girl to command and dominate her. And she loved it! Not wanting to believe it, yet unable to deny the excitement thrumming through every nerve of body and mind, she squirmed deliciously as the wand stung her thighs again.

"I can see I'll have to be quite severe with you," Loura said menacingly, smacking the wand down again. "Answer me! Are you a naughty girl?"

"Ooh, yes," Kerana breathed. It was true. She had robbed and plundered and even killed when her own life was at stake. She was bad.

"Then you deserve to be punished, don't you?" Three strokes of the wand bit Kerana's thighs, each a little closer to her twitching sex.

"Ooh! Ow! Oooh!" She felt Loura's hand smooth upwards over her mound and belly to her breasts. Her engorged nipples were buzzing and she gave a sharp intake of breath as Loura pinched one of them.

"Is it too much? Should I stop?" the slave girl asked in concern.

Nooo! No, please!" Kerana's sex was afire and trembling.

"It's as well," Loura said, playfully uncompromising again, "because I want to see some masturbation here. You've watched me. Now I'm going to watch you!" She laid the dildo on Kerana's belly and as the outlaw girl reached for it the wand stung her twice. "Still!" Loura snapped. "No one told you to move."

Kerana dropped her hand, thrilling at the strict tone that chastised her, and unbelievable pleasure sparkled through her sex. A tiny part of her mind demanded to know how she could be aroused by the idea of being made to touch herself in front of another woman. How could she feel such pleasure by humiliating herself in wanton submission? All she had to do was say no. But she said nothing, just whimpered when her breasts bounced suddenly under taps from the wand and her sex responded with ripples of delight. The weals on her swollen globes began throbbing and a different kind of throbbing filled her sheath, driving her mad with her need.

"Touch yourself," Loura ordered.

Without thought or hesitation, Kerana plunged her fingers deep, groaning and shuddering as they stoked the fire within her.

"Other hand on your clitty," Laura commanded. "I want it swelling nice and hard or you'll get more of this." She flicked stinging smacks with the wand across Kerana's quivering lower belly as the outlaw girl watched through pleasure-slitted eyes while Laura rubbed hard at her own sex. "Did I say look at me?" More taps of the wand flicked over Kerana's up-thrust breasts. "Watch your fingers working, not mine!"

Kerana looked down over her belly to where she was fingering herself as frantically as she could. Her bud was as hard as a button, straining upwards and glowing bright pink, seeming to vibrate beneath her furious fingers. She breathed fast and raggedly, feeling her tremors of excitement mounting towards climax.

The wand bit her thighs. "Stop that!" Laura snapped with mock severity. "Hands off!" She slapped Kerana's hands away when she did not obey at once. "Don't think I'll let you come just when you feel like it, my girl. You've got me to pleasure first!" The wand's tip tapped the swell of the outlaw girl's mound. She groaned in frustrated need. Her musk filled her nostrils, mingling with Laura's in the heavy air within the wagon. All that mattered was to be allowed to thrust her fingers between her burning labia again.

"Up," Laura ordered. "Come on, you got up to piss this morning on your own. You can do it."

Bottom aching, Kerana got to her feet, gripping the edge of the cot to keep her balance as the wagon trundled along. She was a full head taller than the little slave beside her and a lot stronger, yet she had no urge to overpower her tormentor. All she felt was an overwhelming need for the orgasm she had been denied, and a strange, anxious desire to please the slave girl by doing exactly as she was told.

"Now, pick up the dildo." Kerana felt a new thrill as her hand closed over it. "Bend over," Laura commanded. "I want to see that dildo slide inside your pussy, and it had better not slide out again until I say so!"

Incredible shivers of pleasure ran through her sheath as Kerana bent over and pushed her nose to the mattress. A light smack on her bottom made her jump.

"Hands under you! Rub the dildo over your pussy lips and don't you dare put it in 'til I tell you."

Thrilling at the stern words, Kerana obeyed. She had never heard her sex called a "pussy" before. The word was soft and feminine and arousing, so different from the coarse "cunt" that the slave guards used to describe it. Her heat was building again at the feel of the ribbed ivory rubbing her labia and clitoris, and she had to fight the overpowering need to feel it fill her. Her breasts hung heavily from her chest, pulsing as they swayed with the wagon's movement and the motion of her hand working the dildo.

"Now, inside!" Loura emphasised the order with a tap of the wand to Kerana's buttocks. "But slowly!"

Only just restraining her eagerness, the outlaw girl pushed the tip of the dildo between her swollen outer lips, feeling tremors tease her inner petals as the thick hardness passed over them and slowly, as Loura had instructed, she slid it up over the rippling walls of her sheath. She gave a long, breathy sigh as its whole length penetrated her, and then yelped as the wand bit her bottom.

"All the way in," Loura snapped, adding another stroke. "Are you deliberately trying to annoy me? Get it in now, naughty girl!" A delicious thrill of nervous excitement shivered in her belly as Kerana pushed the dildo deeper until her sex engulfed it. "Stand up, and you better clamp down tight. If it falls out you'll be sorry." Kerana stood up, clenching the walls of her sex hard on the ivory to hold it inside. "Come here." Loura went to Macro's chair and the outlaw girl followed, almost overbalancing as the dildo chafed the hot walls of her sheath. The slave girl thrust the wand into her hand and her stern expression and strict aura vanished. White teeth flashed and her fierce arousal showed bright in heavy-lidded eyes. "My turn." She bent and leaned a forearm on the seat of the chair, lifting her bottom high as her free hand slid between her legs.

"I..." Kerana swallowed, staring from the sliver of whalebone to Loura's rapidly moving fingers.

"Hit me, Kerana. Spank me with the wand," she said between panting breaths. Things had changed abruptly. Suddenly Kerana was expected to mete out punishment. It seemed wrong. Tentatively she tapped the thin wand on Loura's bottom.

"Harder," Loura urged, and Kerana tapped with a little more force. With a groan of frustration, Loura stood and her hands shot out suddenly, fingers closing over Kerana's nipples. Pain surged through her breasts and she clamped hard on the dildo and pressed her thighs together to stop it slipping out. "If you think you're in charge here you're mistaken," Loura snapped, giving her a forbidding look. "Do what you're told or it's your bottom that will get a drubbing. Do you hear?" At her nod, Loura adopted her position again. "Now, spank me 'til I say stop!"

Kerana hit her with enough force to leave a thin, pink line on her perfect buttocks when the wand rebounded from their firm flesh.

"Oh, yes. A little harder." The slave girl wriggled her narrow hips and moaned at the second stroke, diving a hand into her sex. Kerana continued to spank her, decorating the slave's pale-skinned buttocks with fiery red stripes while Loura whimpered and panted just as she had, with her juices glistening on her busy fingers.

"That's enough," she sighed when the outlaw girl had laid more than twenty strokes to the tight, glowing globes. Loura turned and planted her smarting bottom on the seat with a gasp, hooked her legs over the chair arms and exposed her wetly glistening sex. "Lick me."

Kerana was stunned. Only yesterday, she had been almost too embarrassed to watch Loura play with herself. Today excitement roiled inside her, thrilling the length of her sex at the slave girl's order. Casting the wand aside, she knelt before the little slave. Their eyes met, and she knew hers were as bright and burning with passion as Loura's.

"Lick my pussy, sweet one," Loura said, using Macro's endearment.

Kerana lowered her eyes to the girl's sex. Her gold-ringed clitoris had long since fully emerged and shone bright pink except for the pale, hard little nub of its tip. Below it, the petals of Loura's inner lips were flushed red and swollen. Kerana remembered the pleasure she had so unwillingly felt when the slave's tongue had artfully explored her in Macro's tent. How could she do less for the girl to whom she owed her life? She sank to her knees and leaned her face towards the twitching pussy, breathing in its ripe aroma of arousal. Her own sex pulsed with excitement around the dildo filling it. The edge of the chair's seat pushed into the swells of her breasts and made them ache deliciously as Kerana put out her tongue and tentatively pressed its tip past the moist, red inner lips of Loura's pussy.

"Ooooooh." The slave girl wiggled and thrust her hips up, pushing Kerana's probing tongue deeper into her wet heat. Kerana did not draw back. Her own sex was as hot and wet, and quivering as Loura's. The rich tang of the slave's dew filled her mouth and it was far sweeter than the guards' slime. She pressed her nose against Loura's soft mound and wriggled her tongue in her tight, trembling tunnel. The slave girl cooed and sighed and moaned, giving wriggles of her own, and Kerana felt a new pleasure at the knowledge it was she who provoked that response. She licked upwards and met the rigid bud of Loura's clitoris. Closing her mouth over it, she sucked hard and flogged it with her tongue, feeling the little ring piercing it flick back and forth and tugging at it with her teeth and lips.

"Aagh, yes." Loura heaved, legs sliding from the chair arms, and Kerana felt the slave's shivering thighs against her cheeks and her hands on the back of her head, mashing her sucking mouth and flickering tongue against the quivering pussy. Her own sex tingled and tickled, pulsed and prickled then tightened suddenly, clenching hard on the dildo. Sparkling delight rippled through her, and her pussy spasmed wildly in the sudden, wrenching release of her orgasm.

"Co...co...coming," Loura gasped and a rush of hot juices flooded Kerana's mouth as the little slave thrashed and bucked against her lips in her own fiery climax. Kerana kept her mouth hard against the writhing sex, sucking and tonguing until both girls' orgasms subsided. She eased her breasts away from the

chair and laid her head on Loura's thigh while their rapid breathing returned to normal. Loura's hand stroked her hair and she opened her eyes. She returned Loura's smile, feeling the same gratitude and affection for her that showed in the slave's face. Her sex relaxed, and the dildo slipped free and rolled across the wagon bed. They stayed like that for long minutes, too drained to move, but the floor of the wagon was giving no comfort to Kerana's sore bottom. She rose unsteadily to her feet and Loura did the same, tilting her chin up to look her in the eye.

"It's a long time since I came like that with another girl," she said. "Thank you." She lifted her lips and pressed them to Kerana's, and the outlaw girl felt no revulsion. Their mouths held in a lingering kiss, the first Kerana had ever shared with one of her own sex. Her mind spun as she relived what she had just done. It could have been another person, that lusting, submissive creature surrendering to her unnatural passions. But it was not. It was her. The wagon hit a bump and pulled their mouths apart. Kerana slid her arms from around Loura's nakedness, tottered to her cot and laid her aching body upon it. Her sex still tingled.

"Do you believe that can be wrong?" Loura asked.

Kerana shook her head. "It was... incredible," she said truthfully.

The little slave laughed. "Yes it was, but you didn't have to make love to me to get the answers you're looking for."

"But I... I wanted to." Kerana was suddenly horribly self-conscious.

Loura laughed again. "It's a little late to be blushing about it. You have no reason to feel embarrassed. I hope you're not regretting it."

"Never! I'm glad it happened," Kerana confessed, suppressing her doubts. "I don't regret a moment."

"Nor I, and I will relive every one next time I have only myself to play with." The little slave grinned, but Kerana was feeling serious.

"I'm no closer to understanding why I get excited sometimes and not others." It took a great effort to say the words aloud but it was the question that puzzled her most.

"Oh, that's easy," Loura said. "If pain is given only as punishment and with deliberate cruelty, you will just feel pain. Only when it is given with affection to pleasure you, by someone you trust and are attracted to, can you enjoy it."

To her surprise, Kerana realised she did trust Loura, as well as liking her, and she certainly was attractive. "Then why do I feel it with Macro? I barely even knew his name the... the first time."

"But didn't you find him attractive, so big and handsome as he is?"

She had, Kerana was forced to admit, remembering how she was awed by his strength. "But that means I might behave the same with anyone like him."

Loura smiled sympathetically. "No Kerana, I don't think you will. You responded to me because I was safe. Because I am a girl too. I doubt you will ever respond to any man but Macro."

"Why?"

Loura gave her a knowing look. "I'm afraid you'll have to work that one out yourself, my dear. And I think you will very soon." She sat down and leapt up immediately with a yelp of pain, twisting to look down at her striped bottom. "Oh. I think things got a little out of hand. It'll be a little difficult to explain these to Macro." She giggled at Kerana's dismay. "Don't worry, I'll think of something, but it would be wise to keep this to ourselves."

Kerana entirely agreed.

An application of Loura's salve and some face powder helped disguise her weals, and she was a picture of beauty and serenity when the caravan stopped for the night and she left for Macro's tent.

Kerana settled on her side to sleep, still afflicted by doubts. The day's events had presented a whole new set of questions and she was not convinced her original ones had been answered fully. Tired and sore, she tried to make sense out of her tangled feelings but her thoughts kept returning to the intensity of the pleasure she had felt. She fell asleep quickly, her hand buried in the moist warmth between her thighs.

She could not avoid exchanging a knowing glance with Loura when the slave gingerly sat down on Macro's chair next morning. But the little slave filled the day's journey with her amusing chatter, making no mention of the day before, and Kerana pushed all disturbing thoughts from her mind and let herself be entertained.

"How are my friends?" she asked Hordo when he brought her food at the evening halt.

"Well enough. Kirkit's back, but no worse than usual. Maybe not even so bad. He's quieter, brooding perhaps. The other guards don't pay him much heed since you... well, you know."

Kerana nodded. She would have to face him eventually, with his brutal assault on her still raw in her memory. She would worry when the time came.

Macro appeared. "Who's brooding?" he asked.

"We were talking about Kirkit," Hordo said.

"Is he giving you trouble?"

"No, I can take care of him if I have to."

Macro's expression softened. "Hordo, what are you doing here? You're no more a slaver than I am. Weren't you a soldier?"

"Yes, sir, like you. But the enemy laid waste my farm while I was away fighting. I need money if I'm to rebuild it."

"That's a story I know too well," Macro said. With a brief glance for Kerana he put a hand on Hordo's shoulder. "Come and tell me about it."

"What was that about?" Kerana wondered aloud.

"Macro's land was also ravaged in the war," Loura told her. "He took the slaver's job for the same reason as Hordo."

"He has no money?" A cold dread filled Kerana's heart.

"Not enough. He worries his people will starve when winter comes."

Trust Loura to know the whole story. Kerana's stomach churned with horror as Macro's motives were suddenly crystal clear. All his efforts to preserve her life had been for one purpose only. He had known all along who she was. And he was going to hand her over to King Barca for the price on her head.

Chapter 14

Kerana shivered, nipples puckering in the cold dawn. Fear gnawed her belly as it had all through the hours of darkness, when every anguished toss and turn had rattled the chain on her ankle and reminded her there was no escape. She was far too valuable for that.

Macro had come when the rest of the camp was barely stirring. During her time in the wagon, the chain had been taken from her collar. Now it was back and she felt its familiar tug as Macro set his horse in motion towards the head of the caravan.

"Where are we going?" Kerana asked hoarsely.

"You're back in the coffle tomorrow. You need some exercise."

The Caravan Master spotted them as they were passing. "Back on her feet already? She's strong. Or she got off too lightly. I see you're not carrying that whip. Damn thing was hopeless. It saved her backside a proper thrashing." He ran his eye over her nudity while Kerana stared fixedly into the distance, trying to ignore her shame at having begged his mercy. He nodded at her bare sex. "You should ring her before those holes heal completely. Aye, she's a rare beauty. I don't suppose you'd sell her?"

"I wouldn't sell you a dog." Macro spat at the Caravan Master's feet.

His act was good, but beneath it she knew he was as cruel and heartless as Kirkit. The awful dread closed in again as they left the startled Caravan Master behind and continued up the empty road. Stiff and sore, and terrified though she was, Kerana had no difficulty maintaining Macro's slow pace. Her heart leaped for the hundredth time that morning as she stepped from dirt to hard stone. The paved road began fifteen miles from Azdagul. Less than two days march would see her delivered to her doom. Or was Macro taking her there now? If he put her over his saddle, he could be there by afternoon. Her gut wrenched. They would rape her. Barca had a bad reputation. He might want to use her himself. What if they raped her anus? She could not stand another bumming! And then there would be hours or days of agony until her life ebbed away.

Just as the sun rose, they turned off the High Road down a track between two hills. Kerana's fear did not recede. She knew the place it led to and she would have killed to avoid going there. She should leap at Macro; take him by surprise. But he would not be surprised and would overpower her like he always did. Kerana pulled desperately on her neck chain and pissed herself with fright. Macro turned his face away until the splashing stopped. Throat too tight to speak, Kerana pleaded silently with her eyes.

He gave a short, stern shake of his head. "Come, there's something you need to see." He tethered the horse and followed the track on foot, leading Kerana by her chain. The sound of hammering came from ahead. Anywhere else it would seem harmless, ordinary. But not at Valdoth, Kerana knew. She heard shrill screams and her stomach cramped into a ball of fear as they emerged from behind the hill. The land widened out before them, brown desert on the left and green fields on the right, for Valdoth was as far as the irrigation canals extended into the desert. It was also a place of execution.

The blue-uniformed Road Guards raised the cross as Macro made his way to the front of the crowd of a hundred or so gathered in a semi-circle twenty paces from the execution area. Weak with panic, Kerana obeyed the pressure on her collar, though every instinct was demanding that she run.

The cross slid into its socket with a loud thud that made her heart leap, and the naked woman upon it screamed abominably as her body jolted against the broad-headed nails holding her fast to the wood. Kerana stared in awe-struck terror. The woman was about thirty, broad-hipped and full breasted. With her face twisting in agony, it was impossible to tell if she was pretty. They had nailed her ankles to the sides of the upright, legs open and knees slightly bent. Before being crucified she had been flogged with barbed whips in the usual way of the Road Guards. But not too much. She must not be allowed to bleed to death and escape the hours of torture ahead of her. As Kerana stared, the victim straightened her legs, levering herself on the nails through each ankle, and held her position a few moments until the excruciating pain and cramps made her sag and bear her weight once more on her nailed wrists. Kerana's nausea swelled. One of her worst nightmares had become reality before her eyes, and she was too horror-stricken to look away. The crowd was jeering and throwing disgusting things, and they seemed to know the woman for they shouted the name Menina as they cursed her.

Kerana overcame her horrified fascination and dragged her eyes from the woman's struggles just as a Road Guard sergeant, spotting a warrior among the onlookers, made his way over to Macro. Kerana turned from the feared blue tunic, but her terror was already overwhelming and she could feel no more.

"Don't go feeling sorry for that one, milord," the sergeant said. "She poisoned her mate. It took him two days to die with his guts eaten away. She won't even last 'til nightfall. She's a local girl. That's why we brought her here." He glanced at the shrieking woman being pelted with rotten food and excrement by the crowd. "She's not too popular with her neighbours."

Kerana knew he was grinning, and a fresh wave of nausea swirled in her stomach at his callous indifference. Lifting her eyes a little, she saw the bloodied barbs on the many-tailed whip in his belt and knew he had had a hand in flogging the crucified woman. Her knees went suddenly weak and she clutched Macro's arm to keep from falling. She sensed him look at her but was too frightened to look up.

"Your slave squeamish, is she?" the sergeant asked. "Brought her here to teach her a lesson?"

"I thought I had," Kerana heard Macro say.

"Well, we're doing a slave today, too. Yours will soon come to heel when she's seen that."

Kerana turned her lowered eyes in the direction he indicated, towards the execution frames standing next to the cross. The breast-hanging gallows was empty, as was the flogging frame, but between them a young woman with breasts and buttocks bloodied from the whip was fighting four Road Guards with all her strength. And losing, Kerana saw, for they already had her ankles shackled to the

bottom of the impaling rack and were securing her wrists. She made no sound Kerana could hear above the crowd's noise. In her mouth was a ring-gag like the one Kerana had been forced to wear and there was spunk running down her inner thighs.

"Bit the cock clean off her master," the sergeant said. "Said she didn't regret it at the hearing, being he was a cruel bastard. But I think she will soon."

The guards had the girl fixed in place, body stretched so taut her joints must have been cracking. She was allowed no movement that might divert the impaling pole from its course. They put the iron band attached to the rack around her forehead then hauled on the rope, raising the rack and its captive girl upwards on the well-greased runners at either side. They tied the end of the rope to another looped around the neck of a big sack resting behind the rack. It lifted slightly then sank back to the ground, counterbalanced by the victim's weight.

The girl's voice rose faintly above the noise of the crucified woman and the crowd. They had removed her gag. Kerana's heart gave a sickening lurch. Of course, the crowd would want to hear her screams. But she was not screaming or begging for her life. Tears stung Kerana's eyes. Gods, let me be half so brave. The girl was cursing her tormentors, hurling insults and defiance at them with the only part of her body she could still move. Kerana's knees almost buckled and she clung tighter to Macro, hating him, herself for her weakness, the fact that in all the world she had no support but the arm of a man who was going to betray her.

"scuse me, milord. I've got to do my bit," the sergeant said and went to stand by the suspended girl. He took the impaling pole, six feet long and as thick as his wrist, from one of his men. "Arse or cunt?" he bellowed.

The crowd fell silent. The crucified woman continued to scream, and the slave bound to the rack hanging above him called him a bastard, but he paid no heed. He thumped the pole down hard into its socket, slid a hand slowly up its length and tapped his forefinger on the point.

"Well," he said, grinning at his audience, "what's it to be?"

The crowd began to shout. Kerana's stomach heaved but there was nothing in it to vomit. She closed her eyes but her head started spinning so she stared at the ground until one word drowned out the other among the chanting onlookers. The same terrible compulsion that had forced her to watch the crucifixion dragged her eyes back to the helpless girl.

The rope was loosened and the guards lowered their suddenly frail-looking victim towards the point of the pole. She had fallen silent, hoarse from shouting perhaps or gripped by the same prostrating terror as Kerana. The sergeant reached up to open her sex for the point and she let loose a stream of piss that sent him scurrying out of range. He laughed as urine splattered the boards near his feet.

"Nice try. The gods bless your spirit, lass, you're a game one. I'll pray they don't make you wait at the gates when you reach the other side." But his admiration did not divert him. The girl sank lower until the lips of her sex were bulging around the pole. A dribble of spunk had escaped her, shining in the morning sunlight as it trickled down the smooth wood. Her bloodied breasts rose and fell rapidly as the rope was tied off and the sergeant drew his sword. He pushed the blade into the bottom of the sack and made a small slit. Sand trickled out. The crowd cheered.

The girl began cursing again – the guards, the crowd and her master whose stump of a cock she hoped rotted away and took the rest of him with it.

"It already has, lass," the sergeant told her. "Rest assured. He's gone before you." He took position beside Macro again. "Aye, that's courage now. She deserves a better end."

"You could give her one," Macro said. "A quicker one, at least."

There was a sudden halt to the girl's invective. She sucked in a shuddering breath and Kerana imagined she heard the crack of her pubic bone snapping as the sand trickled out and she sank a fraction down the pole.

"I couldn't do that," the sergeant said. "The crowd wouldn't like it."

"The crowd wouldn't give you twenty crowns either."

"To do what exactly?"

Kerana tore her eyes from the tortured girl and risked a look at Macro's face. He was staring at the victim with eyes narrowed and jaw set in the way she had learned meant he was angry.

"Cut the bottom out of that sack."

Kerana watched the sand flowing from the small cut. It would be hours before it emptied and with the girl held rigid there was no chance a vital organ would be pierced and end it quickly for her.

"I might manage half-way," the sergeant said. "It's a very tough sack."

"Forty then and twenty for your men."

Coins clinked. The sergeant strode to the sack and thrust his sword deep. The crowd's noise faltered and the girl screamed just as the blade slashed forward and all the sand spilled out. The rack seemed to hang for a heartbeat then dropped, plunging the girl down onto the pole, forcing its sharpened tip through womb and belly and gullet. At the last moment the band around her forehead triggered,

snapped her head back and with a gush of blood the pole cut off her dying breath and the point thrust upwards through her open mouth.

Terror was tearing Kerana's guts. Her racing heart must surely burst and she prayed it would and spare her the horrors to come. Grisly images of herself thrust themselves into her mind. Dying by inches on the pole. Twisting in agony on the cross. Hanging with her breasts grotesquely stretched and skewered. Writhing under the slow flogging of the barbed whips until her ribs showed through the tatters of her breasts and her hip bones gleamed white above her shredded buttocks. She buried her face in Macro's chest.

"Please," she pleaded in a strangled whisper, "don't make me die this way."

She felt his fingers lift her chin but could not see his face. Blackness hovered at the edges of her vision. Then it closed in.

* * *

Water was trickling into her mouth. Kerana coughed, swallowed and opened her eyes. She was in the desert, the sun was high and there were no screams or jeering crowds. There was no weight around her neck when she lifted her head. Her collar was gone! Then she saw Macro beside her and her terror returned. His horse stood nearer to her than to him. Kerana tensed to leap for its saddle but Macro's hands pressed her shoulders back down to the cloak beneath her.

"Steady, you've had a far bigger shock than I intended."

"Bastard! You'll never get me to Azdagul. I'll kill myself first."

His eyes went wide and his mouth fell open and suddenly her sore bottom was in his lap and his arms were holding her against his chest.

"Ah, sweet one, forgive me," he said. "I see now what was in your mind, but I swear on my honour I never meant to frighten you so. I only wanted you to see how you will surely end if you return to your outlaw ways." Kerana pulled away enough to look into his face, struggling to grasp his meaning. He smiled at her confusion. "I should spank you soundly for believing I would stain my honour with the king's blood money."

She dragged in a breath. "Then you're not...?"

"Do you think I've gone to so much trouble over you just for the sake of the reward? Sweet one, I will never sell you! Not on the block for two hundred crowns or to Barca for two thousand. Don't you see? I want you for my own. To belong only to me."

There was smouldering intensity in his eyes as his mouth came down and Kerana

lifted hers to meet it. The relief flooding her turned swiftly to desire as they kissed, and Macro's hands smoothed over her bare skin. She put her arms around him, heat tingling low in her belly at his warmth and the hard muscles under his shirt. He stripped quickly, Kerana as eager as he that he shed his clothes. He kissed her again, tongue probing between her lips and tangling tantalisingly with her own, his broad chest crushing down on her breasts and making them throb. It was sweet pain. Her blood grew hot and her need for him was stronger than ever before. His lips blazed a teasing trail down her neck and breasts, over her quivering belly towards the prickling heat in her sex. His mouth tugged gently at the folds of her hood and she moaned as the tip of his tongue delved between her smooth outer lips. Then he hesitated.

Oh, gods, don't let him stop now! Kerana knew why – he had seen the half-healed piercings in her labia and was afraid of hurting her. He lay next to her, face hovering above her parted thighs. She turned her head and saw his cock rearing arrogantly inches from her face. There was none of the repulsion she had felt with Kirkit. She closed her hand around the taut-skinned shaft, guiding it to her mouth, closed her lips over its broad head and sucked. A surge of satisfaction ran through her at Macro's sudden gasp, and she smiled around the pulsing thickness in her mouth then gasped herself as his tongue parted her slit and slid within. Intense and all-consuming pleasure filled her and she surrendered to it.

Macro mounted her finally, slowly sinking his breath-taking length into her eager sheath and Kerana cried out in amazed delight as his entry triggered the fiery thrill of her orgasm. She felt again the stab of guilt as the weight behind his long, slow thrusts forced her flogged buttocks against the ground and pain and pleasure melded together into a single sensation of overwhelming excitement. Lifting herself to take him deeper, she met his thrusts with her own and fiery tremors rippled the length of her sex. She wrapped her legs around him, pulling him down onto her sore breasts and aching-erect nipples to heighten the pleasure-pain thrumming through every nerve. Macro's glorious shaft plunged ever faster within her as their urgency drove them on towards fulfilment, and with her head spinning in spirals of ecstasy she heard his cry and felt the hot gush of his spunk flood her. A great wave of writhing, wriggling delight washed over her and she cried out joyfully.

Kerana's arms slid from Macro's body and thumped onto the sand. Breathless, she lay and waited until the lights flashing inside her head faded.

"Gods in heaven," Macro panted and brushed his lips on hers.

She looked into his still smouldering eyes. As her passion ebbed, her pain became only pain once more. She waited for Macro to lift his weight from her but, just as she got her breath back, she felt his cock begin swelling inside her. Her hurts faded, mingling again with rising pleasure as Macro's fingers sensually caressed her skin and his lips sucked on her pulsing nipples. A sudden daring seized her.

"You haven't spanked me soundly yet."

Macro's tongue stopped flicking her nipple and he slid his cock from her hot sex. Kerana held her breath, afraid she would see a look of revulsion on his face as he raised his head to look into her eyes. Whatever he saw there brought a smile to his lips and he smoothed his hand over her taut stomach.

"I said I ought to, but I think your bottom has suffered enough for now."

A flood of excitement made her shiver. His eyes were bright with desire not anger. He was not disgusted or repelled. "But I'm a naughty girl," she persisted with a delicious tremor teasing her sex. "You said so yourself. And I deserve it. You know how bad I've been, don't you?"

"I know," Macro confirmed and caught his breath as Kerana curled her fingers round his swollen shaft. His lips crushed down on hers, his hard chest against her breasts making them buzz wonderfully. Kerana groaned against his mouth and he pulled free.

"You really are a naughty girl, aren't you?" he whispered, and suddenly he was sitting up and she was face down with her thighs pressing onto his and her bottom lifted invitingly towards him. His palm rubbed firmly over the tight round globes and Kerana trembled in anticipation. He smacked the backs of her thighs first, gauging her reaction, and she cooed her pleasure at feeling them sting and hearing the slap of his flesh upon hers. Hot juices flowed inside her sheath as once more pleasure and pain entwined. He used lighter blows as he worked his way up the curve of her wriggling bottom, making each buttock bounce in turn and adding a new smarting glow to the dull ache of her bruises.

"Oooh," Kerana panted. "Ooh yes, yes!"

"Yes, Master, naughty slave girl," Macro corrected, but even in the fierce throes of her passion she could not let the word pass her lips. His palm struck harder. "Yes, Master," he repeated.

Kerana made inarticulate cries, squirming as her bottom turned hot and throbbing under his insistent hand. Abruptly he slid her from his lap and she felt him push her thighs wide and the marvellous pain in her pierced labia as the broad head of his cock forced them apart to thrust into her rippling sheath. His belly slapped her buttocks as he ravished her from behind, crushing her breasts into his cloak with his weight, and in a few rapid heartbeats lights were flashing behind her eyes, her head was spinning and her pussy was clenching tight around his hardness in another wild, tumultuous orgasm. They fucked with the same ardour and urgency as before, until the fiery splash of Macro's spunk made Kerana come again and she almost fainted with the ferocity of it. Loura was right, she thought hazily as she drifted on the edge of consciousness, men were better.

* * *

Aching everywhere, Kerana let Macro help her to her feet.

"Damn!" He stared at her and she felt none of the shame she had when he had first looked upon her nudity. Amid all the warm wetness between her legs she had not noticed the blood dripping on her thighs from one of her pierced labia.

"I knew I should have waited 'til you were properly healed," Macro said, kneeling at her feet to dab away the blood with his kerchief, "but when you started sucking..." His eyes lifted to hers. "I just couldn't resist any longer."

Kerana smiled down at him, thinking it was a strange position for a man who expected her to call him "Master", and knew she had had her first experience of exerting power over men at which Loura was so adept. "You could have taken me on the first day if you had chosen to," she said. "I couldn't have stopped you."

"But you would have wanted to. And that would have made it rape."

Remembering her responses whenever his fingers had teased her, Kerana doubted it. What kind of man was he who did not think slave girls were fair game for rape, she wondered.

"I wanted to wait until you were ready," he explained. "If I had taken you against your will, how would I ever win you over?"

"You knew who I was from the start, didn't you?"

"I had heard talk of a she-bandit audacious enough to raid the High Road all the way to the king's doorstep. They call her The Dove." He looked a question. "Because she is the complete opposite?"

"A hawk," Kerana said.

His teeth flashed. "When we first met I knew there couldn't be another like you." He stood. Her bleeding had stopped but her breasts and buttocks buzzed in complaint at what she had put them through.

"Can you ride?" Macro asked.

Her belly shrank. They could have only one destination. She shook her head. "I'm stiff. I'd rather walk for a while."

They set off slowly, Kerana holding onto his stirrup leather as he rode. Her knees still shook from her orgasms, and Macro's spunk leaking from her tickled as it ran down her thighs, but the warm after-glow of their love-making was dissipating fast and Kerana faced a problem even her wildest imaginings could never have

conceived. Did she want to be a slave?

She had given up any idea of returning to outlawry. After her abject terror, she would never again be able to run the risk of dying in the awful ways Macro had forced her to confront. But though Macro continually insisted she belonged to him, did she belong with him? She admired the handsome warrior and could hardly deny she was attracted to him. Many times he had tried to make amends for his mistake of putting her in the coffle, and he was even willing to forego the reward and risk his own people starving for her sake. And she loved the feel of his hard-muscled body against hers, his skilful touch and the strength of his cock inside her. He was the ideal master that Loura had described. But he was, and always would be, the master, and that meant Kerana would always be the slave.

She recoiled from the thought. Searching her mind, she found only one answer. But to find a distant place where she could settle she must first recover her plunder. And to do that she must escape. Something like her old determination arose inside – her only real problem was the one she had had right from the beginning.

Lifting Kerana onto his saddle, Macro set the horse into a canter, bearing all of her weight on his arms to save her the pain of her bottom jolting on the saddle. It was late afternoon when they sighted the caravan making good time along the paved road. Tomorrow, Kerana knew, they would reach Azdagul. Macro set her down, dismounted and took her collar from his saddlebag.

"Sorry, sweet one."

He stood behind her and she could not see his expression as he locked it in place, but if she needed reminding, the weight around her neck was more than enough – the euphoria of passion was gone, for him as well as her. Their brief time alone was over and she was back to harsh reality.

* * *

It was good to see the slave girls again. They greeted Kerana like an old friend when she emerged from her last night in the wagon to rejoin the coffle, and she was not ashamed to admit she felt the same about them. Truly, they were the only friends she had ever had except for Loura, but she would not be sorry to swap her comfortable cot for the hard ground and thin blankets shared with her slave-sisters. Hordo made her third girl with Nita behind her.

It was not long after the march began before the blonde spoke. "Kirk's acting strange."

"You haven't suffered because of me?" Kerana asked.

"No, he's never mentioned you since... that day. But he hardly lifts his whip any

more. He lets us piss the same way the other girls do, and he hasn't made anyone suck him either."

"Don't complain if things are a bit easier."

"But he isn't right. Hordo says when he's off duty he sits apart, muttering to himself, and he's lost his temper with other guards over nothing. Macro spoke to him last night. He told him to remember the punishment ended matters between you, and he had better not see him abusing you. Hordo said Kirkit's face was like a thundercloud."

Kerana was not surprised. He had constantly told the other guards it was he and not Macro who should be leading the slave-train, yet it was he who had been proved the fool by letting her escape. Kirkit was not going to let bygones be bygones. But he seemed calm enough when he took over from Hordo and gave Reina, last in line, only a cursory flick with his whip when she stumbled. Although, Kerana suspected Macro's presence alongside the coffle had a lot to do with the weight of the blow.

She did not look at the warrior, afraid something in her glance would betray her thoughts. Every slap of her bare feet on hot stone brought her closer to Azdagul. Once beyond the city, in unknown territory, her chance of freedom was non-existent. Even if she escaped the slave-train, she would almost certainly be caught by the local outlaws and enslaved again, or worse. She had one last desperate throw of the dice. Tonight, when they camped close to the city she must find a way to escape that did not bring punishment on the other girls, and a means that ensured Macro's tracking skills would be useless in recapturing her. She had a plan for the second part. For the first, she could only wait and seize her chance when it came. She might have one advantage. She was sure Macro believed she had embraced her slavery and that might make him careless. Give her just a few moments to slip into the darkness and she would be free. Her heart beat faster, and she felt a spark of her old self – before the chains and whips and horror – flicker into life.

There were exclamations from the slaves when the high walls of Azdagul appeared through the heat haze. Most had never seen it before. Kerana had hated it for as long as she could remember. An hour later they were marching across the bridge over the Gul River and Kerana could see the crowds on the road that circled the city, not just travellers but all the teeming hordes of Azdagul itself. She kept her head down as the coffle passed the Road Guards at the end of the bridge, and caught sight of a familiar figure as she looked up. He wore a bandage over his eyes and carried a long staff, and he was no more blind than she was. Murgiz had spied for her for years, reporting on the caravans passing through Azdagul. It seemed he was doing the same for Durkan. She saw him step out to approach Kirkit and waited for the guard to strike him. Kirkit raised his whip but whatever the beggar said stopped it falling. To Kerana's surprise the guard leaned down in his saddle, seemed to be listening, then rode on. When she reached the

spot, Murgiz had disappeared. It seemed strange, but Nita had said Kirkit was acting strangely.

Sudden whistling and shouting ahead drew her attention and her belly clenched tight. Oh, gods, she should have known! In the past days she had almost grown used to her nakedness, but she was at Azdagul now and she cringed inwardly at the ordeal of embarrassment that lay ahead. The slave coffles always attracted a crowd of boys and men, gaping at the nude girls, making lewd comments and obscene gestures. They always made the trip past the city a misery for a slave girl. She thought suddenly of her friends plucked sexes and her own breasts and buttocks with their fading bruises. Her coffle was bound to attract special attention.

As the first slaves began to pass the unruly group, hands shot out to grope breasts and slap bottoms. Two youths especially caught her eye, jumping into the road to swing sticks in stinging blows across the defenceless girls' buttocks and laughing about it. In front, Murina drew level with the first youth, and Kerana heard her yelp as he gleefully laid his stick across the upper curve of her backside. She clasped her hands to the spot and the second youth cracked his stick into the lower curve and made her yelp again. So that was their game! Kerana speeded up a little, tugging the four girls behind with her. The grinning youths raised their sticks as Yulana came in range, and in two paces Kerana snatched them from their hands, snapped them over her upraised knee and flung the pieces at their feet without even breaking step. The crowd hushed, too surprised to do anything but stare while the rest of the coffles passed unmolested.

With sudden bravado, Kerana looked back in defiance and stared directly into the eyes of a Road Guard captain.

Chapter 15

Heart lurching, Kerana tore her startled gaze from the captain's face. Had he recognised her? She knew him! And she knew the reason for his bandaged forearm. Less than a month previously she had disarmed him in a running fight along the High Road. Icy chills prickled her spine as she felt his eyes following her. Scarcely breathing, she waited for the outcry.

It did not come. The coffle tramped on, approaching another group of men jeering the girls of a slave-train coming the other way. Kerana clenched her fists, swearing her dangerous overconfidence would not get the better of her again. This time she would do nothing to attract attention. But she and her companions were spared further humiliation. Macro led the slave-train onto the road that led to the bridge over the Azdan River. They were going north. Bewildered, Kerana watched the rest of the caravan disappearing down the road to Olnis. But of

course, Macro would not be such a fool as to tell a bandit his true destination.

They camped four miles from Azdagul at the gathering place for northbound caravans and well away from the Road Guard post, much to Kerana's relief. She shivered, recalling her fear when she had seen the captain. Now her outlaw career was ended she wanted no more close calls with the Road Guard.

While the slaves waited to drink, she eyed the mountains, hardly believing her luck. No more than a bowshot away the river valley sloped steeply up to meet the twisted gullies and ravines that led to her main hideout. It had always amused her after a raid to think of the Road Guards ranging the countryside in search of her while she hid safely within sight of Azdagul itself. But, more important now, it was where the loot from her years of banditry was hidden - if Durkan had lied. And if he really had found it he was probably there, gloating over the riches he had gained by betraying her. Either way, it was within her reach.

She turned her back to the hills and looked beyond the road to the river. Wheat grew tall in the fields between the two – good cover for escaping slave girls. For she would not risk Macro tracking her down. She was a strong swimmer. Even with her collar and chain, she could float downstream for ten miles, come ashore and hide until the slave-train was long gone. Then she would settle with Durkan. She would be naked and unarmed but she knew every tree and boulder, gully and goat-path better than anyone.

Macro passed, escorting Loura to his tent, and a sudden heaviness filled Kerana's heart as she realised she would never see him again, never feel his strength, hear the humour in his voice or see his desire for her smouldering in his eyes. She shook herself. What was she thinking with freedom so nearly in her grasp?

The slaves drank at the river. Its current was swift. Once in the water, Kerana would quickly be swept away from any pursuit. But she still had the problem of escaping the coffer without her friends suffering for it. Hordo provided the answer when he told her in future she would spend her nights in Macro's tent. "Just to make sure there are no more escapes," he said, but they both knew it was to keep her out of Kirkit's reach. And perhaps within Macro's, she thought, and tingling warmth sparkled in her sex. An image in her mind of her mouth closing over Macro's cock made her cheeks hot. Impatiently she pushed the feelings away. She must seize her chance. Already the sun had nearly set. When Hordo came for her, she would surprise him, vanish into the night and be in the water before the alarm was raised. As the coffer was led into the bushes above the camp to piss, Kerana felt a warm glow of satisfaction at how well her plan was working. The other glow, lower down, she ignored.

As she squatted in the dusk, she glimpsed Kirkit come out of one of the gullies higher up, look around and set off towards the camp. A moment later Murgiz, the beggar-spy appeared at the same place, retying his bandage around his eyes before going in a different direction. Sensing trouble, Kerana wondered what a slave

guard and a thief could have to talk about in secret. She looked at Hordo, but as usual he was looking away from the pissing girls and had seen nothing. She ought to tell him to warn Macro but alerting the warrior would disrupt her plan, and such an opportunity would never come again.

* * *

Kerana sat on the floor of the tent, her thoughts in turmoil. Tensed and ready, she had waited for Hordo to come and unchain her. There had been only one guard to avoid, then she would have been across the road and sprinting for the river. But as if he had known her intentions all along, it had been Macro who came for her. She looked up at the nail on the tent pole where he had placed the end of her chain. She could easily pull it free. Nothing else prevented her running – except Macro himself. Despite his size, he was even faster than she was and would catch her easily. She put her food aside. Her stomach was still quivering with the shock of her astounding discovery.

Macro was feeding a slice of peach to Loura, kneeling at his feet. Like a puppy, the outlaw girl thought, as the girl seized the succulent fruit with glistening lips and sucked it into her mouth. And the ache of jealousy inside Kerana seemed worse than anything her poor bottom had ever caused her. Why was Macro feeding Loura with his own hand when it was she who was his slave?

The awful knowledge twisted her belly and made Kerana's head spin. But she could not deny it, for when Macro had loomed from the darkness and ruined all her plans, she had not felt anger or despair. She had felt relief!

Though she had not seen him move, Macro was suddenly kneeling beside her. "What is it, sweet one?" he asked, brushing away a tear she had been unaware was rolling down her cheek.

"You fed Loura from your own plate," Kerana sobbed miserably. "You've never done that for me."

His eyebrows rose in surprise. "I didn't think you'd want me to. You were all set to run away again just a little while ago."

She looked down. So he had guessed she planned to escape. And she had just revealed her stupid feelings to him.

"Do you wish me to suck your cock, Master?" Loura asked, but her gaze was on Kerana as she spoke. As the outlaw girl met her eye she smiled and gave her the same knowing look she had when they were together in the wagon.

"Behave, Loura," Macro warned softly.

"Be strict with her, Master, not with me," the little slave replied, grinning impishly

at Kerana.

Macro gave Kerana a long, assessing look then glanced from one girl to the other, frowning suspiciously. "Is something going on between you too?" he demanded and before Kerana could deny it, he added, "It better not be more devilry like you got up to in the wagon."

The two girls exchanged looks and Kerana saw Loura's surprise was equal to her own.

"Did you think I wouldn't guess?" Macro stood and a smile played around his lips, quickly concealed behind an expression of disapproval as he looked down at Loura. "You came in here with a badly disguised set of stripes on your bottom, and when I went to the wagon she was sighing in her sleep with a hand between her legs." He turned to Kerana. "Do you think me fool enough that I wouldn't know you'd been up to something?"

She gave a shake of her head, nervous and confused by Macro's behaviour. They were feelings that increased when he hurriedly stripped to his breechclout. As Kerana eyed him warily, she saw the cloth begin to rise and her belly flipped as his swelling cock pushed it aside and curved upwards past his navel. Macro tugged the breechclout free and sat in his chair.

"I'll have you both kneeling here." He pointed to his feet. Loura was there in an instant but Kerana had to cross half the length of the tent. She began to rise.

"On your knees!" Macro barked, and even as she resented the order that forced her to crawl to take her place beside Loura, she felt a sudden warmth within her sex at his commanding tone. She looked up, and the thick-veined shaft of his cock seemed to vibrate before her eyes, triggering an answering vibration in her moistening sheath. Uncertainly, Kerana looked at his face and saw him struggling to hide his grin. There was no anger in his eyes, only amusement and desire. He was playing with them! Her sex gave a twitch of excitement. Beside her, Loura was licking her lips and unconsciously leaning towards Macro's straining erection. "Go and take off those decorations," Macro told her, indicating her revealing clothing, "and fetch some of those toys you're so fond of."

Loura gave Kerana a worried glance. "But Master, you will wish to be alone with your slave girl."

"So you can avoid punishment for your part in the misbehaviour? I don't think so. Do as you're told!"

Loura disappeared and Kerana swallowed hard. The words went round and round in her head: "your slave girl." A few minutes ago she had thought of herself as just that. Now doubts assailed her. She realised Macro had spoken to her and looked in the direction he pointed. His belt hung from one of the tent poles. The

whip that had terrified her was no longer upon it but the switch was.

"Fetch it," he insisted, and she guessed he was repeating the order. She hesitated to touch the implement. Twice before she had felt its bite. Almost in the first moments she had ever seen Macro, she recalled, it had scorched her buttocks and the lips of her sex while the guards held her helpless in the dust. With a little shudder, she closed her fingers around the switch and knelt to offer it to him. Why had she done that? She could have remained standing but for some reason that seemed wrong.

Macro took it and bent it between his hands. "Do you think Loura deserves the same as you're going to get, sweet one?"

He was asking for her approval to include the little slave in their pleasure. How could she do anything else? Her jealousy had been directed at Macro, not Loura. If she could have chosen anyone to share the warrior with, it would be the little slave. Watching the supple wood bend and straighten she nodded agreement and little thrills of excitement teased her belly and sex. Macro was looking at her, having difficulty keeping the stern expression on his face as he watched the rapid rise and fall of her jutting breasts. She giggled with nervous excitement.

"Silence!" he snapped just as Loura reappeared and knelt beside her with two ivory dildos in her hands, one considerably larger than the other. "So, you two seem to have become much better acquainted in the wagon than I expected," Macro said, raising an eyebrow at Kerana, and she felt her face turn pink and lowered her eyes. The tip of the switch forced her chin up. "Don't look away," he ordered, and her pussy quivered. "And all done without your Master's permission. I wonder what you got up to. Of course, I could make you show me." He tapped the side of one of Loura's breasts with the switch. "Couldn't I, Loura?"

"Yes, Master," she said breathlessly. Kerana felt a wicked thrill run through her at the thought of being forced to make love to the girl in front of Macro, and she knew Loura was experiencing the same thing. The switch tapped her own breast and made her catch her breath.

"Couldn't I?" Macro demanded again.

Kerana nodded. "Yes." Macro raised an eyebrow expectantly and she knew what he was waiting for. Her lips parted a little, but Kerana still could not bring herself to say "Master".

Macro chose not to press her. "Loura, give her the phallus."

The slave girl passed the smaller ivory length to Kerana, and without need of further orders she turned on her knees and elbows to present her raised bottom towards Macro. He tapped the switch on the dildo in Kerana's hand. "Put it in."

She gulped, embarrassment tingeing her mounting excitement as her hands went to Loura's sex, knowing Macro was watching her every move. The little slave's musk was strong and heady as Kerana's unsteady fingers parted the girl's labia, already coated with dewy moisture, exposing her inner lips and the darkly pink tunnel beyond them. Loura shivered and gave a hiss, sex and anus flexing suddenly as the tip of the dildo touched her entrance. Moist heat radiated from between her thighs as the outlaw girl gently pushed it all the way in, and Loura's shiny petals closed behind it as she moaned and wriggled her hips.

Before Macro could command her, Kerana turned her own backside to him and knelt as Loura had, savouring the delicious thrills tickling her sheath as she willingly adopted the humiliating position. Loura's fingers spread her sex and rubbed tantalisingly over her inner lips and the erecting nub of her clitoris, and Kerana shuddered with delight as the ridges carved into the phallus coursed over the sensitive walls of her sex. With a breathy groan, she clamped them tight, engulfing the dildo's full length.

"Stand!" Macro snapped sternly, also rising to his feet. "If either of those dildos slip out you'll both get double."

Kerana saw the tip of his hard cock, swollen and gleaming redly in the lamplight, and was convinced it must be aching as much as her erect nipples. She realised she was not the only one who had heard the story of Loura's first experience when Macro made them stand face to face and put their arms around each other. He began circling them. Nervous excitement made her belly flip, and she could feel Loura's warm body trembling and gripped the girl tighter in her arms. She trembled too as she turned her head to follow Macro's progress until he disappeared behind her. The first wonderful sting of the switch flashed across her buttocks.

"Eyes to the front," the warrior barked, then reappeared to pass behind Loura. Kerana felt her go rigid, but Macro did not strike her. She whimpered as he disappeared from Kerana's sight and her gut tightened and clenched her sex around the dildo as she waited for the switch's bite. It never came.

"Oooh!" It was Loura who cried out with a rush of hot breath against Kerana's skin as Macro cracked the switch across her bottom, and her belly thrust excitingly against Kerana's mound. Loura was shorter, her eyes reaching just above the outlaw girl's shoulder, so her view of what Macro was doing was even more limited than Kerana's. Again Kerana tensed for a blow that did not come, and again it was Loura who cried out as her bottom stung. She rubbed her cheek on the upper curve of Kerana's left breast, agitating its stiff nipple with her chin, and the outlaw girl moaned then squeaked as a surprise slash of the stiff wood scored her bottom.

Just as Loura had described, it seemed to last an age while the warrior paced around them, stringing their nerves taut as they waited, never knowing when or if

a stroke would scorch their defenceless buttocks, and all the while their pussies were quaking and quivering with fiery arousal. Filled with delicious uncertainty, Kerana clutched Loura's soft, sensual body to her, loving its warmth and its stimulating shivers when the switch smacked the little slave's buttocks and her cry vibrated through her chest and into Kerana's own as Loura bucked against her. The tension was thrilling torment, and her sex ached and tingled from gripping tightly on the dildo inside her, rippling with pleasure each time the switch stung her. She was close to climax, and Loura's breathless moans and wriggles signalled she was too.

Then Macro stopped and both girls groaned their frustrated disappointment.

"Silence! Faces to the carpet! On your knees! Bottoms lifted!"

Disentangling themselves, they eagerly obeyed Macro's staccato commands in their burning need for fulfilment. Kerana laid her left cheek to the carpet, arching her back to raise her buttocks high. Loura was right next to her, eyes heavy-lidded with desire staring into her own.

"You... you don't mind, Kerana?" she whispered breathlessly. "He is your man."

Kerana smiled through her frantic arousal. "Never! Ooow!" The switch landed with a crack, making her bottom bounce as Macro gave her a harder stroke than before.

"No talking!" He smacked her again and she flinched at the fiery flare across her soft skin, then once more at the sound of another blow. But it was Loura who cried out as her buttocks were scorched. He gave them each six more, all harder than previously. Kerana looked over her shoulder and saw him towering over her, his fat, swollen cock-head dark purple and seeming to pulsate rhythmically. Her sex quivered and twitched and she longed for the arrogant, rearing shaft to fill her.

"On your back, Loura, knees up and wide."

Loura rolled over, grasping the backs of her knees to hold them as he had ordered. "Oh, I wish you would fuck me, Master," she groaned.

"And tear you open? No, Loura, it's this naughty girl who is going to pleasure you." Macro laughed, and Kerana turned her face to his. "And I who am going to pleasure her."

Blood singing through her veins and her lower belly a furnace of unassuaged desire, Kerana needed no instructions. She crawled to Loura who lay with the lower curve of her striped buttocks and glistening pussy all exposed, and slid her finger and thumb into the hot wetness to grip the dildo. Her cheek rested for a moment on the hot dampness of the slave girl's mound, and then without hesitation she clamped her mouth to the glowing point of Loura's clitoris and

began to suck. As the slave moaned her passion, Macro's hands seized Kerana's hips, raising her to her knees. She shuddered as he pulled her dildo free with wet, slippery noises, and then arched her back as the broad head of his cock pushed against her labia. The half-healed lips parted with aching delight and her sheath sparkled with exquisite pleasure as Macro's thick shaft thrust to the hilt.

It was hard to remember to keep the dildo moving in and out of Loura's pussy as the long, rippling strokes of the warrior's cock sent thrilling jolts through her tender sheath. But Kerana tried her best, determined the slave would have her full reward. Loura was whimpering and cooing, forcing her dripping sex hard against Kerana's mouth and trying to control her own frenzied squirming lest it tear her away from the outlaw girl's sucking and tonguing, nibbling and tugging at her hard bud. Macro's thrusting cock moved faster and faster within Kerana's sex and his belly slapped into her burning backside with every breath-taking lunge.

Loura came first with a half-strangled cry and a gush of ripe juices that flooded from her suddenly gaping pussy to soak Kerana's chin and hand. Kerana continued to suck on the little slave's clitoris, only half-aware of her wriggling in orgasm as Macro's pounding drove her with trembling fervour towards her peak. Then, the first juddering spasm gripped her and she tore her mouth free to cry joyously as wrenching, rippling ecstasy clamped her sheath tight around the hard, throbbing flesh filling it. The cock seemed to swell even more, intensifying the thrills coursing through her, and she ground her twitching labia against him and was rewarded with his hoarse, triumphant cry as his spunk spurted deep inside her. His weight came down hard as he spent and Kerana's knees gave way. She lay still, feeling the thumping of her heart and dragging great breaths into her heaving chest. Beneath her cheek, Loura's belly rose and fell rapidly as she continued to shiver in her final throes. Kerana sighed as Macro's cock slid from her and he took his weight off her weary body. She felt drained, yet glowing with fulfilment as she felt the warm, wonderful wetness between her thighs.

She would have continued lying there, basking in deep satisfaction, but Loura wriggled from under her and crawled to where Macro sprawled in his chair. With a start, Kerana realised she was not yet finished. She had to clean her Master's cock. Her belly knotted suddenly in frightening realisation. For the first time she had thought of Macro as her Master. As she moved on hands and knees towards him, she saw Loura purse her lips around the tip of his flagging cock and draw out the last of his spunk then pull back the flaccid skin and lick at the shiny fluids coating the shaft. Kerana knelt beside her, and Loura stopped and pointed the cock towards her. He's yours, she mouthed silently as Kerana rested against Macro's leg and took his penis in her hand. She leaned towards it then paused to look up into his face. His smile was full of warmth as he gazed at her and she felt a strange glow inside herself, not in her sex but within her chest.

"I will leave you now, Master," Loura said, and at Macro's nod she too gave Kerana a smile, scooped up her discarded dildos and disappeared into her private part of the tent.

Kerana swallowed nervously. She was alone with the warrior, but she had a task to perform. Tentatively, she leaned towards his cock and put out her tongue, licking the stickiness from its warm skin, then she drew back, feeling herself blush with a sudden self-consciousness she had not known when Loura was with her. She realised her confidence had left her at the same time as the little slave. The cock in her hand began to move as it stiffened, and she jumped as Macro reached down and stroked her hair.

"You are beautiful," he told her.

"I'm a little afraid," she confessed before she could stop herself. Never in her life had she felt so vulnerable.

Macro leaned forward, stroking her cheek, and she rubbed it against his palm. "You need never be afraid of me, sweet one," he said. "Not ever. I'll never betray you."

Kerana somehow knew she could always trust him, but something else troubled her. He seemed to accept her perverse nature but he had never actually told her so. "I... I know how I behave when you... you... beat me isn't natural but..."

"Whoever told you that?"

"No one but it just... isn't."

The warmth in his smile did not waver. "Don't ever think it, sweet one. It's part of who you are, a natural part of who you are. You can no more change it than you can the colour of your eyes. And believe me, I never want you to try."

"You mean it?" Joy and relief filled her. "Oh, I was so afraid it would disgust you."

He laughed with a pointed look at the straining erection she was holding in her hand. Her fingers seemed suddenly tiny. "Do I look disgusted, sweet one? Gods, you don't know half of how you make me feel!"

"Then you don't despise me?"

His expression softened further and Kerana saw a familiar smouldering intensity in his eyes. "Never, sweetheart. How could I when I -?"

"Riders!" Hordo appeared in the mouth of the tent, too alarmed to pay heed to their nakedness. "Road Guards!"

They heard the thud of hooves cease abruptly right outside, and a moment later a blue uniformed captain with a bandaged forearm strode into the tent. He looked around and fixed his eyes on Kerana. Too stunned to even let go of Macro's cock,

she just stared.

"It is you!" the Road Guard said.

Macro was stark naked, but it was not his clothes he reached for as the captain took a step towards Kerana. It was all he managed before Macro's sword was at his throat.

"What the hell are you doing?"

The captain backed up and Macro lowered his blade.

"Sir, I saw this slave in the city earlier. I wasn't sure then, but I am now. She's a notorious outlaw, wanted for countless attacks on the caravans and already condemned to death by the King's decree."

"What?" Macro looked down at Kerana, the eye the captain could see wide in surprise, the one he could not giving her a wink. "This is serious. I will have to look into it."

The captain stepped towards her and Macro's sword swung up. "Not now, captain."

"But I have to take her into custody," the captain protested.

"I said not now!" The edge in Macro's voice was unmistakable. "Look, I've had a long day on the road," he added more reasonably. "Time enough for this business when I've finished my supper and fucked my slaves."

Loura slipped from behind her curtain, nude, flushed and smelling of sex, and the captain eyed her, then Kerana, and then licked his lips.

"I paid over the odds for that one," Macro lied with a nod towards the outlaw girl. "If it's my last time using her I want to really enjoy it. Then, of course, she'll be all yours."

It was clear what the captain was thinking as he eyed Kerana's out-thrust breasts and bare, pouting sex. He gave in after Macro promised to summon him within the hour.

Hordo watched him after he left. "He's gone to the guard post."

Images of lingering death still filled Kerana's brain as she felt warm fingers on the back of her neck and her collar came free. Macro stood her up and turned her to face him. "I assume you can find your way in the mountains?"

She just stared, still dazed by the suddenness of it all.

"Kerana?"

It was the first time he had called her by name. And the last. He had lied to the captain and was breaking King Barca's laws by helping her.

"What about your warrior's honour?"

His big hands cupped her face and he kissed her gently. "Some things are more important."

Loura handed her a thick cloak and Macro added a pouch of coins and the dagger from his sword-belt.

Kerana looked at the warrior and the slave girl. "I..."

"No time," Macro said, pushing her through the tent flap. "Good luck, sweet one."

She looked back, but he had closed it to block the lamplight. Hordo walked her to the corner of the tent, shielding her with his body until she slipped into its shadow.

"Give my love to the girls," she said quietly. "Be good to Nita." She slid into the darkness, making for the high ground. She was free. There was no elation, only hollowness and the feeling she had lost something far more precious than her liberty. Her nipples stiffened in the cold and a shiver ran over her skin as she angled up towards a gully that would take her to her hideout. The moon had not yet risen. It would be hard going among the rocks in pitch darkness. Kerana sank to one knee to wait for her eyes to adjust. She sensed a movement behind and looked back, and from in front came blinding pain then all-engulfing blackness.

Chapter 16

Kerana jerked into sudden, gasping wakefulness. Cold water filled her nose and mouth and was running in icy rivulets across her nude body. She blinked the water from her eyes, and her blurred view of the torch-lit figures above her sharpened. Stark fear clenched in her gut as she stared up at the faces of Kirkit and Durkan. They were almost identical – hard, evil, ominous.

"Whoresons!" Kerana snarled to fight her rush of fear. "Carrion!" She strained against the hands gripping her arms and legs and holding her against the cold ground, but the weight of the men she had once thought her loyal followers was too great to overcome.

"Shut your mouth, slave-bitch." Kirkit's switch lashed across her breasts and she cried out.

Durkan knelt beside her. "Surprised, Kerana? I'll admit I didn't think we'd meet again either." His eyes dropped from hers to watch the rise and fall of her breasts as she sucked in deep, ragged breaths. Her heart thumped. "I searched your hut more thoroughly after I sold you," he said, meeting her eyes again. "I didn't find what I expected." He bared his teeth. "But I did find this." He held up her ebony dildo. For all her mounting fear, heat flushed Kerana's cheeks at the coarse, humiliating laughter of her erstwhile followers. "Is this how you amused yourself on all those long, cold nights?" Durkan asked, spreading his hands to encompass the men crowding around him. "With all these cocks you could have had, you chose this one? No wonder we all thought you preferred women."

There was more laughter, and the image of Loura flicked through Kerana's mind as it cowered in further humiliation at Durkan's words. He smiled without warmth or humour. "Since you obviously like having it in you, let's put it in now, eh?" His hand dived between her parted thighs and with a grunt of outrage Kerana heaved in her captors grips, but Durkan's fingers easily entered her slick sheath. His smile broadened to an evil grin. "Why, she's full of spunk. Your master's been fucking you, hasn't he, slave?" He pulled out and held his fingers up to the torchlight so everyone could see the wet stickiness shining on them, then gripped her jaw with his other hand and wiped the mingled juices on her mouth. "You like his taste, Kerana? Swallow it then."

Kerana clenched her teeth but could not stop his grubby fingers smearing the stale secretions inside her lips. She watched in trepidation as he picked up the dildo.

"No point filling your cunt with this. It's so greasy it would just slide out again. We better find another place." Kerana's belly shrank. "What about her arse, lads? It won't be the first time Kerana's had something up there, will it Kirkit?"

The slave guard locked his cruel eyes on hers and Kerana quailed before his hate-filled glare.

"Aye, but she deserves a flogging first." He flexed the switch between his hands. "To teach her her proper place."

"Oh, don't worry," Durkan said. "She'll be begging to suck all of our cocks long before I'm done with her. But there's no reason you shouldn't warm her up a little now."

"Bastards!" Kerana cursed them all as Kirkit gave instructions to the men holding her. Those grasping her ankles and calves stood, holding her legs up at an angle while her shoulders remained pinned to the ground.

"Spread her more," Kirkit said, planting his feet either side of her breasts with his heels in her armpits.

"Let's fill her arse first," Durkan said, kneeling facing her raised backside. He laughed. "Well, well, you've had another switching, Kerana. Just before the fucking by the look of it. Two weeks as a slave girl and it appears you still haven't learned how to be obedient." He slapped her hard on both buttocks, stirring the smarting glow of Macro's switching and the deeper ache from her earlier punishment. Then, grinning wickedly he wagged the dildo before Kerana's eyes. "Now, take a deep breath."

She shuddered and looked away, seeing nothing but lustful eagerness on the faces surrounding her. The dildo was eight inches long and nearly as thick as her wrist. She thrashed uselessly as Durkan spread her buttocks, catching her breath as the smooth, hard ebony pushed against her sphincter. For a long, panicky moment it was the bumming all over again but she fought the terror down. The juices from her lovemaking leaking from her sex had seeped into her crease and lubricated her anal knot, and with an effort of will she forced it to relax. The awful feeling of unnatural fullness as she was penetrated tightened it again, but Kerana suppressed the reflex to resist and there was no agony of pressure or cruel tearing as Durkan thrust the thick wood deep into her tender rectum. Breathing hard, Kerana felt her anal muscle close as the ebony completely filled her and the sensitive membranes within clasp tight around it. Looking down, she thought she could see its tip forcing her belly outwards.

Fear, anger and utter degradation almost overwhelmed her as jeers and laughter filled her ears, but among it all she felt one tiny comfort. For one terrible moment, she had been afraid her rough handling would arouse her, and it had not happened. Her relief was short-lived. She saw Kirkit raise his switch, gasped as it slashed down, and screamed long and loud. She could scarcely believe a single stroke could cause such agony as the springy wood scored a line of blazing fire across the soft skin on the inside of her left thigh. The same incredible pain scorched her again, and she screamed and kept on screaming as, with his usual slow deliberateness the guard laid ten savage strokes on the insides of both of her thighs, working ever closer to where they joined. She almost lost her senses in the extremity of her pain. But it took the last blow to make her do that. She saw Kirkit's eyes flash with gloating cruelty as the switch rose, glowing orange in the torchlight as it poised to strike, and knew with horrible, terror-stricken certainty where it would land. It flashed down. Kerana tensed, gut contracting hard around the dildo deep in her anus. Agony erupted between her legs as the switch cracked onto her defenceless sex, searing deep into the soft, ever so sensitive flesh of her hood and the tender petals of her inner labia. If she screamed she never heard it, for consciousness deserted her.

She awoke as another bucketful of water doused her, to find she was upright and tied by her wrists and ankles to something, with her arms outstretched. She took the weight from her aching shoulders, shuddering at the pain burning her inner

thighs and the awful throbbing between her legs, and raised her head. A streak of fire blazed across her belly just below her navel as Durkan lashed out with the cane in his hand. Kerana cried out in pain, sucked in a deep breath and looked around. She was at her hideout, a deep hollow surrounded by jagged hills high enough to conceal the glow of firelight at night, near the pool that made it the ideal place for an outlaw camp. Behind her former lieutenant and Kirkit, her erstwhile followers crowded, holding torches aloft. By their light, she could see they had tied her to a rough plank cross. The balls of her feet just reached the ground and the rope biting into her waist gave her no chance of avoiding another blow if Durkan chose to deliver one. He did, striking savagely. Kerana screamed, squirming as fiery agony tore across the fronts of both thighs inches from her bare sex.

Durkan stepped close, pressing the end of his cane to her cheek to turn her face towards his. The cane was hard rattan, inlaid with brass rings at intervals along its length and with a four-inch brass cap at its tip. And, gods, how it hurt! She lifted her eyes to his, trying to glare defiance, but her fear was growing with every rapid heartbeat as she grasped the extreme danger of her situation. It was she who blinked first.

Durkan grinned. "Now we're clear who's in charge, I expect you're wondering why my new friend went to all the trouble of bringing you here."

"He didn't do nothing." Murgiz the beggar-spy pushed forward from the crowd. "She was already running for it when we spotted her. It was me felled her with my staff."

Kirkit silenced him with his fist. "I'm not your friend," he told Durkan. "I helped you for the money." He nodded towards Kerana. "And the bitch."

"And you'll have both," Durkan assured him, "as soon as I finish my business with our slave girl."

Kerana quailed. He was going to give her to Kirkit. Her mind revolted at the thought of falling into his merciless hands. And first she would have to endure Durkan's cruelty. She did not need to be told why she was there. There could be only one reason and it terrified her. Her eyes darted from one to the other, seeing only evil in them both.

The cane's tip slid down her cheek and came to rest above her left nipple. Durkan pushed, indenting the jutting flesh of her breast. "Do you know how disappointing it was when I realised I hadn't found all that loot you've hoarded over the years?" He swapped the cane to his left hand and flicked her stiff nipple with his right forefinger. "Pretty." His hawk-face split into a grin and he closed his thumb and finger over the hard cone, squeezing tighter and tighter until Kerana could no longer hold back her cry of pain. Then he seized the right nipple in the same crushing grip, holding it long after she began crying out and heaving against

her ropes. Her vision blurred again with tears of pain, but she did not want to see the pleasure she knew was on his face as he enjoyed hurting her.

"It must have been galling for you these last days," he said, feigning sympathy. "Kerana the slave, in chains with a collar round her neck, taking orders instead of giving them. Quite a come-down, especially for a haughty, little bitch like you." The cane lashed her thighs again. Taken by surprise, she screamed. He laughed. "Too high and mighty for the likes of me, eh? Never thought of me as anything but the one to dish out your orders to everybody else."

Kerana's revulsion at the knowledge he had secretly wanted her was banished from her mind as he slashed the cane agonisingly across her belly.

"No, you've not done too well as a slave, have you? All those punishments I saw you taking for running – tit-whippings and arse-whippings." He laughed again and the watchers joined in. "And the bumming. I bet that really hurt your pride, didn't it. As well as your arse! And how you howled when they nailed your cunt to the barrel!"

Kerana was sure he had seen her suffering and humiliation. He would have been watching her from the moment he realised he still needed her. The laughter died, and Durkan's cane scored deep into her thighs again and she screamed high and shrilly, the sound echoing around the hollow. But it would not reach beyond, Kerana knew, and even if it could there was no one close enough to hear.

"And no clothes for slave girls," Durkan continued, closing in again. She eyed his fingers warily as they caressed her hard nipples. "Chilly up here without them, isn't it? But I'll give you something to wear." He pulled two brass rings from his belt. Kerana swallowed nervously and watched without comprehending. The rings were big enough for Durkan to get both forefingers through and pull their closed ends apart. He slipped one over each of his thumbs and knelt in front of her.

"Give a hand here." Several men rushed forward and he directed the first two to pull Kerana's knees apart. She fought, thrashing in her bindings, scraping her bruised buttocks against the plank at her back in her vain struggles. The rope around her ankles seemed to give a little as her knees bent, parting her thighs and lifting her feet from the ground. She groaned as she hung with all her weight dragging at her arms and shoulders, and the dildo twisted painfully inside her anus. "Hold her!" Durkan ordered. "More light."

Gods, they could not keep her like this! It was like being crucified. Images of the nailed woman twisting on the cross filled her mind and her panic swelled. Her own scream shrilling in her ears dragged her back from the edge, though her heart hammered and her belly churned uncontrollably. Murgiz appeared, eagerly holding out his torch.

"Back fool! I don't want her branded yet." Durkan grabbed Murgiz' wrist. "Hold it here."

Kerana was panting from the strain on her shoulders and legs, and her belly, thighs and sex were all throbbing from the strokes of cane and switch. The flickering torchlight made her sweat-sheened body shine, as she looked, still uncomprehending, down at Durkan. Her thigh jerked as his hand slid up it towards her sex.

"Noooo!" Sudden realisation struck and she tried uselessly to twist away as he pinched hard on one of her sex lips, stretching it down and forward into the light. It stung terribly when he forced the end of one of the rings into the half-healed nail hole, and she felt her tender flesh bulging under the pressure then screamed at the stab of blinding agony as the wound tore and the ring burst through. Durkan nipped the ends tight together and seized the other one. There was the same cruel pinching, the awful pressure as her half-raw flesh resisted the blunt end of the ring, and the same stabbing torment as it suddenly gave way. Kerana screamed again, thrashing so hard she forced half the length of the dildo from her spasming gut as it wrenched in horror at what Durkan had done. Cursing her, he jammed it painfully back in. She stared her hatred as he stood up. Her knees were released and her bound feet dropped to the ground. Her sex was on fire but she groaned in relief as the strain on her shoulders eased.

"That's a start," Durkan said. "We can always add some more. Here, perhaps." He tugged on the freshly bruised hood of her clitoris and the flash of pain made her jerk her head up. She looked with new fright into his pitiless eyes. "Unless you want to answer the question now?" He stepped back, toying with the cane. And toying with her too, Kerana knew. "Did you know I was a torturer for King Barca?" He smiled humourlessly. "No, I wasn't fool enough to tell you. I left in a hurry when he discovered I had been doing some private work on some of his female prisoners, but I had learned a lot by then. I know just how to hurt a woman without doing any lasting damage. I could torture you every day for a month and you'd be no nearer death than the day I started." The tip of the cane flashed in the torchlight a heartbeat before it bit upwards into the point of Kerana's left breast. Shock and pain forced a scream from her lips. "But you would know pain beyond your worst imaginings. You understand? I have as long as it takes to get what I want!"

Kerana's teeth were clenched hard against her agony. The last blow was not his hardest, but her breasts were still tender from their share of punishment for her last escape and her nipples throbbed from Durkan's hard crushing. She sensed him close and felt his breath on her cheek. He spoke softly and insistently. "I want the loot Kerana. I'll do whatever it takes to get it. I won't promise you your life. The slaver gets you when I'm done. All I'm offering you is a chance to spare yourself an awful lot of pain." His eyes gleamed in anticipation.

"Fuck you!" Agony came, as Kerana had known it must, flaring across her thighs

again, making her writhe in her ropes and she felt those at her ankles give a little more.

"Bitch," Durkan hissed.

Kirkit's hand on his shoulder stopped him striking her again. "We should get going," the slaver said. "This can wait. There are sixty prime slaves camped at the river. And a bastard I'm going to kill."

Kerana felt as if Durkan's cane had struck her belly again. They were going to attack the slave-train! The nature of her fear changed even as it intensified. Macro would kill Kirkit easily in a stand-up fight, but in a surprise attack at night with all the confusion it created, all it would take was one blow from behind. And the coffle-girls would fall into Durkan's hands. Without Kerana to restrain them, the outlaws would rape them at the very least before selling them to unscrupulous dealers.

"We need the moon," Durkan said. "Be patient. There's time yet."

Kirkit glared at Kerana as though she and not the darkness was to blame for delaying his revenge. Durkan ran his eyes over her nakedness, focused on the taut, pointed swells of her breasts then met her gaze and smiled wickedly.

"I didn't find the plunder and I've already let you have your toy back. But I'll show you what else I did find." He disappeared into the shadows, returning with an ornate box Kerana recognised immediately. She had seen it last in the chest buried in the floor of her hut, where she hid her share of plunder before transferring it to her main hoard. Durkan must have been in her hut and found it, only discovering it was not the main hoard after he sold her and felt safe enough to do a thorough search. Despite her pain, she felt some satisfaction at having upset his plan. For one fleeting moment.

Durkan set the box down beside Kerana's feet and opened it. "Two paltry bags of coin. That's all I found. And these." He held up one of the enamel-headed cloak-pins that had so much attracted her when she had found them in a merchant's wagon. It was less attractive now. Eight inches of thin, sharp-tipped steel glinted in the flames from the torches. Kerana sucked in a breath. Abruptly, Durkan jabbed the cloak-pin into her plump mound. She made a guttural noise and writhed, feeling her ankle ropes loosen. He pressed the pin flat against her skin and pushed its length through the flesh above her sex until the point reappeared.

His mouth brushed her ear. "You've caused me a lot of embarrassment," he whispered, "and cost me half the men in desertions when I couldn't pay what I promised." He took another pin and thrust it through her mound on the opposite diagonal to the first, the point almost piercing her thigh as it emerged. Kerana writhed again in shocking pain and the rope yielded more. "Anything to tell me?"

She shook her head.

"Well, there's ten more." He closed his hand around another and pinched her right nipple, pulling her heavy breast up until Kerana felt the skin beneath it stretch painfully. The back of his hand rested against her ribs below her breast, the slim steel pointing menacingly upwards. Kerana tensed.

Then Durkan let go.

Chapter 17

Kerana's breast dropped and its own weight plunged the needle-sharp point through her tender flesh. It was fire and ice. Lights flashed inside her head and then an image of the girl on the impaling pole as her head snapped back and the point thrust from her open mouth. Then her own mouth opened and she screamed hoarsely. Her throat was dry from her earlier cries but Durkan forced the sound from her again as he pulled down on her nipple and worked the steel shaft deep into her breast. She watched in horror as the skin on its upper swell bulged upwards into a cone until the cruel point overcame its resilience and erupted from her flesh. Blood seeped from around it, mingling with the sweat trickling towards her throbbing nipple.

"We've just begun, Kerana. How much do you think you can take?" Coldly deliberate, Durkan meted out the same torment to her left breast, eyes glowing in the torchlight, enjoying every grimace, gasp and cry she made. She heard him laughing evilly as she thrashed in her bonds while he forced more of the long pins with agonising slowness up through the base of each of her nipples. And she hung on. For the moon would rise soon and he would leave to attack the slave-train. And each time she squirmed the ankle rope loosened. She clung to that glimmer of hope while pain seared deep into her breasts as Durkan mercilessly thrust more cloak-pins into each in turn. "Last two," she heard him say. "But we can always pull them out and start again."

And he would, she knew with certainty. The anguished rise and fall of her chest intensified the pain in her impaled globes as she watched with fearful fascination Durkan coming closer. The wicked points in his hands gleamed redly in the light of the flaring torches. She braced herself for more pain, and suddenly the steel was glinting silver and ghostly grey light and black shadows filled the hollow. A three-quarter moon was rising above the hilltops.

"Now can we go?" Kirkit demanded.

"Aye, now's the time. To horse." Durkan turned back to Kerana, raised his hands and simultaneously stabbed the last two cloak-pins through the outer swells of

both her breasts. He waited for her scream to dwindle and lifted her sagging chin. "I'll return soon and we'll continue. Think hard about that while you wait, slave girl." His hands closed around the pins in her mound, twisting them agonisingly within the flesh. It felt as if her scream was trapped in her throat, but Durkan forced it out with a last scorching cane-stroke to her thighs and stalked away.

Kirkit rode up to her, leaned down from his saddle and thrust his face into hers. "You made a fool of me, bitch. You've unmanned me. But I'll get it up again when your arse is wriggling under me. I'll fuck you until you can't walk, then drag you to Azdagul and claim the reward. Look for me at the front of the crowd when they kill you. I'll be there right up to your last breath."

* * *

Her whole body was pulsing with pain but Kerana kept still, feigning unconsciousness and watching through slitted eyes. The outlaws had gone. Only Murgiz remained. Her wrists were still tied to the cross but the ankle rope was a loose coil lying on her feet. Ten paces away Murgiz stared at her as though entranced by the moonlight bathing her nudity in blue and silver. Moaning, she wriggled her hips, ignoring the pain as her breasts shook. His hand began rubbing his crotch as he came closer, enticed by another wiggle that set her breasts swaying and thrust her sex towards him. He stepped forward.

"Murgiz." The whites of his eyes showed as Kerana slipped her foot from under the rope. The pain did not slow her as her foot shot out, hooked behind his head and jerked him between her uplifted thighs, setting sparks of agony flashing in her head. She crossed her knees behind his neck and he made strangled noises as the points piercing her mound pricked his cheeks.

"This is the only time you'll ever be between my legs," she rasped, "and the last time you're between anyone's unless you untie me." Kerana waited until both wrists were free before she relaxed her grip and slammed her fist in his face to send him sprawling. "Run!"

He fled in the direction of the outlaws, but he would not catch them up. That was her task. And more, for she must outdistance them. She squatted to force the dildo out of her anus, and common sense dictated she must take the time to drink and pull out the cloak-pins she had once thought so pretty. Blood oozed from her wounds but not enough to kill her. What she was about to do might, one way or another. Her belly lurched with fear, whether for herself or those camped unsuspecting by the river, she was not sure. At the back of her mind was the knowledge she was free. Her plunder awaited her. All she had to do was collect it and disappear. The Road Guards would never find her. But it was not important. Everything that mattered lay beside the river. She climbed the hill and looked at its gleaming ribbon in the distance. Durkan and his horsemen must follow the twists and turns of the gullies to get there. To beat them she would have to go over the hills themselves, risking everything in a race she had to win. Lives depended

on it!

She took a deep breath and began to run – down the first hill in a scatter of stones, up the goat-path on the next, avoiding the sheer drop at the top, up and down into bright moonlight and black shadows. She forced the pain in her sex and belly and thighs and wildly bouncing breasts from her mind, raking her memory for every scrap of knowledge that would speed her progress. Once, she stopped to listen as she heard a faint noise, but there was only the sound of her panting. Only when she set off again did she realise it was the brass rings in her sex lips clinking together as she ran. There was no time to take them out.

With her throat burning and legs on fire, she at last felt the ground beneath her feet change from bare rock to dry earth and then to the springy turf of the slope above the river. She did not stop, just angled down towards the lights of the camp, crossing the mouth of the gully from which a horde of ravening outlaws might emerge at any moment. Shouldering Hordo aside, Kerana staggered into Macro's tent and sagged to her knees.

The raised voices she had heard fell silent. Macro and the Road Guard captain were both staring in shock. Then Macro whipped the captain's sword from its sheath and pressed the point to the man's chest. "For heavens sake Kerana, what are you doing here?" he demanded.

Panting hard, she shook her head, but Loura gave her wine and she gulped it between heaving breaths. "Outlaws," she gasped, "Durkan... Kirkit... The Dove's band... coming here."

Macro was pulling on his mail after the first word. "Rouse the men, Hordo." He held out the sword to the captain. "You heard. Are you with us?"

"I'll fetch my men," he replied with the briefest of glances at Kerana.

She rose unsteadily, but more wine and knowing she had made it in time gave her renewed energy.

"Can you...?" Macro faltered as he saw her fresh wounds. She saw anger in his face and something else she could not name as he pulled her gently to him and pressed his lips to her forehead. His strength seemed to flow into her, easing her pain and weariness. Abruptly he released her. "Can you tell me where they'll come from?"

Better than that," she said, "'I can show you where to stop them."

* * *

Only when her hand strayed to where her sword should be did Kerana realise she was naked and unarmed with a fight about to begin. It was too late to do anything

about it. Slow hoofbeats were coming closer. She looked down the, moonlit slope where the gully widened as it neared its end and saw Durkan and Kirkit leading the outlaws into the ambush. A rock clattered down towards them.

"Now," Macro called. Figures rose and bowstrings twanged, and the outlaws dissolved into confusion and cowardice as arrows flew among them. Durkan kicked his horse into a gallop, and Kerana saw Kirkit follow him towards the mouth of the gully. Instead of holding the gap as Macro had ordered, the half dozen Road Guards there rushed to meet them and were knocked aside by the charging horses. Kerana leapt up. Her two arch-enemies were getting away!

She ran down the slope, scooping up a fallen sword, grabbed the nearest loose horse and set off after them. The saddle against her swollen sex was sheer torture and, as her horse's gallop reawakened all her hurts, she heard Macro calling her name. Kerana rose in the stirrups, gritted her teeth and rode on. Emerging from the gully, she saw her foes had disappeared. With a hue and cry out for him Durkan would not risk the roads. He would head back to the hideout, grab what he could and push deeper into the mountains. And, Kirkit had no choice now but to follow him.

Kerana approached the mouth of a ravine and listened. The sound of hooves echoed back along its walls. She followed the sound along the different route that would eventually take them all back to the hideout. She could hear another rider behind, looked back and saw Macro. She did not wait. She had promised herself revenge from the first, on Durkan and on Kirkit. It was almost in her grasp.

Dawn was breaking when she reached the outlaw camp. She had not expected to catch them sooner, for the rough track in the gully and her pain made for slow going, but they would stop at the camp, unaware of her pursuit, to gather food and water and whatever loot was at hand. They must be congratulating themselves on their getaway. Kerana tested the weight of the sword in her hand and felt a spurt of fierce satisfaction. She was going to disappoint them.

They saw her as she rode into the hollow, just as she saw them – Kirkit on foot beside his horse and Durkan in the act of dismounting. He slammed back into the saddle and kicked his horse into a gallop towards her. She bared her teeth in answer to his snarl as they rushed headlong at each other. Sparks flew as their swords clashed, then she was past and another clash of steel behind told her Macro was guarding her back.

Kerana careered onwards, slamming her horse into Kirkit's, throwing the slaver backwards as he tried to remount. She slid from the saddle, and he leapt to his feet with a roar and saliva spraying from his mouth as he charged. Kerana took three fingers off his right hand as she disarmed him and flicked his fallen blade away. He stared in horrified disbelief at his mutilated hand then pulled out his dagger with the other one. Her sword dashed it aside, taking his thumb with it. Kirkit howled in pain and tears of frustration ran down his cheeks. Kerana smiled coldly

at him, knowing he was burning with humiliation at how easily she had bested him.

But he was burning with hatred too and it blinded him to her sword as he rushed at her bare-handed. She sprang back, swinging her leg up with all her force and kicked hard into his balls. His bellow of agony echoed around the hollow and he collapsed, writhing and clutching his mangled hands to his groin. Kerana's hand tightened on the sword hilt. She could kill him, carve him slowly to pieces for every blow and rape and humiliation he had made her suffer. But her killing days were over.

She went to the pool and scooped a handful of water to her lips. Footfalls behind made her turn but she lowered her blade as Macro approached. Beyond him, Durkan lay in the dust.

"Dead?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Flat of the blade, not the edge. The Road Guards can have him."

"That one too" she said, pointing to where Kirkit lay groaning.

"And here they come," Macro said at the sound of approaching hooves. "Go, Kerana. I'll slow them down."

"No need," she said and slid silently beneath the waters of the pool. She swam to the overhang of rock on its far side, surfaced in the narrow gap beneath and pulled herself onto the hidden ledge that lay just above the water level. Then she settled down to wait.

Chapter 18

She must have fallen asleep. The sun reflecting brightly through the water told her hours had passed. Kerana stretched to ease her aches and stiffness, all too familiar since she had been made a slave. But she had experienced more than pain and humiliation during her slavery, things she would never have known in her old life – friendship, loyalty that did not come at the point of a sword, the warm satisfaction of being in the company of someone she could truly trust. And pleasure – not just sexual, though that had been a revelation – but in knowing there were people who were willing to make sacrifices for her because they cared. And first among them was Macro, as proud as she, who had willingly turned his back on his honour for her sake and stood ready to risk his life to save her from the Road Guards.

Kerana slipped from her hiding place, surfaced and heard only the gentle lap of water. She rose from the pool and dropped to a crouch at its edge.

"I ought to take a switch to that lovely round backside!"

She spun, heart leaping at the sound of Macro's voice.

"It's safe," he said, walking around the pool towards her. "The Road Guards took their prisoners back to Azdagul, including Durkan and Kirkit. They'll die with the rest."

She was avenged, Kerana thought. Watching Macro come closer, she felt sudden uncertainty and her stomach fluttered. "I'm glad you stayed," she said. "It saves me having to look for you."

His eyebrows rose questioningly, but he looked disappointed when she ignored the hand he held out.

"I want you to do something for me," Kerana said. "Buy all the slaves, free them and send them safely home."

Macro frowned. "And how do you expect me to do that?"

She slid back beneath the water, swam to the ledge and dragged the first small chest from its hiding place and up to the edge of the pool. Macro's frown deepened as the chest thumped onto the ground and Kerana rose to face him.

"How much?" he asked.

"Ten thousand in that one. There are six more."

"It should go back to its rightful owners."

Kerana laughed. "Try and find them. King Barca will have you in his dungeons and the gold in his coffers the moment he hears of it." She met his eye. "Or you could just free the slaves. And feed your own people come winter."

He smiled thinly. "Very well. The guards and the slave dealer won't complain so long as they get their money. But the girls have seen Loura. Some may prefer slavery."

"Then find them good masters among your friends."

"I could, I suppose. Or I might keep them for myself."

She felt a pang of jealousy until she saw his smile.

"Kerana, you're a warrior as much as I am. Do you really think, knowing you, I would ever want anyone else?" He reached for her and his hands caressed her shoulders, but she just stared, bewildered. "Is it so hard to accept, sweet one?"

Her slavery? No, suddenly not difficult at all. The fluttering was gone from her belly, replaced by the warm glow of certainty. Macro pulled her closer, the feel of his strong arms around her sending ripples down her spine.

"Can't you see that you love me?"

Suddenly she could. The heart beating joyously inside her had known it long before her head.

"I won't always be obedient," she warned as her arms went around him and she pressed her aching nipples against his chest. His laughter set her belly fluttering again, in anticipation this time as tingling heat sparkled between her thighs.

"I should hope not. But I will switch you soundly for it. Naughty slave girls deserve to be punished."

"Quite right," she agreed, and a delicious quiver ran through her sex. "Perhaps you should start now."

He smiled. "Maybe I will." His lips brushed hers and his hand smoothed tantalisingly over her bottom, fuelling the desire within her.

And there was joy within her too as she spoke the words. "I love you."

"And I want you, sweet one, always with me. Always at my side. You love me and I love you. Always remember that."

Kerana the outlaw, Kerana the outcast were no more. Kerana the slave girl knew where she belonged. She looked into her lover's eyes and smiled.

"Yes, Master."

The End