



Luccela

By D. H. Huck

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Chapter 1

Valera hated being tied up. Jask knew how to make her hate it even more. That's why it'd been his job to truss her to the post, and his work was masterful.

Her arms were sore, and every time she struggled the movement pulled one bit of rope or another tighter, hurting her more until she stopped. She never stopped for long, just like the bastard knew she wouldn't. Her gag wasn't very effective at keeping her quiet- there was no packing behind the cloth that was rolled up and jammed between her teeth- but it was just tight enough that her attempts to force it out met with failure. Meanwhile, it was soaked with saliva, and it disgusted Valera to feel it wetting the side of her face as it moved. Even worse, when some of it flowed out the corner of her mouth, running down her chin. Her tunic was damp with sweat, despite it not being very hot outside. Her tights were moist as well, both from perspiration and the occasional drip from her chin.

She was kneeling, her legs tied to keep her that way. Valera never knelt to anyone. Servants knelt to masters. Court suck-ups knelt to kings. She had no master, and if she was ever in a court she'd be on her way to be hanged. Her head was bowed- forced that way by the position her arms were tied in. Craning her neck up hurt, but when a familiar set of footsteps stopped in front of her, she did her best to meet the eyes that looked down on her.

"That's been four hours. I can make it another four, or I can sit down and you can start talking sense."

Valera grunted.

Coddis Wood-Eye pulled up a chair. He took his time, playing up his age as he dragged it over, sat down, sighed, and pulled the gag out of her mouth. A silence elapsed, Valera in no hurry to speak to him.

"What should I be hearing right now?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," she replied, an answer to his question more than a statement of her feelings.

"Then why am I not hearing it?"

"I'm sorry, boss," she answered, trying to sound more sincere. Coddis

wasn't visibly impressed.

"You remember what we did to Woddie Dungheap? Five months ago?"

"I heard Breg say somethin' about it," she admitted.

"Did you hear that we tied his feet to a rock and dumped him in the river? Maybe that rumor was going around?"

Valera broke her gaze, looking down. The ropes suddenly seemed even more severe, and without even thinking she resisted, keeping it up even when it immediately turned painful. She let it hurt her, giving up only when she ran out of strength without finding a weakness in her bindings.

"I can tell you who heard those rumors. Blumoor's gang. Poor stupid Woddie's pals. And none of them had anything to say about it. They didn't have anything to say because the guy Woddie stuck his knife in was on Boggar Street. They told him not to leave any bodies on their streets so he went and left one on ours. Nothing else we could have done. They knew it. Maybe Blumoor considered we did him a favor, but Woddie's own slobbs probably wish they could get some payback."

"So imagine what's going to run through their filthy little heads if they hear that you've been lifting purses at the east gate. Woddie's going to look like he got a good deal after they're through with you, and they'd be cock-all I could do about it."

"Nothing says I can't be at the east gate," said Valera. "It's a pass-through. Even if they spot me there they can't prove I've been working unless I get caught, and you know I don't get caught."

"What are you doing here then? Running your mouth about it as soon as you get back to spend the money on wine? That's a fine way to get caught."

"Nobody here is going to tell Blumoor more than to go fuck himself."

"I hope not. But I wouldn't risk my life on it for nothing in return. Besides, what do you think they'd do? Go to the magistrate and report you? They don't need proof. All they need is to know you were there and that some money went missing. That's about as much as we had on Woddie."

"Part of me is mad because I spent too much time raising you to see you die before you hit twenty because of some stupid, pointless bullshit. Another part of me is mad because I spent too much time raising you to deserve you breaking my rules and never listening to me. The rest of me is mad because I

spent too much time raising you for you to turn out stupid."

Valera was quiet. Coddis had been good to her. She just wished he knew when to let go. Everyone broke the rules. Everyone knew everyone was breaking the rules. The only real rule was never to do anything you couldn't get away with. Valera always got away with it- until Coddis found out.

"I had a lot of buddies when I was your age. Some of them were better than you. Didn't keep them out of a noose. Maybe you'd like to try one out? See how it feels before you get one fitted for the rest of your life?"

"I won't get-"

"Don't tell me that. If anyone thought they were about to do something that was going to get them hanged they wouldn't do it. Tell me you'll follow the damn rules, or I'll throw you in the cell downstairs until I see a gray hair pop up."

Valera made him a promise. Neither of them believed it.

Dannis pulled on his reigns, halting his steed in front of an unmarked building. The cobblestone street was busy with commoners, but they made way for him as he dismounted and approached the porch, the sword at his hip and the quality of his clothing warning them of his status. The building could have easily been mistaken for a private residence, but Dannis was well acquainted with the business going on inside.

He tied his horse to a post out front, trusting the man sitting on the porch to watch it. The man was paid well to keep trouble away, whether from thieves or from jealous wives. Dannis made his entrance proudly, his reputation already well set in the city of Yorshir. Inside was a parlor, dimly lit by candles and oil lamps for want of sunlight. The windows here were well shuttered to keep out peeping eyes. Women, provocatively dressed, poured their charms onto the clientele. Some of the women were there by choice. Some weren't.

"Neckler! Where are you? I hear you've got a special waiting for me."

A burly man with a shaved head and voluminous mustache appeared from some corner, arms open in welcome.

"Dannis! The hound! I've got a choice lass in, just picked her up this morning. Her uncle sold her to me to pay off a gambling debt. She's a virgin,

just as you like 'em, and I've got her ready for you downstairs."

Dannis tossed him a pouch that was heavy with silver coins.

"Gambling debt, huh? I've just settled one of those myself. That idiot Brier tried weaseling out of a bet he'd lost fair and square. I had to go find him at that operus lounge near the square and put some boot marks on his hide."

It wasn't a large sum, at least not by his standards; it was about enough to pay for the chance to give one of Necker's new girls her first fuck. The important thing was that Dannis had too much pride to let being cheated go by without answer.

"Her name's Dess," said Necker, bowing theatrically. "Room six. Enjoy yourself, young master."

Dannis knew his way. He followed a set of stairs down to the lower level, where the girls who still might try to escape were kept. It wasn't exactly legal, but Neckler made sure to keep the right people happy, and as long as he made sure that the girls were just commoners and didn't have any family that would raise a stink he was left alone.

Dess was right where Neckler said. She was pretty. She had blond hair and light skin, looking the perfect innocent, lying naked and tied up on the bed. She was on her stomach, hogtied, and when she saw him she started squirming nervously.

"Who... who are you?"

"Name's Dannis. I just bought you for the next hour."

She didn't seem to appreciate his candor very much, judging by her face.

"Listen, please. I'm not supposed to be here. I'm not a whore. The man up there kidnapped me-"

"Heard all about it from him."

Dannis liked it when they still had it in them to resist. There just wasn't as much of a thrill with the ones who'd spent a few years on the job, even if they were more experienced and willing to pretend for him. The girl on the bed didn't think she was a whore. Dannis was about to prove her wrong.

"I paid him specifically to give that virgin cunt of yours its first fuck. And I'm going to make it a fantastic first fuck for you."

He sat down next to her and rolled her onto her side, exposing her tits and pussy to his groping hands. She begged him to stop when he put his

fingers inside her, playing around until he forced a reaction. He untied her enough to lay her out flat. After thoroughly warming her up Dannis put her face down on the bed while he raised her ass into the air. Her cunt was as tight as he'd hoped when he filled it with his dick. She didn't take it silently, but her moans and screams blended with others, mere parts of a symphony of the whorehouse.

He didn't get her off easily. Her gasping betrayed her, telling him exactly where she was sensitive, and Dannis worked her hard there. She tried to hide her orgasm from him, but without much success. Dannis taunted her, wanting to make sure she knew he enjoyed the victory over her.

Eventually he pulled out, leaving a sticky mess behind in her loins.

"You're going to do well here," he said. "A little bit of advice, though- hurry up and rest if you need to. Your second customer will probably be along within the hour."

Valera shoved Jask while his back was turned, a wooden cup held up to his lips.

"You ass," she said.

He stumbled and coughed, the ale spilling all over him.

"You enjoyed that."

"Hey, I was just doing when the boss told me to," he said once his mouth, throat, and lungs were cleared of liquid.

"Bullshit. You tied me up as tight as you could because you get off on it, you perverted shit."

"You were there, right next to me. 'Go put her on the post again' he said. 'Nice and tight. Make her hate you.' When the boss asks for something he wants quality work."

"Screw what he wants. You could have gone easy on me."

"That right there is a little taste of why you spent four hours tied to a wooden post in the courtyard while I spent it in here listening to Smokey's bad jokes. I do what the boss says. And yeah- I enjoyed the hell out of it. I'll even thank you in advance for whatever you do next to get yourself punished again. Maybe I'll strip you to your underclothes and stick an apple in your mouth."

Valera shoved him again, but this time he rolled with it like the

experienced scrapper that he was.

"I will kill you," she said.

Jask chuckled.

"Admit it- the boss has your number, and as long as you keep screwing around he's going to make your life miserable and mine sweet. But you know-

"Gross."

"I'm telling you-"

"You can not tell me, because it's gross."

"One time."

"No times. Ever."

"I give you my personal promise. You let me drag you upstairs and tie you to a bed for fun and I'll have you so wet that next you're up against the post you'll be begging me to let you suck my cock before I gag you."

Valera slapped the bottom of his cup, splashing ale all over the as yet dry parts of his face.

"I wouldn't suck your cock if you shot diamonds out of it."

"The fuck you wouldn't."

"Why? I could get rich raiding your bedsheets."

"You don't know anything about my bedsheets. You keep refusing to meet them."

"Guess what isn't changing tonight?"

Jask had been attracted to her since his balls had dropped. Valera was of medium height with a slender, agile figure. Her body had been toned by years of running, sneaking, and climbing around the city. Her bosom was large enough to make him drool over it, but it had never been the biggest on the block. That suited her; if she had melons like some of the whores that worked the corners around their hideout she'd have problems hauling them up the side of a building.

He'd always told her that she had a beautiful face, a deceptively delicate one with a warm complexion. It was framed by jet black hair than hung down past her shoulders. It was straight, mostly, but naturally full.

Jask finished off the little that was left in his cup.

"Not your attitude, from the way I'm hearing you," he said. This time, there wasn't much mirth in his voice.

"Not you, too."

"Me, too, and everyone else. You're good, Valera, maybe better than anyone else here, but then you just keep doing dumb stuff for no reason. Stuff you're too smart to be doing. It's like you've gotta do this shit just to let everyone know that you can get away with it, even though you never do. At least not with Coddis. And one day you won't get away with it at all. Believe it or not, I'd choose Coddis' advice getting into your head over my cock getting into your parts."

"You'll never have, or get, to make that choice."

"Then you make it. Listen to him this time."

"I came here to give you shit. Not the other way around. If you're not going to help me out when I'm in trouble at least get me a drink. I'm going to need a few to get to sleep tonight if your 'quality work' doesn't start wearing off."

Jask filled his cup and another for Valera.

"What did you need the loot for, anyway?" he asked. "We made enough on that cart robbery to eat for the week."

"Yeah, to eat bread and gruel. You know what I want for once? Some fresh meat and gravy. Maybe some grapes- like those rich assholes get to eat."

She took the cup from Jask and guzzled from it.

"Huh. I'd of spent it at the brothel. Haven't been there in a couple of months."

"Talk about throwing all your money down the drain..."

"Come on, Valera, all you ever do with your coin is eat and drink it up."

"Not like I ever have enough to do much else."

"I'm not sleeping in a bed of gold either."

Valera knew it was true. They weren't getting rich doing small-time jobs under Coddis. There were a lot of luxuries she wished she could have, from down mattresses to time in the Yorshir's exotic bathhouses, but she usually had to settle for a good meal here or there. Drink was welcome too, in quantity when quality was scarce.

Valera didn't need much to put her into a good stupor. When Jask refused to bring her another round she cursed his name, and refused in turn to leave the table. Night was long since set, the common room empty, and Jask tired

enough to leave her and seek his own bed. Her morning began when Breg found her still curled up on the table. He didn't bother trying to wake her before lifting one end, dumping her onto the floor.

The sun was setting again, sinking into the sea to the west. The cobblers, scribes, blacksmiths, and other craftsmen began closing their shops as Valera passed. She hurried along, the same as many other women rushing to get home. The night wasn't dangerous in this part of town, full of wealthy residents who saw to it that their streets were well-lit and well-patrolled. Valera wore a typical maid's dress, a black garment with white trimmings and a brown apron which lay across the front. It covered her from neck to toe, and with her hair bound up in a knot at the back of her head she looked like one of dozens of girls going to and from their menial jobs cleaning, cooking, or whatever else they did.

Valera resisted the urge to brush against some of the well-to-do men passing by, taking their coin with her in the process. She had a bigger score waiting for her tonight, and she didn't need the distraction. Coddis had a tip that some 'importer of fine goods' had just received a number of packages from an arriving ship. One of them was a box full of exotic gems. Valera guessed that one of his house staff would be getting a small cut once the loot sold. That wasn't her job, though. She just needed to get the box.

If she pulled it off, it would be a bigger take than she'd ever had before. Valera knew she was good enough to do it. She'd spent years training and practicing, waiting for the day it payed off for real. Maybe after tonight she'd know what it was like to have real money in her pocket for once.

Daylight turned into a dulling glow over the horizon and the street lamps, still being lit by the watchmen, were left as the primary source of light. In such patchy illumination Valera had no trouble finding a hole and vanishing from the street into an alley between estates. Her black dress came off, revealing a darkish gray set of tights matched with a thin tunic of the same color. A belt held the tunic in place, and on it were the tools she would need that night. It also held a dagger she hoped she wouldn't. She stashed her boots along with her dress, hiding them under a hedge. She worked better barefoot, the stockings only needed for concealment. She slipped on a cowl

and gloves, and in a moment she was over the wall into her target's estate.

It would be some hours before everyone inside went to bed, leaving only a couple of paid guards to watch the grounds. Hiding that long wouldn't be a problem. The guards were not professional soldiers, and did little but keep their eyes on obvious spaces when they weren't preoccupied entirely. The few servants who would remain to work the later hours were busy preparing supper. The merchant and his family trusted others to look after details like security.

Valera looked to the easements of the house. There was space to crawl into them, and places where they were completely outside the range of any lamp. She quickly climbed the outside of the house, as easily and quietly as a spider. Once in her chosen perch she listened, hearing voices creep out of open windows. Stay and observe, she was taught. Wait until all the bedroom lights are out. She held, still as stone, hearing nothing useful or interesting. Hours melted away as the house quieted down and all but one upstairs light disappeared. Good enough.

She eased down to a window, one that had been dark since she arrived, and with a bit of wire undid the latch. Inside was a furnished, but unused, bedroom. She glided across the floor and stopped at the closed door, listening for any activity in the hallway. When she was satisfied that all was still she let the door drift open. The hallway was almost pitch black; it was clear the guards didn't come up here during the night.

Now to find the box. A search of the empty upstairs rooms proved fruitless; Valera left the merchant's bedroom, from which snoring could be heard, and the room from which light still glowed under the doorway alone for now. The guards downstairs proved a nuisance, and it wasn't until they went to the kitchen to feed themselves that she was able to search properly. Even the office with its thick wooden desk proved barren. She would have to search the owner's bedroom.

The door was already ajar when she approached it. She eased it open a bit more, just enough to pass into the room. Inside there was a large trunk, padlocked shut, which presented itself as the most likely hiding place. She trusted her lockpicks more than a noisy keyring, and left the merchant's sitting on his nightstand. She had two scares- once when the lock clicked open, and

once when the lid creaked as she lifted it up. When the man's snoring went undisturbed she started searching the contents, quickly finding the box. She left it where it was, taking only the cloth bag inside.

Moments later, she had put everything back in place, even risking the padlock again. It was always best if they took as long as possible to find out they'd been robbed. She reentered the hallway, setting the door in its original position.

On her way back to her entry point she stopped at the lit room. All else being quiet, she listened, wondering what the occupant could be up to this late. When no answer presented itself, she peered through the keyhole. Another bedroom greeted her eye, this one featuring a female figure laying on a fancy mattress, her back turned.

The merchant had a daughter. A woman in a nice house meant jewelry. Valera would make out well from her cut of the gems, but something entirely for herself would be nice. The woman must have fallen asleep with the lamp still lit. A quick test showed that the door was unlocked. Valera was as silent as a shadow when she opened it up and stole inside. She spied a jewelry box made out of dark, polished wood on a writing desk. Hanging across the front was something that made her freeze- a dark ruby pendant on a platinum chain, gorgeous even in the dim light.

Valera's attention snapped away as the woman stirred. A draft came through the room, enabled by the open door. She sat up, a small book in hand, clearly as awake as Valera. When she turned to see the open door Valera got a good look at her- she was young, probably Valera's age, and a stunning beauty. She was also about to look in Valera's direction.

There was no time or place to hide; she was caught. She whipped the knife from her belt and leaped onto the girl while her eyes were still widening in shock. She pressed her hand over her mouth and put the knife against her neck.

"One noise and I'll open your throat!" she said as quietly as she could while still getting her point across. The girl was paralyzed in fear, and once Valera was sure she was going to behave she rolled her onto her stomach and sat on top of her. She tore the sleeve from her nightgown, hoping the sound wouldn't carry outside of the room, and pushed it against her lips.

"Open your mouth," she demanded, and after a moment of hesitation the girl obeyed, letting Valera stuff the whole cloth inside. She tore the other sleeve as well and jammed it between her teeth, packing the fist one deep into her mouth. She tied it tight behind her head, silencing her as best as possible.

She tore the whole gown off next, needing it to make the rest of her bindings. She forced it over her head, muscling through the resistance she encountered. The girl, stripped to her lacy silk undergarments, tried to cover her body with her hands.

Valera was jealous of what she saw. The girl had the smoothest, creamiest skin she'd ever seen. She had bigger breasts and a fuller bottom than Valera, and not an ounce of pudge or roll of fat to spoil her figure. Her brown hair lay in waves and curls next to her head, full, scented, and practically glowing. She had red lips and full lashes, soft hands with immaculately kept and painted nails. Even her underwear was fine and beautiful- such a waste for something that nobody was ever intended to see.

Recent memories of spending the day callously tied up and left in misery surfaced to compare themselves to the soft, pampered life this girl must lead. Comfort and indulgences were hers, without ever having to work or risk her neck for them, while Valera had to fight and scrounge for scraps. She wondered what this girl had been doing yesterday while Valera was languishing on that post- tasting rare delicacies? Shopping for fancy dresses? Valera started to feel a little vindictive. Valera decided to be a little cruel.

She took a quill and paper from the desk and put it on the nightstand, pushing the girl over to it.

"You're going to write out a note for me. It'll be more fun if it's in your handwriting."

Valera began to dictate. Once the girl got the impression of what she was writing she protested, but Valera hushed her and reminded her of the blade held to her neck. In truth, Valera had never seriously hurt anyone. She doubted that she could make good on her threat even if the girl tried to scream or fight her. She couldn't even read the note be sure it was written faithfully- formal education was scarce among petty thieves.

When she looked like she was finished, Valera pulled her by her feet back fully onto the bed.

Valera thought of a time two years ago when Coddis made her try to steal something from Jask's room to see if she was ready for a serious burglary. She wasn't. Jask was told to make her regret failure, and to have fun doing it. That was the first time Valera had been tied up. She hated every second of it, and so naturally she could remember every intimate detail of how Jask did it.

What better for this girl's first time?

"Stay there," she ordered, putting the girl's wrists behind her back, laid crossed against each other. She did as she was told, holding still while Valera finished tearing the gown into strips.

The first one went to guaranteeing that her wrists would stay crossed for the rest of the night. She did her ankles in the same way, and her malice toward her victim grew when she handled her soft feet. They looked and felt like they had never been walked on before. Valera left nothing to chance, lashing them rigidly together.

With her ability to resist taken away, it was time to get serious. Valera took her arms and tethered them, just above her elbows with about a foot of distance between. Next she took one of the longer strips and started tying a harness around her shoulders, running it across the back of her neck, under her armpits, and across her chest. The young woman was whining and struggling now, apparently understanding that something more elaborate than strictly necessary was about to be inflicted on her.

Her fears came true in no time at all. Valera wrapped a couple of loops of cloth between the shoulder harness and her hands. When they were in the proper place, she started pulling them free of slack.

Even with the packing in her mouth the girl let out a squeal that worried Valera.

"Quiet!" she hissed. "If you do that again they'll find you worse off than tied up."

Valera remembered squealing like that.

She pulled the strip tight, drawing the helpless girl's hands toward her shoulders. Her elbows, tied together and unable to expand outward, were forced up instead. Valera knotted the cloth, leaving her arms fixed in place. She remembered the time she spent in the same position, unable to do

anything about it except curse the perverted bastard who got off on doing it. She had been on a hard wooden floor. This girl was on a nice soft bed. She still had it better. Valera checked over the knots again, making double sure that she'd be staying this way for a while.

She pulled a strip underneath the girl's stomach, tying it around her waist just above her hips, tightening it enough to be certain that it couldn't slip down any further. She pulled her feet up to her ass, and used the new anchor point to bind them there. One more strip ran from her ankles to the shoulder harness, linking the whole thing together. The final strip wrapped around her head, covering her eyes.

She checked over each odd and end again, making sure the package was complete. She was a delicious sight- a fair little maiden, most of her sweet little body exposed and wrapped up shivering against her will. Her attempts to struggle only showed off how little room she had to move, her toes and fingers the only things free enough to give away how desperately she was trying.

Valera listened for a moment, realizing how little attention she was paying to any signs of activity in the house. Fortunately, there had been nothing to miss. The only sounds were coming from the young woman on the bed. She was crying now, sobs muffled by the gag and tears soaked up by the blindfold. Valera felt bad for her, to have to be the victim of her revenge, but it was still deeply satisfying to have a victim.

She put the last piece in place- the signed letter, pinned to her ass.

"To whomever reads this note-

Please do not rush to untie me! I have grown so desperate to learn of a man's touch, so I have had myself bound like this as a prize to whichever strong lad finds me. I beg you, take advantage of me in full, no matter how I squeal or squirm! Touch my innocent flesh and fill my womb! I will be nothing but grateful to you!

Your toy,

Bescie Culthorip."

Valera smiled, thinking about some lucky servant boy coming to bring

her breakfast in her room and finding a meal laid out for him instead.

She whispered into the girl's ear, holding her hair out of the way.

"When I'm done here, I'll leave out your window. When you hear it shut closed, then you can make as much noise as you want trying to get help. Until then, I better not hear a thing. I can tie every part of this mess even tighter if I have to. Got me?"

She nodded.

Valera took another minute to enjoy the scene before scooping up the girl's jewelry. She left out the window, not making the barest hint of a sound. She left it open as she made her escape from the estate.

Chapter 2

The glow from a torch outlined the nude curves of a feminine body. Lady Cellis Hennisfair looked much different this way. She was an admired fixture of upper society functions, always on the cutting edge of fashion and gossip. Always with the finest dresses and most sparkling diamonds decorating her neck, fingers, and ears. Always smelling of the sweetest perfumes.

In the dank cellar underneath her husband's estate she looked much, much different. She was stripped of her beautiful dress, as well as every garment underneath. Her bare skin was exposed to the cool, humid air, not an inch of her flesh spared nor a speck of her modesty respected. Her adornments were cast aside and her elaborately styled hair let down. Perspiration tainted her aroma.

She sat in a heavy oak chair, too solid to budge despite her efforts. Her arms were wrapped around the back, her upper arms fastened tightly to the wooden structure with rope. Her hands were bound just as strictly, to each other and to the chair. Her ankles were each tied to one of the legs, and rope tied to her thighs above the knee ran under the seat, holding them wide open and leaving her sex completely unprotected. Her hips themselves were held fast to the chair with more rope, leaving only her chest free, and only to move just enough to make her breasts sway and bounce.

Dommia Bethor brushed Lady Cellis' crimson locks aside, exposing her neck. She pulled a length of rope across it, wrapping it once around her delicate throat and hardening her grip on each end. The Lady's chest heaved as the rope indented into her skin.

"Stop, please."

Dommia could see her warm breath steaming as it left her throat. Her body twisted as much as it could, failing to even rock the chair. Dommia jerked the rope taught. Cellis' mouth went agape, not a gasp escaping. Her head was pulled as far back as it could go, her neck stopping against the back of the chair. Dommia held on, watching as the seconds passed and the lady's battle against her ropes became frantic, knowing that she could feel her life slipping away. Lady Cellis, so forceful and magnificent, was now completely powerless

at Dommia's hands, and without her mercy would never take another breath.

Dommia savored it, denying her that mercy. Her throes grew weak, her face a deep red, and her eyes began to glass. Finally, Dommia let the rope slip, the Lady convulsing as fresh air filled her lungs.

"Mercy," she begged, her voice faint. "Please, not again."

Dommia answered her pleading by renewing her strangling grip. Again she held firm while a tortured body found itself without recourse, doomed to suffer as Dommia saw fit.

"Dommia, please!" she moaned as soon as she was allowed breath again.

Dommia immediately pulled the rope tight again, denying her the chance to recover first. Using her name like that? She pulled extra hard this time, as much as she dared.

Lady Hennisfair took her point, and was silent for the next three rounds. By now she was a mess, covered in sweat and too weak to lift her head, let alone fight for her freedom. Dommia had a broken woman in front of her, and her desires urged her to keep going, for as long as the Lady's body could hold out.

Instead she let the rope slide away from her neck. She was done for now. This was the woman's limit.

She turned to the man who was sitting silently, watching her work.

"Are you satisfied?"

"No," he said. "Make her say it."

Dommia pulled the Lady's head back by her hair, looking down into her face.

"Will you ever deny your husband use of your body again?"

"No," she said, "I promise."

"That's what you said last time."

"I know. I'm sorry. I'll do anything- just no more."

"Let's make sure," said Dommia, turning back to Lord Hennisfair. "Leave her in the chair for the rest of the day. Then put her in the shackles. Three days this time."

She saw Lady Hennisfair silently agonize at hearing her sentence. It made her wish she could administer it personally.

"Thank you, Justicar," said Lord Hennisfair. "I hope this is the last time I'll

need your services."

Dommia knew that was a lie. As scandalous as it would be if it became public knowledge, the game they played was only too typical of the private lives of the true nobility. Then enjoyed their secret diversions and hidden intrigues, most of which bored Dommia immensely. This particular one she was extremely fond of, however, as was Lord and Lady Hennisfair. They'd called on Dommia a half dozen times now to indulge them with her talents. Cellis liked the fear of punishment, and liked how her husband used it to have his dominion over her.

Eventually, the memories of this morning's sentence would grow too dull for her liking, and she'd refuse him again. He would summon Dommia to put the fear back into her, and he would watch as Dommia got off on abusing his wife. Dommia was only worried that she was a little too harsh- Lady Cellis was breathtakingly beautiful, and Dommia looked forward constantly to the next time she'd get to play with her. She left her with a bruised neck on purpose- the Lady would have to carefully cover it up for a while, and the next time Dommia saw her she'd know it was there and that she caused it. It was just too bad she didn't have any interest in letting Dommia take her into bed. Her husband wouldn't mind, she knew.

She gathered her gear, left the fair lady to her predicament, and quit the Hennisfair's estate. She was an imposing presence in her breastplate and helm, sword buckled at the side. Her skin was tanned but not weathered, and her tall, muscular figure presented a sleek and powerful image. Curls of light brown hair peeked out from under her helm where the shoulder-length mop had been stuffed. Her eyes were a deep green color, and they came with a stare that could cow most men who got in her way.

Dommia would have to go to someone else to finish things off today. There were a few women of her own station who she could arrest on some pretense, and who would make certain offers to bribe her into releasing them. Miss Homm had dropped hints last time they ran into each other about some smuggling that she didn't know anything about, but that maybe she should be interrogated just to be sure.

Or she could just go to the naval officer's club and let one of the lads she knew who were fresh into port have at her. Lieutenant Daevers' ship was due

in, wasn't it? There was always someone there of decent quality, and Dommia had little qualms about trying out new partners.

A soldier interrupted her thoughts, approaching her and bowing.

"Mistress Bethor. How went your business with Lord Hennisfair?"

"Tediously."

"Duty is duty," he said, shrugging. "We have an issue that needs your attention. Master Culthorip was burgled last night, and something rather despicable was done to his daughter."

Dommia started walking, knowing at least what part of the city she was headed to. She put aside her other plans for later.

"You know I hate mysteries when they come from my own subordinates."

"Yes, Mistress."

The soldier filled her in on the details. His story was thin in a few areas, but Dommia guessed that parts of it were being withheld for fear of gossip. An hour later, she was interviewing one Bescie Culthorip.

Dommia feigned embarrassment when asking the young woman to go over the event in as much detail as she could remember. It was easy, on account of her actual embarrassment in enjoying the story so much. Bescie was fresh into her eighteenth year, and Dommia could imagine how good she must have looked after a night of being hogtied in scant clothing. Bescie showed no signs of have any Lady Hennisfair-like fondness for the ordeal, however, and Dommia had to put any thoughts of reenacting it aside.

She took the description of the thief- a young woman- and some much less interesting details about missing gems. It would be difficult to track down the culprit, but it had to be done. Theft was one thing, but the city's money wouldn't stand to have their daughters roughed up in their own homes. If nothing else, some known thieves from the slums would have to be rounded up and sent to the gallows. Examples had to be made.

On her way out she nearly collided with a young man who was rushing to make entrance into the house. He was a handsome face, and well dressed, but he was visibly angry and agitated. He had black hair that was neatly cut and parted on the top, hanging down the sides of his face. He had a somewhat boyish look to him, but he was on the tall side with a muscular enough cut to show from underneath his shirt. He would be an intimidating figure to

someone who wasn't as confident with her ability to put down trouble makers as Dommia.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

"Who?"

"My sister!"

"You mean Miss Culthorip?"

"Of course!"

"She's upstairs. Where were you last night?"

"Drinking at a friend's," he said without shame. "Excuse me-"

She blocked his way as he tried to pass her.

"Your sister is fine. I'm handling the investigation, if my uniform hasn't made that clear. I need to ask you some questions. What is your name?"

"Dannis," he said impatiently.

That name rang a few bells.

"You mean Dannis the Hound?"

'Dannis the Hound' had a reputation. Drunkenness, fighting, carousing, and everything else that fell just below what her office would require her to intervene with. Dommia could only imagine what business of his could have dragged his sister into it. This case might have just gotten more interesting.

"I'll have a lewd suggestion for you about that later. Right now I have a familial insult to avenge, and I really must get going."

"Justicar. See?" she said, pointing at her emblem of office. "You're much better off letting me question you than running around blindly on your own."

"Question me about what? I wasn't here!"

This was going to be a very annoying conversation.

"Let's start with how the thief knew the gems were here. How many of your friends might you have let that slip to?"

It was late morning when Valera made her triumphant return to the gang's hangout. Tickers and Oink were milling around, playing with their knives. Berg had a fresh bruise and a cut under his eye. It wasn't a rare sight, and it didn't look like they bothered him much.

"Move your crap," said Valera, forcing a seat at the table, which was currently covered with junk Tickers had acquired. He had a bad habit of

stealing stuff just to because it was in hand's reach, whether there was money to be had for it or not. She plopped down two bottles of cheap wine in front of her.

The rest of the previous night had been spent selling off the stolen jewelry. A crooked ship captain she knew was always willing to take valuables that were best not sold in the city off her hands, to be sold in a market at another port. He also liked to buy to the cheapest, most base wines he could find, in bulk, and see who in the next port could be convinced that it was a highly sought after foreign vintage. He let Valera, who would drink anything in a bottle, have a couple.

"Nice," said Oink, reaching for one of the bottles. Valera swatted her hand away.

"Back! You three can have whatever I can't get down."

She worked the cork out of her first conquest with her knife and drank until she needed air.

"Damn. I think there's lantern oil in here. I need to rob Lord Veshier's wine cellar one day. See what those twats drink."

A woman's hands came to rest on Valera's shoulders, their owner's body pressing against the back of her chair.

"Valera. It's good to see you again. Still with all of your fingers, even."

Lady Dusk, as she called herself, was the local whore wrangler. She had two dozen or abouts girls she looked after, and for a cut of their take Coddis used gang muscle to keep trouble away from them. They even had some rooms the girls could use when an alley wasn't private enough.

"I don't give you shit about your cunt falling off, don't give me shit about me losing digits."

"You know that I'm just worried about you. I heard that you recently spent some time reflecting on poorly made decisions."

Valera took another drink.

"I know what you want."

"You've gotten so pretty. Men would offer good coin for you, and you'd have your pick."

"I have my pick now. But instead of letting men fuck me, I cut straight to taking their money. Faster, easier, and fewer drunken assholes sticking their

parts in me."

"None of my girls have ever spent their final moments standing on a trap door with a noose around their necks."

"Oh, screw off. I know you've had girls get a knife in their guts before. Or worse. I'm not going to die of a whore's disease like my mother did."

"Your poor mother died of the black fever. It spread through the city on the wind and took all sorts to the grave. It had nothing to do with her work."

"That's what you say. I'm not taking the chance."

"You don't have to walk the streets, you know. There are a lot of fine ladies who I arranged irregular work for. It's the cleanest, best paying work, too. You might get to spend the night with a nobleman's son. And then rob his neighbor, if you must slake that thirst."

"I've got a better idea. Right here in my hand, in fact."

Valera took another long drought, the bottle now half-drained. She reached into her pocket, and as the wine flowed down to her stomach she fished out the necklace she'd taken the night before. She held it up, peering into the ruby.

"Where did you get that?" said Oink, leaning close.

"A little side job getting something Coddis wanted. Took some rich girl's jewelry. Sold most of it, but this was too good not to try on."

Valera noticed that Oink's face wasn't on the necklace anymore. She followed her gaze to find Coddis standing at the edge of the table.

"Breg, please drag our little girl here out to the courtyard. We need to have a talk."

"What? I've got your damn gems!"

Breg wasn't waiting. She tried to avoid him, but he was quick, and too much strong for her to wrestle free. Coddis didn't have another word to add until they were outside, her back against the post and Breg holding her arms from behind.

"Jask should be here in a second. Nice necklace. Very pretty. And distinctive. And pretty popular right now, with rumors about poor Miss Bescie Culthorip being stripped naked and tied up by a thief already hitting the slums. God they move fast."

"I did not! I only took off her gown! I needed it to tie her up with."

"Well some rumors are saying that she had it done to herself. Something about a letter she wrote?"

Valera didn't have an answer that she trusted more than silence. Coddis searched her, finding the gems.

"Did you find these before or after you and Bescie's playtime?"

"Before," she said, knowing she couldn't lie to Coddis.

"Why? All you had to do was leave. They're up in arms about this. The story is too good to blow over anytime this decade. You were seen. And now you're flashing around the loot. The guy who tipped me off is going to have to disappear now. Bottom of the river, along with ol' Woddie. You know I don't like doing business that way. But I don't have much of a choice, what with one word from him liable to get us all hanged."

Jask, as predicted, joined the party.

"I don't even know what to do with her yet," said Coddis. "Tie her up. Make this time special."

Jask shook his head, a smile on his face regardless. He approached her, gathering the same rope that had been tossed on the ground two days ago after her last durance. Coddis went back inside, trusting Jask to follow orders.

"You better fucking not," said Valera.

"Boss says I better."

Jask unbuckled her belt, removing it from her waist and discarding it. Valera wanted badly to sock him in the jaw, but Berg's grip was unyielding. She lifted her leg instead, trying to put between herself and Jask when he started to pull up her tunic. He caught it, grabbing her by the calf and pushing it against her body. He held it with one hand while flipping the tunic over her head with the other. It was left sitting on her arms behind her body, but only until Berg changed his hold to let Jask rid her of it entirely.

"I will gut you in the night. You know I can."

He ignored her, stripping off her tights.

"Dammit Jask!" she shouted. "Fucking stop it."

All that was left covering her body was a sash wrapped around her breasts and a simple loincloth that already risked falling off from being dragged down with the tights. Valera didn't think of herself as modest, but this was humiliating. Tickers and Oink were already outside staring at her, and

Jask made no attempt to hide his leering.

"On her knees again?" asked Breg.

"Oh yeah."

"Fuck you both."

Valera tried to keep her legs stiff, but they quickly buckled under Breg's weight. Jask held her torso, preventing her shins from slamming onto the pavement. He let her down slowly, keeping his hands on her body until her knees touched the cool rock surface beneath her.

"Mitts off, you pig," she said, knowing he'd take every opportunity to let those hands wander if she let him.

"You're lucky I'm a gentleman, you know."

"A gentleman? You filthy-"

"Put her hands right here," he said, tapping a spot on the post. Breg moved his grip to her forearms. Valera felt her arms forced straight. She had no choice but to lean forward as her wrists were pressed against opposite sides of the post, held above head level. She tried to turn her head, to see what they were doing, but with her shoulders locked where they were she had to wait for the sensation of rope being wrapped around her wrists to tell her the story. She tried every trick she knew to wiggle free, but her hands stayed stubbornly in place. Rough fibers slid across her skin, pressure where coils encircled her slowly increased, and sudden jerks signaled things being pulled into order and knots being tied. All together they betrayed the progress of her imprisonment.

They finally stopped shortly before let go of her arms. Even putting the weight of her body against them, her hands were fixed well against the post.

"Dammit. Come on, Jask, this is enough."

"Not yet. Hold her legs together."

Breg knelt in front of her and pushed her knees together. Jask worked her feet together in kind, and there was nothing she could do to interfere with his tying them together, cinching the ropework to keep them snug.

"Feet up against the post," he said, patting her on the ass.

She wouldn't have obeyed even if she could move easily. Breg and Jask did it for her. As her legs moved back, the bottoms of her feet touching the wooden post while the balls supported her weight, she was obliged to further

raise the angle of her arms. They were held too high to rest her ass on her heels, and balancing on her knees would only become more difficult as the hours passed. Pretty soon she could feel the rope around her ankles holding her feet where they'd been positioned, set for her maximum discomfort.

She wasn't going anywhere at this point, but Jask just had to rob her of any small leniency that was left. He tied her knees together, further hurting her balance. He even tied her elbows, something she knew from experience would start to hurt quickly, even if they were only forced an extra inch closer.

"Fuck's sake, you prick," she said as he was giving her a final go-over, tugging on things to make sure they were secure. "This shit really hurts, you know."

"I know. I hope you're a real damn mess when Coddis finally decides to come back out here. Maybe then he won't hand you over to Lady Dusk and tell her to chain you to a bed and make some money from your cunt. He just might, you know. You really fucked up this time."

"Shut up," she said, knowing how weak a retort it was. Would Coddis do something like that? It made her shudder. He had done the better part of raising her, but he wasn't a squeamish man. Going into that room was seaming like so much worse an idea now than it did last night.

Something pressed against her lips. It was an apple.

"Either this can be in your mouth or you can be naked."

Valera didn't want to bet on him bluffing. She reluctantly let him shove it in as far as it would go. Her teeth sank into it, holding it in.

"Don't let it fall out. I'll come back and check."

"What do we do with this?" asked Breg.

Valera strained to see what 'this' was, afraid for what new horror could be added to her plight. All she did was hurt her arms. She gave up and let her head hang.

"Gimme," said Jask.

Cold metal fell upon her skin, and the pedant on the necklace passed her eyes as it went over her head. Jask pulled her hair out from under the chain, leaving it to dangle from her bent neck.

"Nice touch," said Breg.

"I've got some nice touching in mind."

Breg laughed.

"Come on, I hear someone left two bottles of wine on the table."

Their voices trailed off, disappearing completely behind a closed door. Tickers and Oink stepped up in front of her to have a quick debate about taking the apple away. Valera grunted angrily, but they seemed not to notice. Oink eventually convinced Tickers not to. When they left it was Lady Dusk's turn. She ran her fingers up the side of Valera's face and fiddled with her hair.

"I can't promise you won't get tied up working for me, but at least you'll be paid for it. Think about it. You'll have plenty of time to in the immediate future."

The lady left her alone. She waited in shame, her arms already sore. She hadn't even slept since yesterday morning. She was tired. Very tired. Usually she was too miserable to get any kind of rest when she was tied up, even when laying on the floor hogtied. Hanging from the post like this should have been far harder, but for the first time Valera's consciousness grew light. She came back to a couple of times, her arms hurting anew, but eventually she fell into slumber.

She dreamed of a ruined city, black and desolate. Buildings made of broken obsidian lined the streets, completely empty of any sign of habitation. No plants grew in sight. No sunlight pierced the thick clouds overhead. In the center of the city stood a massive temple, raised above the rest on a tiered platform.

Inside the temple was a maze of malformed statues, iron cages, and implements of torture. Valera wandered through them in a daze. When she stood in front of one gigantic set of iron-bound doors she finally questioned her surroundings. Her hand laid on the cool surface, ready to push it inward. She'd never had a dream like this. She never questioned her own dreams either.

When the portal opened and she crossed the threshold she was wide awake. Where was she? What was she doing here? Her questions changed immediately when she saw what dominated the center of the room. Standing on top a raised platform was an iron throne, and in it sat a creature which belonged in whispered tales and forbidden tomes.

Her skin was as red as a rose petal, not like the blush of a pale maiden

but as a solid hue. Crooked ebony horns grew from her head, veins of gold decorating their surface. Wild hair poured down the sides of her head and hung down to her waist, its black so deep that it seemed almost a void. Between her back and the throne were pressed a pair of wings, the folded tops visible over her shoulders. Her toenails were practically talons.

Most damning were her eyes. Even from across the room Valera could see into them. A literal fire burned inside her iris, flickering yellow and orange.

She was also something that put every woman Valera had ever seen to shame. Her skin was unblemished, unwrinkled, and smooth. She was tall, perhaps a few inches over six feet, and under her skin showed only lean muscle. Her breasts were a few hands full, and the curve of her waist and hips was more perfect than any body Valera could imagine. She had deep red lips, darker than the rest of her skin, and a face that was exotic but still feminine.

Most of that freakishly sexual body was on display. She was completely bare except for a cord around her hips, from which hung a leather strip that hid whatever lay between her legs.

When she saw Valera she smiled and licked her lips. It was only when she started writhing in her chair that Valera noticed that she was held there by thick metal bands. Her arms vanished behind the back of the throne. It was tall, but just slender enough to rest between her shoulders. On each side it had a shackle, thick and wide, melded directly into the chair. Her upper arms were lock inside, and by her bent elbows Valera guessed that her forearms must be similarly encased to the back of the throne. A choker around her neck held her head hard up against the structure. Her legs were manacled to the front supports, intentionally angled to keep her knees slightly over the sides of the throne.

The only part of her that could move freely was her tail. It was as long as her leg, about the thickness of a bullwhip, and ended with a heart-shaped barb. It slithered, coiling around the chair's legs.

Valera watched, entranced, as the creature's body moved in her captivity. She seemed to enjoy it, cherishing every restriction the shackles placed on her like it was a gentle kiss. She moaned the way Valera only heard whores moan when trying to convince men that they were enjoying themselves. Very, very skilled whores.

"Don't just stand there gawking."

Valera was shocked by her voice. It was deep and rich, vibrating with lust.

"Come over here. I haven't have a visitor in so long..."

Valera was wary; she wouldn't blindly obey this monster in a woman's skin.

"What are you?"

"My name is Luccela. What are you?"

"A thief. There's nothing valuable around here, is there?"

"You sound so nervous. Are you worried about me? If I could get out of this chair I'd have done so long ago."

Valera took a step back, keeping her eyes on the demoness while reaching for the door. She was forced to turn around when she found it shut, and no amount of her strength could coax it open.

"You can't leave. Not once you're in here. Only I have the power to make that door move from the inside.

"Then do it!" Valera demanded, her dislike of the situation quickly growing.

Luccela laughed.

"I'd be happy to. You'll just have to come up here and pop open a few restraints first."

"No."

"This isn't a negotiation, you precious little fool. I don't have any power to help you as long as I am physically shackled to this chair. I'll do absolutely anything you like, if you give me the freedom to. You're my first friend in centuries. I'd die if I didn't treat you well."

"Tell me how to get out of here on my own."

"You can't. This room is a prison. It isn't designed for people to get out. In my case... extra measures were necessary. But if you would rather stay, I'm sure we could find ways to pass the time. I've been very lonely. I'm told I have an exquisite body. Would you like to taste it?"

"Disgusting," said Valera.

"Only men for you? Boring. At least give me a chance to change your mind. One kiss. Please? I promise, give me one second and it'll be hours before

you bring yourself to pull away."

"Who put you here?" asked Valera, not wanting to think about the creature's suggestions. "Why?"

"Oh, it was a bunch of priests from a thousand years ago. The gods they worshiped and the language they spoke have probably disappeared by now. They had some very chaste ideas about how people should live, and when I came to show their people what kind of pleasure a body could experience they trapped me here."

"Then how did I get here?"

"How can I say? Did you find a ruby, perhaps? A large one?"

"You mean my necklace?"

"I might."

"I stole it from a woman last night. But if putting it on brought me here you'd have seen her. She must have worn it at some point."

"What were you doing when you put it on?"

"I was..."

She hesitated.

"I was tied to a wooden pole. I think I passed out."

"Oh. That might be trouble."

"Why?"

"The ruby is designed to imprison souls. If being bound caused it to draw in your soul, then it might not want to give it up. The longer you spend in here, the worse your chances."

"I'm not letting you go."

"Mmmm... not now, maybe. But after a few years of being trapped, you might start to get curious. I can do great things to you. I think I'll have a chance, with your consent."

Valera tried the doors again, pulling as hard as she could. They wouldn't budge. She pounded on them and screamed.

"Nobody else is out there."

"Be quiet."

Luccela obeyed, letting Valera search the room in silence. There was nothing to find- no doors, no furnishings, no secret passages or hidden levers. The room was empty and nearly featureless. Valera kept looking.

When she couldn't stand it anymore she reached for her knife. It was there, at least. She pointed the tip and her arm and held it there.

"What are you doing, dear?"

"Waking myself up."

She stabbed herself. It hurt quite a bit. At first it bled, but as Valera watched the cut began to close and the blood turned to a fine mist and drifted away. The pain wasn't as fast to disappear. The wound still throbbed as if it were fresh.

"You could try some more extreme measures, but I can spoil the results for you- it won't work."

Valera threw the knife aside. She sat down, back against the wall where Luccela couldn't see her.

"Can we talk, at least?"

"No."

"You didn't tell me your name."

"I know."

"Do you have any friends? Parents? A lover?"

Valera ignored her. She didn't notice that she had dozed off until something woke her up.

Dommia waited for the next dirtbag to be dragged into her office. It was getting to be a long day. Bescie's brother had been of no help. He was more interested in impressing her than keeping his story on the truthful side of things. Right after visiting the victim's house she issued an all-call for any petty criminals that could be brought in. For the last five hours she'd been threatening small-timers she usually wouldn't waste time with to see if any would crack. One of them had to know something, and the harsh sentences she was handing out ought to wring it out of them. Four men would be hanged tomorrow morning. Eight would be shipped off to penal labor camps.

Hash sentences, but she was paying back years of unpunished theft, assaults, and murder. Maybe the rest of the lot would take a hint.

Two soldiers delivered her next person of interest. He was a short man with close-cropped hair and a patchy beard, and Dommia could see that his nerves were already half-gone. He looked around the room as if expecting a

wild animal leap out at him.

"Next up, Mistress. This one's a real upstanding citizen. They call him Graverobber."

Dommia looked the man in the face.

"Graverobbing? That's a hanging offense, at least."

"No!" he shouted, "No, no, it's just a nickname. I wouldn't step foot in a graveyard. I don't even visit my mum."

"Yeah, he only robs dead people's houses while their families are digging the graves."

"That's a lie! It's a rumor, you know how people make things up?"

"I have a list of the witnesses here."

Dommia took the parchment and waved her hand to dismiss the soldiers.

"How much would you like to see whatever filthy little hovel you call home ever again?"

"Very much, Mistress."

"Then tell me about a young female burglar who likes to tie up and humiliate her victims."

"Huh?"

"I've got a lot of other people to ask today, and more nooses than you can count."

"No! I'll tell you whatever you want. Can you tell me more? What was her name?"

"I don't know her name. She was thin, black hair, wore a gray tunic- give me some names, and if any turn out to be the right one I'll let you go with a week in the stocks and a flogging."

Dommia guessed from the look on his face that he didn't consider that an easy deal.

"Well, I, uh, I know a few."

Dommia jotted down notes as he gave her a half-dozen suspects. None of them sounded very likely.

"There's also this one girl," he said. "I have a friend who says that he knows her. Says she's really sloppy and gets in trouble a lot for not following gang rules. He never told me any details. He's no dirty snitch. But I know where their gang meets."

Pain shot through Valera's arms whenever they were touched. This was on top of the constant ache when they weren't being touched. It was night, and no part of her body wasn't in agony. She screamed into the apple which was still jammed in her mouth.

"I know, I know," said Jask. "Just hold still. Good news is that Coddis doesn't want us to slit your throat before untying you, so it looks like your chances are on the up."

The rope binding her elbows was already gone, and he was working on her hands. When they slipped free of the rope she fell forward, barely catching herself. She let her body rest on the ground, feet still tied. Feeling other than pain was slowly coming back to her arms, but even when Jask finished untying her she was immobilized by her body's own demands against her moving. Jask even had to help her spit out the apple.

"Come on."

"Ow, fuck you."

"Coddis wants to see you; maybe you'll look like you're in enough to pain to have learned something."

She made him pull her to her feet, and even then she could barely stand.

"Where are my clothes?"

"Don't worry. Anyone who wanted a look got plenty. I think Smokey made some drawings."

She went along with him, not having much choice while she still needed his help not to fall down. Coddis was in one of the back rooms, washing his face. Valera found a chair and Jask let her fall into it.

"The Culthorip household has had a very recent staff reduction," said Coddis, keeping his back turned. "If he didn't already flap his jaw to someone, we're safe. From one of the dozen ways this could come down on us. The gems aren't going to see the light of day for a good while. Maybe I can sell them down south. Not now, though, and not for what I was going to get for them."

Valera didn't interrupt him.

"What did you do with the jewelry?"

"I ditched it already."

Coddis turned around.

"Not all of it."

Valera palmed the necklace. Memories of her dream came back. Memories that were more detailed and vivid than any she'd ever had from a dream.

"This is all that's left."

"Descriptions of it are already being passed out. Family heirloom, they say. That is the most dangerous rock in the city right now. You're going to take down to the harbor and pitch it. Jask is going to go with you to make sure you actually do it."

"Maybe not tonight, boss. She's looking pretty sore. Won't end well if we see trouble and have to run for it."

"Tomorrow night then. As soon as the sun goes down. If Jask doesn't see you toss that thing into the water the Culthorips won't be the only ones with an opening."

Valera was in no condition to argue. She nodded, and let Jask walk her out of the room. She found a bed and collapsed into it, the necklace held tight in her hand.

Chapter 3

The next morning Valera woke up still feeling sore. Both physically and from Coddis' demand. She wouldn't be getting a cut from those gems anytime soon, if at all. She could eat on the money she got for the jewelry, but she'd been waiting for a big score for a long time. Now she had to get rid of the best piece.

Well, she didn't have to get rid of it now. And her legs needed some kinks worked out of them. She cleaned herself up and found her clothes. She tossed a faded blue cloak over her shoulders, covering her tunic, and slipped out while nobody was looking. Coddis didn't tell her that she couldn't leave, but nobody needed to see her do it. It was a short walk, barely a mile, to her destination. She climbed the stairs to an apartment above a bakery. Valera knocked on the door, rapping out a short pattern that announced her as a friend.

The door cracked open, and she saw Phia's face on the other side.

"Val! You look like you're in trouble."

Phia annoyed the hell out of Valera with that. She was practically a mind reader. Valera couldn't begrudge her, though; she made her living with those skills.

"Let me in," she said, pushing her way inside. "You haven't heard any rumors lately, have you?"

"Lots of them. The most popular are about that Bescie Culthorip girl who was attacked in her room and forced to make love to another woman."

"Fuck's sake, that's not what happened."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"All I did was tie her up. She caught me, and I had to keep her quiet."

"So they didn't find her stark naked, with her bloomers shoved in her mouth, soaked first in her own womanly juices?"

"Ugh-" said Valera, almost gagging. "How would they even know whose womanly- forget it. Gross men are telling stories that get them off."

"Some women too."

"Even worse. Look, I wanted to show you something."

She pulled the necklace from her pocket and let it dangle from her fingers.

"Wow, it's beautiful. And they'll hang you if anyone sees you with it. So you've come here to show it off?"

"Yes. This is going to sound... a little weird."

"Weirder than-"

"Weirder than whatever else you've heard about fucking Bescie."

Phia was probably the only person Valera trusted enough to talk to about this. She was a younger friend of her mother's who helped raise her in the ways that Coddis couldn't. She was a thief too, but not one who relied on picking pockets or robbing houses. She knew how to talk people out of their valuables. Growing up she'd watch her go into a store, buy something, and confuse the owner into giving her more back in change than she paid him to begin with. It was a magic that Valera could never get the hang of.

It helped that she was a quite a looker. Even with a few wrinkles on her face she could charm a man out of half his sense before laying on the tricks. She had luxurious blonde hair and a great bosom. She dressed to play up her assets, but never made them look available.

Valera told her the story, not going in to details on Jask's latest techniques. She went over everything she could remember about the demoness, only leaving out her name for fear of invoking her somehow. When she was done, Phia was looking at her like a madwoman.

"How tightly did Jask have you tied up? I think you've started to go loony to cope with it."

"No- this was real. Super real. This necklace might be worth a lot more than it looks. And it already looks like it's worth a lot."

"If it's possessed by a demon I would think it's worth less."

"Well, not to the right people. Coddis wants me to throw it in the sea."

"Coddis is smart."

"I... I don't know. I have until tonight. Have you ever heard of anything like this?"

"No, at least not seriously."

Phia took the necklace and ran her fingers over the ruby.

"So you think you need to be tied up while wearing it to see the demon?"

"I guess. I think she was lying about a lot of stuff. She wanted me to set her free, after all."

"But you didn't. At least I taught you something."

"So what do you think?"

"I find it honestly more plausible that you had a silly dream than that we're holding an ancient evil artifact."

"You weren't there."

Phia laughed.

"Well let's test it. Truss me up and put the thing on me."

"Phia, this serious. All I know is I got out when Jask started to untie me."

"You spent hours tied up. Just leave me for a little while; if you were fine, I should be. I already know that I don't need to do anything to get free."

"You're nuts."

"I think you're nuts. If you want to convince me, this is your chance."

Valera wished that Phia would just believe her, and certainly didn't want to waste time that she was short of. But she needed an ally, and Phia was too often the spinner of lies to go along with strange sounding ideas easily.

"Fine, get on the bed."

"I've got some clothesline in my cupboard."

Valera took the thin white rope and sat down next to Phia. She laid her on her stomach and put her palms together, wrapping coils of rope around them and cinching them tight. She didn't know how well Phia needed to be tied, so she'd at least make sure Phia wouldn't be escaping. She put Phia's feet together and tied them as well, completing the hogtied with a length of rope that she put enough tension on to keep Phia's hands and feet from moving much from their rest positions.

"Is this how you did poor Bescie?"

"No! I may have been a little rougher on her. You don't have an apple around, do you?"

"An apple? Why?"

"Never mind."

Valera gagged Phia with a scarf, and when she was ready put the necklace over her head.

Dannis stormed into Neckler's brothel like an angry bull.

"Neckler! Tell me you have a cunt ready that I can absolutely destroy."

Neckler, sitting on a couch while one of his girls pawed at him, raised his eyebrow. The girl was less dispassionate, a bit of worry on her face. She needn't have it; Dannis knew she was an old fixture of this place. Not his type.

"Do I hear a bit of anger in your voice, my lad?"

"Yes, you do. And somebody will be getting the brunt of it very soon. But I need a minute to rest, and nothing clears my head like a squealing whore."

"Ielis, go see if Ophiel is freshened up," said Neckler, swatting at her ass when she stood up to obey. She kept her eyes on Dannis as she passed him.

"You'll like her. Not a virgin, but a delicate little thing. I've been keeping her that way, but I suppose if anyone is going to really break her in it should be one of my best patrons. Tell me, though, what's gotten you on a rampage."

Dannis waved his hand dismissively.

"If you of all people don't already know I won't be spreading it further."

"Oh- I have heard some rumors. I wasn't sure what to make of them, but I think I do now."

"Watch it- I've got plenty of wrath to spread around."

"I'm surprised you're so upset. Let's be honest, boy, you've done worse. I wouldn't put it past some of the rabble you go carousing with to have done it as a prank."

"I said watch it. I've had my fun, but never with an innocent. That's why I come here instead of harassing the cobblers' daughters. My sister did nothing to draw this her way, and I've been very clear with that rabble I go carousing with that if they're ever less than cordial toward Bess they'll have to apologize with a bleeding hole in their chest."

"So those tales about you and Mistress Fresier..."

"I seduced Camlie away from her innocence fair and square," he said, jabbing his finger at Neckler.

"I see. Your search for Bescie's assailant has been going poorly?"

"Of course. I've roughed up a dozen goons and thugs trying to find a lead. We were out all night. Geard threw one out of a window for me, smashed his face up good. But I've got nothing."

"Isn't there an investigation? An official one?"

"Oh, who cares? Some justicar woman came by and asked a bunch of pointless questions. I'm not leaving my family honor in her hands."

"Excuse me, Master."

Dannis turned around to find a woman standing behind him.

"I heard you talking. Are you Master Culthorip?"

"Not in here, sweetie."

She smiled at him. Dannis hadn't seen her before. She hadn't seen him before either, which meant she was definitely new.

"Well, I, um... I've been hearing those rumors going around. And there was just something that made me wonder, since I heard it before and it stuck with me, and I remembered it when I heard that story, so I thought maybe you'd be interested-"

"Yes, yes, I can't be in here all night, what is it?"

"Yes, Master. See, there was this man who I entertained once in a different whore house, one down on Boggar street. It was rougher there, sometimes, so I heard this one was nicer if you could make it here, and I was always really popular there, so I did. But while I was there I entertained this man, a couple of times. He liked to, well, uh, he liked to tie me up. I didn't mind it, as long as it wasn't too tight. But after one time he was a little drunk and he told me about some of his friends, and one of them was a girl he liked, and that he got to tie up sometimes, but she didn't like it very much."

This was going nowhere. Dannis was about to interrupt.

"There were all thieves, is the thing. And he told me about her, and about how she was good, but she always did stuff that she shouldn't and got in trouble. That's why he got to tie her up."

Dannis listened much more intently now. It made sense, it didn't rely on hearsay, and this girl had to know that Neckler would have her hide if she sent Dannis down a phantom trail.

"What was her name?"

"Oh, he didn't tell me that. His name was Jask, though. He was a nice guy. Kind of handsome, too."

"I don't care about- no, wait, tell me what he looked like. Details."

"Uh, he was a little shorter than you. Not really skinny, but lean I guess. Not big muscles, but nice ones. He had brown hair, it was short but it was

curly. And green eyes."

"Clothes- what did he wear?"

"He liked green. He usually wore that. Simple stuff. He had brown cloak, though."

Dannis grabbed her and kissed her. Then he paid her well for it, giving her enough to take off the night if she wanted.

"Oh, thank you so much. This place really is-"

Dannis was behind her, moving to the door. He stopped, turned, and held her from the back, covering her mouth with his hand.

"What about Ophiel?" asked Neckler.

"Sorry, my friend, but I have to run. Perhaps I'll be back to celebrate tonight."

He let the girl go- he'd be back to fuck her too, sometime- and took to the street. He was in a far better mood than he was minutes ago. Boggar street. Jask. It was time to round up some good men and punish the wicked.

Phia shifted her body, trying to get comfortable. She'd been tied up before, in a couple of regrettable circumstances, but it wasn't an everyday experience for her. Valera was watching out the window. She was starting to feel really silly for entertaining this whole idea when she finally started to feel drowsy.

Phia didn't remember any ruined city or temple steps. By the time she was lucid she was staring into a deep pit. She stepped away from the edge, and took in more of her surroundings. She was in a gloomy tangle of hallways. The stillness unnerved her; she was less confident physically sneaking around than her young friend was. She saw a pile of chains on the ground, next to an iron contraption that looked like it was made to do evil things to someone's poor body. She lifted them up, finding them to be a set of manacles. She carried them with her, having an idea about that door that gave Valera so much trouble.

It didn't take her much longer to find it. She considered leaving it be; she'd wake up soon enough, and did she really need to see this thing for herself? Eventually her curiosity won out, and she opened the door. The throne was there, the creature sitting on it in all her magnificence.

Phia worked the manacles around the door handles, running them from the outside to the inside. The doors wouldn't be able to shut with them there, leaving Phia an exit. The demoness watched her in silence, cracking an amused smile.

When she was done she faced the throne.

"Two visitors in so short a time. Did the other girl send you?"

"I wanted to see if you were real."

Phia was a practiced actor. Fear and doubt clouded her mind, but they wouldn't show on her face or in her voice.

"I am. Gloriously. You aren't here to let me go, are you? The other one must be feeling guilty for leaving me like this after I tried to help her."

"You lied to her, actually. You told her that she wouldn't be able to leave unless she unchained you."

"An insult! I only said she might not be able leave. Luckily, she was."

"You were clearly hoping for a different outcome. I-"

Phia heard a rattling noise behind her. When she spun around the chains were only hanging from the inside handle. The door was closed. She should have heard it shutting. The chains couldn't have just fallen loose either. She stared for a minute, then put it out of her mind. It wasn't important. She'd get out when Valera untied her. Some instinct told her not to take her eyes off of the demoness.

"What was her name?"

"She didn't tell you?"

"No. I don't know why. She was a little rude, if I must be honest. I'm not complaining- company is company. You seem much better mannered. Please, let's not let this be awkward. My name is Luccela."

"You may call me Bescie."

"I may? Alright, Bescie. It's not your real name, but it will do."

Phia's stomach fell. She didn't like it when people made her as a liar. Maybe she shouldn't talk to her at all. She never imagined that she would have a harder time spotting the con that Valera, but now that she was locked in a nightmare world in a room with a creature of the abyss she wondered if this really was something she was better suited for than someone who was accustomed to the shadows.

"Yes, it will do. You can call my friend Lien if it makes it easier to talk about her."

"Did she tell you anything else unfair about me?"

"She said you made some unladylike suggestions."

"Forgive me. I only offered her some monstrously pleasurable ways to pass the time. I can't keep abreast of what is considered appropriate from my appointed seat."

"I will, provided you refrain from sharing any such ideas with me."

"Are you absolutely sure?"

Luccela let her chest stick out while she shuffled her hips. Phia couldn't deny that she looked good doing it. She had the soft breathing of a woman aroused, and an inviting expression on her face.

"Yes, I'm sure."

Luccela didn't speak to her again for quite a while. Phia waited, expecting her excursion to end soon. It didn't. Phia couldn't tell how much time was passing. She took to pacing the room, but no matter how many laps she made nothing happened. She sat by the wall and tried to sleep as Valera had done. She thought she did a couple of times.

Luccela broke the silence at last.

"Two days."

"What?"

"Since you came in. It's been two days. You looked like you wanted to know."

"That's impossible."

"I've been counting seconds for centuries. Two days, more or less."

"Valera wouldn't leave me tied up that long."

"Valera? Did you mean Lien?"

Phia thought about claiming Valera as a third person, but Luccela already saw through a better lie when Phia was less frayed.

"Thank you, Lien. She wouldn't leave me tied up for two days."

"Maybe she hasn't. I don't know what's happening outside any more than you do. And I did warn you that you might get stuck here. She might be trying to wake you as we speak."

"And if I let you go, I'll wake up?"

"Opening the door could help. If you don't mind me being selfish- it doesn't matter to me if by the time you decide to release my restraints it's too late for you to return to normal. It's the only thing you can do right now other than that pacing, so if Valera doesn't find a solution on her side of things you'll have to do it eventually, if only to get freedom to leave this one room."

"If you're stuck here permanently, then at least I have someone to talk to. And in my defense, I have offered to make your stay pleasant in the way most suited to my talents."

It was another three days, according to Luccela, before Phia was desperate enough to risk it.

She approached the throne, the manacles from the hallway outside in her hands.

"I'm going to let you out of that chair. But I'm putting these on you as I do. Don't try anything."

"If that's the way you like it. I'm not adverse to serving on my knees."

Luccela's smile was suggestive enough on its own. Phia ignored it. She started with the choker around Luccela's neck. It was held shut with a simple pin that slid out as easily as she could put her fingers on it. She opened it. Luccela stretched her neck, but could only lean forward a scant amount with her arms still locked in rigid iron. Phia worked the manacles' collar around her neck anyway. The pin for this was more difficult, and Phia had to tap it in with the ankle cuffs. Luccela waiting patiently, showing no sign of minding Phia's plan.

Behind the chair Luccela's forearms were bound separately, each inside a shackle that ran half the length from her wrist to her elbow. Phia took note of her nails and how they curved into sharp claws. The pin slid out as easily as the last one. Luccela moaned as her hand came free. Her upper arm was still locked to the chair, preventing her from further removing any of her bindings.

Phia took hold of her wrist and worked it between Luccela's back and the chair. Luccela had to arch her back out to make room, but did so cooperatively. The manacles gave Phia a lot of trouble with so little room to work with, but she eventually satisfied herself that the demoness' wrist was held securely by the thick iron cuff, a chain running from it up to the collar.

It took her as long to put the matching cuff around Luccela's other wrist.

Phia breathed a little more easily knowing that the tricky part was done. One by one she transferred her ankles from the chair to the manacles, having to draw them up toward the seat to get the chain to reach.

Phia stood up again, eyeing the armbands. They were the last things holding Luccela to the chair.

"Don't have second thoughts now. You've worked so hard."

Phia looked into her face. It didn't show a speck of impatience or frustration. That scared Phia more than if she had been lunging forward to try to break out of her chair. Still, she had no other choice. She opened the shackles.

Luccela stood up. The chains that linked her collar to her hands held them at the small of her back. The link from her hands to her feet was not quite long enough for her to stand full erect, and she had to arch her back mightily in order to full straighten her long legs.

"Mmmm... that feels good."

Phia watched her stretch every muscle and joint she could. She did it slowly, pleasure showing on her face with every movement. With her arms still wrapped around her wings she couldn't let them open, but it made Phia nervous to see her try.

"What now, my Queen?"

"Open the door," said Phia.

"I'll try."

Luccela shuffled down to the floor, showing off the difficulty of moving in her chains. Phia followed her, prodding her when she took too much time. When they reached the door Luccela put her back against it, leaning onto the solid face and pushing with her legs. It budged slightly, but stayed shut.

"Mayhaps I need some motivation. Tell me, how will I be punished if I fail?"

"You'll go back to the chair."

"So boring."

Luccela pushed again. This time it opened. Phia's body urged her to run, but she didn't want to leave the creature unattended. She want to put her back on the throne, but she knew that the door would find a way to close again.

She reached for a dangling chain that hung from Luccela's collar down between her breasts- a leash for pulling her along.

"Come with me."

"God, yes!"

Phia started exploring the hallways. One room held a half dozen cages, no more than three feet high and not long enough for someone to lay down in. Luccela would fit. Barely.

Phia swung the door open.

"What? Putting me away already?"

The creature's tail touched her leg, trying to cozy up to it. Phia swatted it away.

"Yes. Get in."

Luccela got down on her knees, shuffling up to Phia.

"Please, let me play a little longer. It'd be such a shame if you went through all of that heartache of waiting, worrying, and finally taking me down to not even take advantage of me."

She tried to rest her head against Phia's stomach, but she quickly backed away.

"I'm not buying any of it. You're a monster. Now get in the cage where you belong."

Phia jerked the leash, but Luccela didn't budge. Even chained up, muscling her into the cage might not be easy.

"If I obey, when you have safely boxed up, will you give me one thing? A kiss between the bars?"

Phia hesitated.

"Yes."

Luccela climbed into the cage, bending over her folded legs in order to squeeze in. Phia wasted no time in slamming the door shut and engaging the padlock that would keep it there. She backed away and let her heart relax a little.

"How about my kiss?"

Phia spit in her face.

Luccela closed her eyes and reached up with her tongue to meet the saliva running down her cheek.

"Please, my Queen, another!"

Phia's stomach lurched, and she turned and ran. She found no order to the place, and her mind grew more distant and confused as she turned randomly, never finding an exit or familiar place. Did she fall down? Pass out? All she knew was that she was dreaming again.

She opened her eyes, seeing her apartment around her. There was something in her mouth and her hands were tied. Valera was already loosening her feet, but Phia rushed her, moaning into her gag and shaking her hands.

As soon as she could she hugged Valera.

"God... who long was I laying there?"

"Only about an hour. Geez, what's wrong? You're sweating."

"I was in there for days. It wouldn't end."

"What? Wait, so you saw her?"

Phia nodded.

"She was there. It was too real. For too long. I don't know how."

She was too ashamed to share what she'd done, freeing Luccela. It didn't matter; neither of them were putting on that necklace again.

"You need to get rid of it. Now. Go get Jask and bring it to the docks right now."

"Maybe I could hide it. Coddis would change his mind if he knew, wouldn't he?"

"Who would want that thing? Why? You did the girl a favor by stealing it. Honey, I've spent my life watching people get taken because of their own greed. I can make it happen, every time. You have the worst kind of trouble I've ever seen in that necklace. Come on."

Phia stood up and took Valera by the arm.

"We're going to the hideout. You'll be rid of that thing forever in an hour's time."

Valera sighed, but let Phia drag her out.

Dannis stood with a crowd a friends. Good men, troublesome to their families at times, but men that were ready to help him find the thief who hurt his sister. They were conspiring out in the open, standing in a circle outside his

father's house. There was nothing for them to fear; today they were out to deal a blow for justice and decency.

"One we find this 'Jask' filth we'll tell him he can either talk or we'll turn him over to the justicar. If he doesn't crack, we break his legs and tell him we didn't mean in one piece."

A cheer went up. Eight fierce and strong lads, more than enough fire and might for any scum that tried to get in their way.

"What if the girl's with him? Or we run across her first somehow?" asked Peccos, a broad-shouldered man with a solid square jaw.

"Drag her back here. We'll let my sister get a good look at her. Then we'll take her somewhere. Then we'll take turns."

They were happy with that.

"Okay, let's-"

"Excuse me, is one of you Master Culthorip?"

Being interrupted- and frankly being asked after in the first place- made Dannis want to turn around and lay his fist square in the man's jaw. But this was the second time today a conversation had begun that way, and the first time worked out well for him. He put his temper in check and pivoted to see who he was.

Even with eight men at this back Dannis was glad he hadn't greeted this man with a punch. He was tall, seven feet almost, and he stood erect and proud. His features were cut from stone and a trio of scars ran from his cheek to his neck. He was dressed in a well-fit formal coat that went down to his knees and a matching hat.

"Yes," said Dannis, wary but always confident. "I am. I'm very busy at the moment, is this important?"

"Very much so, Master Culthorip. I represent the jewel crafter's guild. They have been informed of the recent theft from your house, and wish to help keep an eye out for any attempts to sell the stolen goods to any of their member establishments."

"Good man, then," said Dannis, cautiously wondering if the jewel crafter's guild occasionally needed necks broken.

"Thank you, Master," he said, his manners stiff but otherwise faultless.

"In this endeavor, the more detail they can be told about the gems and

jewelry the more likely they are to spot it. I was hoping to take a little of your time to get some descriptions, including as absolutely much as can be remembered."

"Ah! You'll want to speak to my father about the gems. The jewelry you'll need my sister's help with. Well, I can tell you about the necklace. My grandmother wore it a lot before she died."

"Please go on, Master."

"It was a ruby pendant hanging off of a thin platinum chain. The ruby sat in sort of a disc-shaped backing, and along the edge of the disc were these little etchings, letters, I think, but we never knew which language they were in. The ruby was about the size of someone's iris, and it was cut to look like one. It was also darker than other rubies I've seen. Between the back of the ruby and the disc is... well we don't know how they did it, but you can see something back there, if you look really closely, that looks like a flame. It moves as you change your viewing angle."

Dannis surprised himself. He never remembered thinking or caring so much about a piece of jewelry.

"Thank you, Master Culthorip. That should be rather distinctive. I will interview your father and sister if allowed, as you suggested. But if it isn't too odd, there's one question I would like to ask. Have you ever heard the name Luccela?"

"Luccela? No, I don't think I have."

Suspicious rose in Dannis' mind. Who could this 'Luccela' be that could be relevant to his sister's jewelry?

"I didn't expect so. Thank you for your cooperation, Master Culthorip."

"Who is she?"

"A jewel thief, they say. Her name is told in stories, but I can't testify to any of them being real. Just a silly little thing; if she were real and you met her she'd likely not use that name."

Dannis wasn't entirely satisfied, but he didn't see a way to press the point. Besides, he had his own plans on how to find the necklace, and more importantly the hand that took it.

Valera followed Phia down the street. Despite her urgency she wasn't

rushing. Phia was like that. Nice and casual.

"What if Jask isn't there?" asked Valera.

"We'll wait for him."

It was a weak attempt, and she knew it. It was killing her to throw away a good opportunity. Surely there was some lord or lady hedonistic enough to want to play around with it, and lords and ladies had lots of money. They'd even keep their mouths shut about it; it was just a merchant she stole it from, and they'd hardly care for any award that was put up.

"We should tell Coddis."

"He won't want to hear it."

"But-"

"I know him, dear. He'll tell us that we're either lying, crazy, or telling the truth, and in all three cases he'll want no business with it for a different reason."

Valera gave up. She was a rank amateur trying to outwit an old pro. Maybe she could convince Jask.

Some impulse made her stop and grab Phia by the arm. She quickly realized what it was; soldiers were coming down the street. And they were led by a justicar. Bad news.

"This way," said Valera, pulling Phia into an alley.

"Quick, climb!" she said, grabbing onto the wall.

"I can't do that! Calm down, we don't know that they're coming for you."

"We don't know that they aren't. Justicars never just come around here, and we're way too close the hideout. Come on!"

"I mean that I literally can not do that. I'm not strong enough to climb like you."

She risked a look down behind her.

"Give me the necklace."

"What? No!"

"You're far better off escaping alone. If you make it- you know where to meet. If you get caught, that necklace is a death sentence."

"What if they catch you with it?"

"They're much less likely to be looking for me. We don't have time to discuss this, Valera. You know you can trust me with both our lives."

She held her hand out. Valera hated the idea, but Phia was right about not having time. She slapped it in her hand and started scurrying up the wall.

A roof was a conspicuous place to be in broad daylight, but Valera didn't think any of the soldiers would be able to follow, even if they did spot her. She crossed over to the next street and dropped back down to pavement. When she looked down the street her stomach dropped. Both ends were guarded by soldiers. Valera ducked into a busy inn. She rushed past the patrons inside, spilling ales and ignoring rude challenges. She dashed up the stairs to the second floor, barging into a room.

"Hey!" shouted the woman inside, busy nursing her child.

"Hey," said Valera, throwing open the window. She jumped across the alley and caught the windowsill that was nearly opposite the one she left. She deftly worked the latch, opening it and crawling through. Usually she could do this silently, but in her rush she made more noise than she should have.

"What's that? Who's up there?"

Valera didn't answer, opting to make for the opposite side of the house. There was another window there, but through it only a blank wall in view. A man holding a saw rounded a corner.

"Stop there!"

"Not a chance."

She swung from the window up to the roof, grabbing onto the overhang and using her momentum to flip over. She tried to keep low, hoping to stay out of sight just long enough to get to the next street and hope her luck would be better there. If that didn't work, she just needed to steal a new cloak, maybe a dress if she could change fast-

Something slammed into her head. She lost her balance and nearly slid off the roof, catching the edge only after her body was hanging free over the alley. A battered apple rolled past her, falling to the ground below. Valera's head snapped up to see the justicar rounding the corner. She had another piece of hard, throwable fruit in her hand.

"Get down here, on the order of Justicar Dommia Bethor, and surrender."

Valera didn't like her chances down there. The Justicar was a tall, mean-looking woman. She had good, long sprinting legs and a proper weapon and armor. Instead she heaved, pulling her chest above the level of the roof again.

The second piece of fruit hit her square in the jaw. Even though she was ready for it her lights still flickered and she dropped down, one hand losing its grip.

She started to reach back up, but a hand shot out from the window and grabbed her arm. The man with saw had it in his grip.

"I'll lop your hand off if you don't give me back whatever you took you little trollop!"

"I don't have anything of yours you freak!" she shouted back, lifting her leg to push him off. She had to plant her heel in between his eyes before her arm slipped free. He went crashing backwards, and Valera reached up again.

It was too late. The weight of a second person hung from her leg. Her other hand slipped, and her heart stopped beating while her back rushed toward the ground. She landed on something softer than pavement, but the fall still knocked the wind out of her. She rolled to the side, seeing the Justicar lying on the ground as well.

Valera raced her to her feet, and won. She stumbled, still dazed, out of the alley. Three soldiers were waiting for her. She darted to the side, evading them for a moment. She wasn't so lucky with the burly fellow who just happened to be standing in a bad spot. She bounced off him, twirled, and powered into a sprint.

It was short-lived. Someone tackled her from behind, and when the faster, heavier body crashed into her there was nothing she could do.

Valera slammed onto the pavement. Once again she had to fight to get her wind back, but this time her pursuers didn't. Two pairs of hands gripped her arms and someone put their weight on top of her hands. She fought like mad, but there were too many assailants pinning her down in too many places. While she was pressed down and her arms twisted someone began to tie her hands. Valera felt her head going light. Being tied up by Jask was awful enough, but at least she knew what she was in for. This was for real.

The soldiers didn't bother with anything elaborate. Instead they went ruthlessly tight. They crossed her wrists and pulled hard as they coiled rope around them. She was used to being tied snugly, but this was well past that. Her hands were already throbbing by the time they were finished with the knots. A soldier used his arm to press her head against the cobblestone while the woman picked over her body, taking everything short of her belt.

"Watch where you're touching me, you bitch."

"Keep quiet before I decide to let every man here have a turn. They'll be thorough."

Valera bit her tongue; nobody would complain if a justicar let her men rape a thief before she went into the noose. At least nobody who mattered.

Her feet were hobbled with rope and she was dragged upright. She almost fell when the woman pushed her, but she stumbled forward instead. She glanced from side to side as she walked. Everyone was looking. She hated having so many eyes on her. She had trained her entire life to avoid being seen, and so much attention nearly made her panic. It was even worse that she was being paraded on by as a helpless prisoner. She wanted to cry, but you didn't make it in her world if showed that kind of weakness.

It was a very long walk to the Justicars' keep. Every step was difficult, every moment was a new face staring at her, and every possible fate that could await her was grim. The rope around her wrists felt as hard as stone, and she quickly lost all feeling in her hands.

She passed sets of armed guards on her way inside the building. She was in the lion's den now; she had crossed a threshold into a dark and hostile realm. Soldiers milled about with sharpened weapons. Men went by in chains. She knew how insignificant she was to these people, and how casually they'd prescribe an end to her life.

The justicar turned around and pointed to a pair of the guards.

"You two put her in the waiting room. You- go fetch Mistress Culthorip. We'll see for sure if this is our girl."

They nodded to their Mistress and the group broke up. Valera was forced along with two of them as she watched the woman march off to some other business. The torch-lit hallways swallowed Valera up. Everything in this place looked evil. The chamber that they stopped in front of was no exception. A solid wooden door swung open to let her into a lonely cell. The soldiers grabbed her arms and thrust her against the back wall.

A heavy collar hung from a bolt driven deep into the stone. Valera tried to tear free from the soldier's grasp. She couldn't let this happen; she wouldn't spend the rest of a short life in this miserable place with every indignity possible piled on top of her. One of the soldiers reached for her hair, pulling her

head back and asserting his control over her body. The other snapped the collar around her neck, engaging a latch that would keep it closed.

They let her go. Valera instinctively lunged forward. She knew it was a dumb move even before the short chain to the wall stopped the collar, her throat crashing against the cold, hard metal. She heard the soldiers laughing while she tried to get her breath back.

She stood placidly, barely daring to wriggle her hands for how badly they hurt.

"Hold still," said one of the men. He turned her to the side and started jerking at the rope. Valera winced, but held silent. The rope fell away and blood rushed to her hands. She saw that she wouldn't get to enjoy it. A set of manacles hung from the same bolt as the collar, and she had little time to act before they would be locked around her wrists.

The soldiers were armed. She could reach for their swords... with fingers that could barely move. And then what? Her little time ran out before she could think of an answer. They weren't gentle; they gave no chance for her to stall or resist. Her arms were twisted to keep her still while they put the shackles on her and locked them with a key.

They let her hands fall. Valera felt them suddenly stop as the cuffs around them ceased their descent. The chains were a couple inches too short to let her arms rest naturally. Of course they were.

"She's pretty," said one of the soldiers, and older man with sandy hair.

"Sure is," said his portly cohort. "Shame they're going to have to string her up."

Valera ducked back when he reached for her face.

"Fuck off, you creep."

"Leave her alone, Jorn."

The older man looked her in the eyes.

"Kid, this is not a good time for any pointless acts of defiance. If Mistress Dommia offers you a way to keep your life, take it. Nobody is playing around in this court. Come on, Jorn."

The men left her alone, closing the door behind them. Valera rattled her chains. They stayed locked in place. She leaned her back against the wall and closed her eyes. It didn't stop tears from getting out.

Valera raised herself on her toes to give her arms a chance to stretch. She wished badly to sit, but even if she let her hands go all the way up to her shoulders the collar would strangle her. Maybe that would be a mercy. She let her knees buckle, and eased her weight onto her neck, feeling the breath come to a halt. She had to fight her instincts to let it happen. Her feet slid to the side as her body dangled. At least this way she could deny them the chance to judge her. Suddenly she scrambled, tenuously standing again on weakened legs. She wasn't brave enough to do that. She clung to hope, however foolish it might.

She caught her breath again, wishing for something to happen. She feared what it would be, but the waiting was unbearable. She wanted out of the dark. Valera usually didn't spend much time thinking about what she wanted out of her life. She never planned for ten, twenty years' future. But now that those years were so uncertain she started fantasizing about everything she would miss. She wanted to travel. To see beyond the city walls she'd been born in. To have an adventure. To meet a charming prince.

She tried to lose herself in thought, but the need to stand and try to keep her arms from cramping made it difficult. She felt every moment that passed.

At long last she heard noises outside the door. When it swung open her least favorite person in the world led the way in. The Justicar stepped to the side, clearing the way for another woman. Valera took a moment to recognize the girl she'd left hogtied in bed such a short time ago. She was dressed up now, wearing a red business-like outfit with a matching hat. It cast a shadow over the hard expression on her face.

"This is her, Mistress Culthorip. Do you recognize her?"

Her visage held firm as she spoke.

"Yes. I don't think I'll forget that face easily. Those are even the same clothes she was wearing."

"That settles it," said the Justicar. "Valera, yes?"

Valera let her question hang.

"Valera, you are found guilty by Justicar Dommia Bethor of burglar, assault, and indecency inflicted upon Mistress Bescie Culthorip."

Valera swallowed her urge to break down.

"She's wrong! It must have been too dark to see."

"Do you recognize her voice?"

"Yes, Justicar. Your judgment was certainly accurate," she said coldly.

Valera's mind raced, searching for some avenue of appeal. Against her class of person a justicar's whim was enough to convict and sentence her. If she passed a verdict on Valera no authority in the city would question it, no matter how loudly she howled.

"There's no point in further deliberations, then."

Justicar Dommia spoke clearly and evenly.

"I sentence the prisoner to death, to be carried out tomorrow morning by hanging."

"No," Valera cried, "I didn't even hurt anyone."

"I assure you, thief, that what you did to me hurt quite a bit by the morning."

Valera didn't doubt it. What she did to her was inspired by personal experience, after all.

"And do you have any idea what you've done to my reputation? The things people are already saying about me?"

"But she's going to kill me. Please, can't you have any mercy? I don't want to die."

"This isn't a negotiation," said the Justicar. "You may escort Mistress Culthorip back home now. She can come watch the execution if she wants a last look at her."

Valera sank, barely holding herself up.

"One more moment, please," said Bescie. She dared forward and faced Valera. "What have you done with my necklace? And my father's gems? They found neither on your person or in at your gang's hovel."

"I don't know where the gems are," she said. "I'll bring the jewelry back to you if you let me go, I swear."

"You swear on what?" asked the justicar. "You'll flee as soon as we take your chains off."

"Tell us where they are and I'll ask Justicar Bethor to spare your life."

Valera would rat out the ship captain in an instant- this was literally her neck on the line- but she couldn't drag Phia into this."

"I can tell you where most of it is, but only I can get the necklace."

"It's no use trying to keep it," said the justicar. "You won't be getting a chance to fence it anyways. I'll let you live, but there's hard labor in your future."

Valera imagined the kind of hellhole she might be sent to. The gallows weren't looking so bad suddenly.

"I'm telling the truth. I left it with a man who will only come out of hiding if he sees me first. I don't even know how to find him."

"Your sentence stands, then. If you change your mind..."

"Please, Mistress Dommia, the necklace was my great-grandmother's. Isn't there some effort we could make?"

Valera saw the justicar's eyes run over her body.

"I suppose so. Go home and rest. I'll continue questioning her."

Valera caught the looks the two soldiers standing at the door gave each other. They gave her chills.

"Thank you, Mistress."

Mistress Culthorip bowed politely and walked off. Valera heard her heels fade down the hallway, leaving her behind. To just be able to do that right now- walk away. Valera caught herself alone now with the justicar. She had an ominous smile on her face. A couple of steps brought her face to face, inches from Valera, even as she pressed herself against the wall.

She reached around Valera's body and unlocked her cuffs. Valera was once again denied any chance to taste a moment of freedom. The Justicar had her wrists locked, held by her thumbs, even before the manacles were off. Valera squirmed, but this woman knew her trade. She reached to her belt and loosed a piece of cord.

"What are you doing?" Valera finally asked. Dommia's body was now pressed against hers, front to front, held from behind.

"Continuing your questioning."

She tied Valera's hands back to back, wrapping the thin cord around her thumbs as well. When she was done she opened the collar, taking Valera by the arm and walking her out. Her feet were still hobbled from earlier, and it was a struggle keep up with the pace her captor wanted.

"This way. The interrogator's room isn't far."

"Please, what are you going to do to me?"

"Continue your questioning."

Chapter 4

Valera passed soldiers as she walked down the hall. She wanted to beg them for help. She knew they wouldn't give her any. Her journey ended at the door to a large chamber. The Justicar found her key ring, picking one and unlocking the door.

Valera had her questions answered in full. Inside were a dozen devices designed to hold her body still while somebody inflicted pain on it. There was a rack, chains hanging from the ceiling, cages, and many other unmentionable things. Whips, flogs, and crops were hung from the wall. Metal contraptions sat lined up on tables, and she could only make terrible guesses as to how they worked.

"Over here."

Valera was pushed against a large wooden semi-circle; a table with a curved surface. When she saw the straps she realized what it was for and what the justicar meant to do to her.

"No, you can't! I'm not lying! I'll do whatever you want, just please believe me."

Valera wouldn't let Dommia do that to her. She collapsed on the ground. Dommia hauled her up, strong enough to carry her weight. She twisted and jerked. Dommia held her hair and thumbs, making Valera suffer for it. Despite every device she employed Dommia was able to pick her up and plop her on the table. Valera tried to roll off, but her back was forced to arch by the curve of the table. The justicar held her head down and pulled a leather strap across her neck, buckling it with as much difficulty as Valera could give her.

"Let's see how much you like being stripped by a strange woman," said Dommia.

Before Valera could think about what she said Dommia grabbed her tights and pulled them from her waist to the ankles. Valera screamed. Why not? People here were probably used to hearing it from this room. Once Dommia was on her ankles there wasn't much Valera could do. She was in a poor position to resist, and Dommia patiently put each ankle in a leather cuff. Her hands spent more time on Valera's legs than she was comfortable with

while she walked the length of the table back toward her head.

Valera wasn't surprised when her hands were next. She tried to reach for the strap on her neck when they were untied, but Dommia easily overpowered her. She stripped the tunic from her torso, leaving it only around her head where the leather band stopped it. Her arms were stretched above her head, and once again her fighting was in vain. Leather tightened around her wrists, and after that it was over.

Her body was part of the furniture now. She was laid out, her hands about a foot apart from each other and her feet the same way. From head to foot the table made nearly a half circle, and Valera's form was stretched taught along with it, her back, legs, and arms all curving outward. Her spine, hips, and shoulders felt the pressure put on them to hold her in this unnatural pose. Her wrists, ankles, and neck were bound directly against the wood, held as fixed points which the rest of her body was at the mercy of. She couldn't move an inch, and trying just made her joints hurt. Whatever torment the justicar intended, Valera would be laying still as the table itself while she worked.

Dommia let her neck free just long enough to get the tunic off. She put the strap right back in place. This time she put great care making it exactly as tight as it could be without completely strangling Valera. As it was, she felt it resist as she inhaled, and when she swallowed it felt like a rock going down her throat. Dommia fixed the rest of the leather bindings to be just as restrictive. Valera could do nothing but wait, the pace of her rasping breath and thumping heart giving away her fear.

"Almost done," said Dommia.

Valera watched in horror as she removed the rest of her clothing. Her chest came unbound, exposed naked for anyone to see. Her loins were uncovered and her virgin pussy was revealed underneath. She was completely nude now. The table positioned her body to put her breasts and vagina on display, presenting them prominently to the evil creature that put her there.

She had never been this vulnerable before, much less in the hands of a sadistic justicar. Jask's worst plans for her paled in comparison. Valera wished that she would wake up, still tied to the post in the courtyard. She'd be glad to have his cock in her mouth if it meant that this was all a dream. This woman would have no kindness for her when it was over, no limits to what she would

make her suffer.

If Valera had any doubts that Dommia was getting off on this they were dispelled when her fingers ran the length of her torso, starting from her loins, up the length of her slit and onto her belly. They traced the outline of her breast, and guided her whole hand to come to rest on her neck, just under where it was held immobile by the leather strap.

"Do you have anything to say yet?"

Valera knew that only one thing she could say would stop this. If it even did. But she wouldn't. Phia had been too good to her. Valera was doomed anyway; she'd endure what she had to if it kept Phia safe.

"I threw the necklace in the sea," she said, choking on the words. "I didn't want to be caught with it. It's gone. I'm sorry."

Dommia was silent for a torturous amount of time.

"That would be unfortunate. It means that you have nothing to buy mercy or freedom with."

Valera could scarcely turn her head, but she made the effort to watch Dommia leave the table and stand before the selection of whips on the wall.

"I'll start with my confession. I'm not a trained torturer. It's a very technical practice; you have to know how to cause the maximum amount of pain without killing the person. We have a professional who will be along later today."

A short whip came off the wall. It was the length of Dommia's arm, thin and stiff.

"Right now I'm just going to see if I can warm you up for him."

The end of the whip pressed gently against Valera's flesh. It drew a circle on her stomach, the strips on the end tickling her.

"What I'd like you to keep in mind is that anything you tell me now can be potentially verified before he gets here. Once he starts, you'll need a very, very convincing story to make him stop."

The whip lifted off of her skin. Valera tensed, eyes firmly shut and teeth clenched. A horrible few seconds went by before it finally came. Her soft belly shot through with pain and her skin burned long the line of contact. She screamed for a second time, and not for the last. Valera strained madly, the lashes that came one after another against her body overshadowing the pain

the leather bindings caused when they dug into her. Her struggling was completely useless- not a single stroke had to alter course to paint a fresh line across her. Her naked frame stayed exactly where the bitch wanted it.

The blows stopped, leaving the red marks across her stomach to throb in agony. Valera tried to get her breath back, the choking strap making it all the harder. While she waited for the next barrage she had to content with Dommia's hand on her breast, absently fondling it and plucking at her nipple with her fingernail.

"It's a shame. You're a good looking woman. This body could be making someone very happy."

Valera knew that it was making someone very happy right now, the freak.

"Maybe it still could, one day. But not if a certain man gets his hands on it first."

The whip gave away its next field of play, running down her legs. Minutes may as well have been hours as the cruel monster scourged her legs from the knee to the hip. As her thighs were covered with marks of the whip's touch Dommia worked inward, where the skin was softer and more sensitive. Valera howled. She begged in every way she knew how. Dommia was untouched, and only ceased when her legs were a mess of lingering pain.

Valera was soaked with sweat now. Her mouth hung open, drawing in great gulps of air. Dommia used the break to feel her up again. This time it was her inner thigh she caressed, pinching skin that was already whipped raw.

"Would you like to know what it feels like? To be in a noose?"

Valera felt a hand on her neck. The strap briefly went loose. Then it went tight. Valera tried to gasp, but her throat was being crushed by the leather band. She heard it buckle, and knew her life now depended on Dommia's rescue. Instead she traced Valera's lips with her finger, letting her body grow ever more desperate. She was surprised at how long it took, how many seconds and minutes passed while Dommia calmly watched her fading light.

Valera didn't even notice Dommia loosening the strap again. The world needed time to come back in focus. Her chest heaved and her head ached. Dommia let her recover in silence. She stared at the ceiling, too weak to try to follow her tormentor around. The only warning of her next ordeal came from

the now familiar pattern; this time, it was her breasts that the Dommia played at with the whip. When it left them to still air Valera knew the worst was about to come.

Nothing in Valera's life hurt like this. The stinging bite of the whip come mercilessly down, over and over. Once was more than she could bear. She felt her wits flee as once became twice, a dozen times, and a dozen more. She heard echos of her screams as the bounced throughout the chamber.

Dommia must have stopped at some point, but the pain faded far too slowly. The end of the whip touched another part of her body. Valera's eyes went wide. It rest between her legs, along her pussy.

"Wait..." she said, barley having the strength to speak. "Wait, wait-"

She had already decided to betray Phia. It broke her heart, but she was only human. How could she endure this, let alone what would come later? It was only her weakness and lack of courage that slowed her down from uttering the name. Dommia wasn't waiting.

One lash came down an inch to the left. She screamed. Another an inch to the right. They alternated, moving closer until they started falling on her lips. Valera was powerless to stop it, to defend her body, so unfairly abused. The final stroke laid down hard, right between them.

Dommia let her rest, doubtlessly to be ready for the next round. Every part of her hurt now. Her skin throbbed where it had been whipped. Her muscles were exhausted from futile struggling against her bondage. Her back hurt. To even hang limp was a great effort to overcome her body's reaction to the trauma it suffered.

"You can tell me now, Valera. If I find it where you say it is, I'll still call off your execution."

Valera tried to get the words out. She knew she had to. That she would be in store for even more horrible agonies if she didn't. But something stopped the name in her throat, holding her in silence.

A knock came against the door. Dommia turned.

"What is it?"

"News, Mistress Dommia. We have a lead on the gems."

Dommis sighed.

"I'll be right there."

She took one last moment to slide her hands across Valera's unwilling but available body.

"I'm disappointed you won't be giving me the chance to give you mercy."

She finally gave up all pretense and bent over, putting her lips against Valera's. When she had first been strapped down she would have resisted, but now she was spent in ways she didn't even know were possible. The woman took her pleasure.

"I thought you deserved that. It's all I can do."

Valera closed her eyes. She heard the door open and close. She was sure that somebody outside got a look at her. All she could focus on was trying to come down, to get some final moments of peace while she had the chance.

Mellis' entire life might have just gone up in smoke. Her home was gone, she was a wanted woman, and she had no idea where any of her friends were, or if they were still alive. She was worried about all of them. Well, almost all of them. The stupid girl who caused all of this mess could hang for all she cared. She'd been trouble ever since they met. That's when Valera gave her the nickname 'Oink'.

Mellis wasn't as slender as Valera was, but fat she wasn't. She was all hips and boobs. And while she didn't have Valera's toned, flat stomach, something Mellis only knew about because of recent events, her waist hardly bulged outward. She had the perfect body for a man to put himself on top of, and men volunteered any time she walked down the street without a concealing cloak.

She waited in the small house she shared with an old widow and a young woman who didn't think Mellis knew she was a whore working on Boggar street. It was a place to sleep, but the gang's hangout- that was home. Now it was crawling with soldiers. Mellis was luck to be gone at the time. She wasn't a fighter like Berg or a runner like Valera. She could pick a man's pocket while he held both her hands, but if she'd been in the place when they raided it she would probably be taken. When she walked by a few minutes ago she saw the soldiers outside, and more inside searching. She calmly kept walking. Fortunately, none of them noticed. She didn't even know if they had her name or description- she'd have to assume they did to be safe.

Finding anyone, even if they all got away, would be damn hard. If the gang was betrayed nobody would know who could be trusted. Mellis was glad that nobody knew where she lived. A lot of them were paranoid like that. If they had a secret place to meet for such a time, nobody would probably show up when it came down to it.

But without Coddis, Mellis wouldn't have safe territory to work anymore. No Breg watching her back. It would be dangerous, even without a justicar hunting for her. She could hardly run to any of the other gangs- they all had grudges, and it could be one of them that ratted Coddis out.

Mellis fixed her strawberry blond hair while she thought, tying it behind her head. A knock on the door made her jump. She dashed out to the window, and at the street she saw a hunched, nervous man in a tattered cloak. He wasn't a justcar, but he could be looking to turn her in to one for a reward.

"Who is it?" she called out, walking toward the side door that led into the alleyway.

"I've got message for a girl who lives here," he said, "Her name is Mellis? It was from a lad, said she'd know who he was. Jask, it was."

Mellis didn't believe it for a second.

"Just a moment," she said, "Let me find my key."

She picked up a jar and threw it at the front door, letting the noisy crash cover her exit into the alley. She ran, taking the long way down the alley past the house that stood back to back with her's, hoping to make the street before he thought to look down the alley. She didn't even make it halfway.

Two arms wrapped around her, pinning her to a colliding body. She felt her feet leave pavement as he lifted her up and spun her away from the street. He clamped a huge hand over her mouth and carried her back to the house. Mellis thrashed in his grip, but he was much larger than he looked from the window. Even when she bit his hand he took no notice. He handled her with the easy of a child playing with a doll.

Mellis' wind flew out of her when the man shoved her onto the floor. She rolled onto her back, hoping to defend herself. Before she could draw a breath to scream he silenced her again. She grabbed his arm with both hands, trying to tear it away, but he had no trouble keeping her down. She lifted her knee to plant it in his ribs, but she had no weight to put behind it and he ignored the

blow.

She stared into his face, looking for any sign of his intentions. He was eerily calm, and underneath his cloak she now saw much nicer garments underneath. In a few brief seconds a thousand fears went through her mind.

While one hand held her prone he pulled a vial from his shirt pocket, and with his thumb uncorked it. His hand shifted, no longer blocking her mouth but squeezing her face to open her jaw. She tried to turn her head to the side, to close her lips or teeth- anything to stop him from pouring his poison down her throat. She tasted the liquid splashing on her tongue and felt it flowing past.

Mellis tried to force it up, but the man held her mouth shut, and lifted her head from behind. She squirmed frantically, but her body began to go limp and her breathing slowed despite her panic. Her hands dropped from his arm, and she didn't have the strength to raise them again. He put her head down and let her face go. She told her body to scream, but a whimper was all she could force out between her lips.

Her horror only intensified when he used her paralysis to roll her onto her stomach and bind her hands back to back. He had an easy time of stuffing a handkerchief in her mouth, and even her whimpers fell silent when he tied it deep between her teeth. Soon her feet were tied too, and she could only listen while he opened her front door and dragged something heavy into the house.

She listened to something creak as it opened, just out of her sight. She knew nothing else until the man lifted her whole body, and when he lowered her into a large wooden trunk she begged her body to start moving again. Her legs were folded and she watched as the lid closed, leaving her in darkness.

Valera tried to squeeze her hands free from the straps holding her fast to the table. Her body punished her for the effort, her joints and muscles aching as she put tension on them. She quickly gave up this latest attempt. Over the last few hours there had been many, and the result was utterly the same- the leather was as tight around her wrist as possible, and she remained stuck. Still naked, clothed only in the red lines left behind by the whip and still bent backward across the table. Her back especially resented her position; it hurt when she moved and it hurt when she didn't.

She heard the chamber door opening. This was it. She had spent hours

dreading it, struggling for freedom even when she was only rewarded with more suffering. She was too afraid to even look his way- if her neck would let her. She shut her eyes, trying to prepare herself for the worst agony a human could suffer. She couldn't. How could she?

A hand closed her jaw and covered her mouth. It was soft, and smelled of perfume. It smelled familiar.

"Shhh... Gods, what did they do to you?"

It was Phia. Was she hallucinating now? How could she be here? Had they caught her? Valera's heart had been torn to bloody shreds since she first decided to give her up. She planned fully to give them Phia's name, in the hope it might stay the torture's hand just a little.

"Can you hear me, Valera? Are you... there?"

Valera whimpered. Phia took her hand away.

"Phia?" whispered Valera. "Is that you? How?"

She opened her eyes. Phia standing over here was the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen.

"Just be quiet. You'll be okay."

Phia began to unstrap her, starting with her neck. Valera had no words for the feeling when the tension on her arms stopped, her hands finally free. She tried to pull her body toward her feet, relieving it just a little, but she was too weak. She could hardly even roll onto the ground when her feet were released.

Her friend helped her down, sitting her next to the table and giving her the most painful and wonderful hug of her life.

"Take a minute. Just a minute. We need to hurry, but you need to be able to walk too."

"Phia, what's going on?"

"We're escaping. They're not going to hurt you anymore."

"I don't understand."

Valera first noticed what Phia was wearing when she began to take it off. It was a bright yellow dress, matched with a white scarf over her head. The dress looked slightly off, and Valera saw why when there was an identical one underneath it.

"You'd be surprised how easy it is to get in here. People do it all the time,

on all kinds of business. The guards can't keep track of who everyone is, and if they're busy you can get left in the main hall waiting for quite a while."

Phia brought Valera her clothes, minus the tunic, and started helping her get dressed.

"Jask convinced a greedy little snitch of a sailor that the thieves the justicar is so intent on finding were hidden on a ship about to leave port. Told him there was a reward for them, but that obviously neither of them would sell out good, simple folk just trying to get by to those nasty justicars."

"Once I was sure Mistress Dommia would be away, I came in saying I needed to see her. They wanted to know why, and I spun some reasons I needed to talk to her, about not wanting rumors to get out. They got annoyed, and told me to wait in the hall until she came back. Even said they couldn't guarantee she'd see me. That was fine."

"The only hard part was figuring out where you were. Jask knew someone who could tell us the basic layout, but I still had to peek into a few rooms to find you. It was risky, but we didn't have time for a better plan. I guess you had a little bit of luck owed to you, from the looks of it."

Phia put Valera in her duplicate dress, hiding her black hair with the scarf.

"This isn't going to work," said Valera, not trusting to hope after expecting the worst for so long, "I don't look anything like you."

"It won't matter. People don't remember faces. They barely remember anything. They think they do, but as long as you hit a few of the same notes, you'll look perfectly familiar to them."

"I don't-"

"Listen, Valera, my sweet little girl- I know you never had a head for this kind of thing. Just listen, and just do what I say. Walk out of this room. Don't sneak; nothing is going to be easier to spot than you sneaking around in that dress. Just walk. If anyone stops you, say that your name is Angla and that you just had an audience with Captain Bunt and that he told you to go back to waiting in the main hall. Smile at the guard. His office is close to this room. Take a left, then another left, then a right and one more left. Once you get to the main hall just walk out of the front gate."

"Don't run, don't look back, just walk. If you look like you're not

expecting someone to stop you, they usually won't."

"But what are you going to do?"

"I'll wait a little while and follow you."

"But the guards will see you. They'll know something is wrong."

"They'll think it. But what are they going to do? I'm the woman who walked in. People do that all the time, dear. They see something wrong, and they don't do anything. Because they doubt themselves. They'll see the second woman leaving in the yellow dress, and they'll make excuses. Because they aren't sure. You never could believe what you can make people accept if everyone around them is treating something as normal. But now you have to. Just trust me. Just believe in me."

Valera hugged her friend again. She stood. It wasn't easy, but she could walk. She let her breathing slow. She bowed her head. She listened to make sure nobody was on the other side of the door. She walked.

It was like putting her hand in a pit of snakes. She passed a party of soldiers. When they noticed her she smiled. Each one was willing to believe that she was blushing at a handsome man in uniform, and not that she was nervous. None of the snakes struck, and she entered the main hall.

A soldier was there that she recognized. It was the older of the pair that chained her up in the cell. One of the ones that arrested her. He glanced at her, but didn't seem to notice anything off.

A man in a better class of uniform- an officer- was the first to challenge her.

"Leaving already? Mistress Dommia can't be back yet."

Valera just let herself speaking, trusting to fate that whatever she said wouldn't give her away.

"I'll be back in a moment," she said, turning as she continued to walk so that she was still looking at him, "I'm just going to get some early dinner, since I'll be here a while."

He nodded. She crossed back into the world of the living. She was on the streets again. She walked until the keep was out of sight. When she rounded a corner into a familiar alley her knees buckled. She caught herself against the wall, trying to put her world back together after it had been torn apart.

The entrance to the alley darkened. Someone was there. She reached for

her knife, which obviously wasn't there. Someone grabbed her in her moment of confusion.

"Woah! Stop! It's me."

It was him. Jask was wearing a butcher's smock and a dirty cap. It wasn't his usually attire, which was probably the point.

"Come on," he said, "I've got a safe place we can go. Phia knows where it is."

Valera ditched her scarf and followed him. She needed new clothes. Something she could work in.

"Deeper," she moaned. "Deeper, you damn whore, or I'll never let you go."

Dommia pressed the woman's face into her pussy, grinding on her mouth. The woman had no say in the matter- she was lying on her bed with Dommia sitting on her face, her hands were tied behind her head, held from straying by a rope that circled around her neck. Dommia knew that it was taking active effort for the woman to not choke herself, her hands closer to her neck than was natural. It wasn't made easier by Dommia's shins resting on the woman's arms. Dommia liked it that way.

Ceath's purpose in life at this moment was to make Dommia cum as much as possible, and Dommia would do whatever she needed to the woman to make it happen. Dommia made sure Ceath knew it, too. She'd punished the woman before for not working hard enough. She must have remembered the lesson, because her tongue reached ever more into Dommia's pussy. Dommia rode her face, rubbing her lips hard against Ceath's mouth. Dommia moaned, spreading her wetness sloppily over her victim while Ceath squealed for mercy underneath the fury of Dommia's climax. She didn't know if Ceath could breathe the way she was smothering her. She hoped she couldn't.

Dommia slowed down, feeling her release flow out of her, and eased up only once she was completely satisfied. Ceath gasped, and Dommia let her tend to her body's needs now that her service had been done.

"Give it a kiss," she said, once both women had taken a moment to catch their breath.

Ceath obeyed. Dommia sighed.

"You're lucky. I'll have to punish you later."

"Punish me?" asked Ceath. "I've done everything you asked, Mistress Dommia."

"Yes, you have. But I have to leave, as soon as I get my clothes back on. And I know that once I do you'll put your fingers in you cunt and fuck yourself."

"No, Mistress, I won't."

"You liar."

Forbidding Ceath to ever touch herself was a whim Dommia had after the first time she used the woman. She didn't expect her to actually obey, but it was a fun bit of play. When she could spend the night with Ceath she got to watch her squirm, denied release after Dommia used every trick she knew to wind her up. But that wouldn't be tonight.

Dommia was lucky to get a moment with Ceath at all. She'd wasted hours on a bogus lead, searching ships in the harbor and questioning sailors. Dommia had been working herself ragged for the last couple of days. Ever since she rendered her judgment on Lady Hennisfair she'd been itching for some action, and having to see the thief, Valera, stretched out naked while she whipped her- Dommia told her soldiers that she needed to run an errand on her way back to headquarters. It was the truth.

She untied Ceath, the lonely wife of a seaman who was too faithful to ever cheat on her husband. This wasn't cheating, naturally. It was just between two women, after all, and Ceath was only rendering services to a Mistress Justicar anyway. She couldn't deny such an important person.

Dommia dressed with Ceath watch her, stretching her arms. Maybe what she needed was a chastity belt. When her husband came back she could tell him she was afraid of being raped and lost the key.

Dommia put it out of her head. It was back to duty for now.

"When will you be back?" asked Ceath.

"Tomorrow night, I hope. Be here. It'll be the manacles and whip when I do."

Dommia left the woman behind in silence. She felt better now. Back to work. Hopefully the thief was ready to talk. She'd been left to stew for a while now. She could buy the girl a couple more hours if she gave her a promising

enough answer. After that, she wouldn't be able to let her base desires get in the way of her official responsibilities.

She arrived at headquarters as the day was beginning to fade. The guards at the door stiffened their backs when she passed. Inside she was sure there would be more tasks piled up for her. She made straight for her office, stopping only when she passed the door to the interrogation chamber. Might as well, she thought, hoping again that she could spare the girl.

She was surprised to find the chamber empty. Only the thief's tunic had been left behind.

"Captain Bunt!"

Dommia shouted the name, but didn't wait. She found him in his office.

"Captain, where is the prisoner? The one from the Culthorip burglary?"

"She should be in the interrogation room."

"She isn't"

Captain Bunt stood.

"I haven't given any orders to have her moved."

Dommia had a feeling that when got her hands on Valera again, she was going to feel much less merciful than she did a few minutes ago.

Mellis screamed, still muffled by the cloth in her mouth. She kicked as much as she could, but there was no room for it, and the trunk that had been her prison for gods knew how long now was in no danger. Her strength had come back too late; by the time she could do anything the trunk had stopped moving. That was a while ago now, and nobody came to interrupt her calls for help.

Until now, at least. Her first warning was the sound of a key entering a lock. When she saw light again her abductor was standing over her. He was wearing a robe now, dark red with a leather belt around his waist. He reached down with one arm and lifted her out, dragging her across the floor to throw her into a chair.

She looked around the room- it was a cellar, an unused one based on based on the remnants of tools and machinery left rusting behind, a few lanterns providing a glow to see in. She had no idea where in the city she was, but this man obviously wasn't a justicar. Or planning on bringing her to one.

The man squeezed her arms around the back of the chair and bound her hands directly to one of the horizontal slats, keeping her from escaping. He grabbed her face and forced it toward his, clinically examining it. She stared back at him, looking into his cold eyes. He let her go, but she couldn't bring herself to take her gaze off of him.

A bag, the kind a craftsman might carry his tools in, sat at his feet. He bent over to dig into it. Mellis screamed when she saw the gleaming blade that came out. The man ignored her and slipped the knife between her chest and the dress she wore. She closed her eyes, hearing and feeling it as her body had the clothes cut from it.

Whatever could be slid down over her feet was, and whatever couldn't was sliced up and ripped off. Mellis sat as she was reduced to her bare skin, her breasts hanging free and her pussy not hidden very well by her closed knees alone. She waited in fear for the knife to begin slicing her skin, sure that he meant to murder her.

She put up a token effort to stop her feet from being tied to a brace between the chair's legs, but knew it couldn't save her. When he was done the man stood, circling behind her. Her ponytail was seized and used to crane her neck back over the back of the chair. He added his hand under her chin, solidifying the hold. He stared down at her face from above. She begged him not to hurt her, but all he would hear were unintelligible umphs and groans.

"Quiet. When I'm ready to hear you speak, I will remove your gag. Until then, listen. I know that you are part of a petty gang of street scum. I know that there is a woman named Valera in this gang. She has something I am interested in. The nice young lady at the brothel, the one on Boggar street, has let me know a number of other details. But not enough."

"She worked for a Lady Dusk, haunting street corners before finding a nicer place to sell her wares. She knew your gang. I was thorough in my interview with her. She knew, for example, where I could find your home."

That couldn't be true. She'd have never told one of Dusk's whores where her house was. Then again, street whores spent a lot of time on the street, didn't they? Had Mellis overestimated how well her tracks were covered?

"My point is that if you are less than honest, I will likely catch on it. If your information conflicts with hers, I will be forced to take extreme

measures."

"I want to know how to find Valera, or where she hid the necklace. The one with the ruby pendant."

Was this man working for the merchant Valera robbed. Or did he just want the loot for himself? Either way, if ratting out Valera would keep her life from ending horribly in this cellar, Mellis would tell him everything she new.

"Scream, if it suits you. The cellar is quite deep, and the house above empty."

He let her head roll forward and removed her gag. Mellis spat out the cloth in her mouth, swallowing to get the taste to go away.

"I'll talk. If you let me go, I'll talk."

"You'll be free to leave once I'm satisfied."

Mellis knew there was nothing to hold him to that, but the thread of hope was her only lifeline.

"Valera still had the necklace when I saw her. Our hideout was raided by soldiers, so she probably went to her friend Phia's place, if they didn't get her."

"Tell me about Phia."

Mellis did. She told him where she lived, what both of them looked like, how they worked, where they liked to go, and any other drop she could spill out. She told him about Jask, and that he might try to help her too. She hoped that nothing the whore told him was wrong or misunderstood, because she was certainly telling him enough to risk contradicting something.

"That's everything. If you can't find her with that, then I wouldn't have any better luck myself."

The man let her sit nervously in silences for a moment.

"Thank you. That should be rather useful. I have more now than my rival, and since I've beaten him to you, he won't be getting the same."

"What? Is someone else looking for me?"

The man went back to digging in his bag.

"Master Culthorip. Mistress Culthorip's brother. He's searching for your friend as well. I followed him to the brothel. Where him and his buffoons only stirred things up and drove the genuine treasures to ground, I was able to come in their wake and employ more subtle measures."

Mellis saw what he was holding now. It was a metal ring with leather

straps on the side. He took position behind her again.

"Obviously, he won't be able to follow the same trail now. If you haven't reasoned it out yet, my promise to free you was a lie."

"No-"

Mellis tried to protest, but as soon as she opened her mouth to scream he put his fingers inside. She tried to bite them, she came down on hard metal. It was the ring. His strong hands pushed it behind her teeth. Mellis wanted it out, but it proved impossible to move, especially once the leather strap tightened around her head. The corners of her mouth were pinched and her hair was pulled.

The inside of her mouth was now as naked and available as the rest of her. What was he going to do? Was he going to pour more poison down her throat? Not being able to close her lips was a new kind of vulnerability, more terrifying than she would have expected.

She hadn't even noticed that her hands were no longer tied to the chair. The man pulled her arms back over the top. He slid her off the seat, onto her knees in front of the chair. Her feet were still tied to the support, and her hands to each other. There was nowhere for her to go other than face first into the ground.

He stood in front of her, loosening his belt. He was going to fuck her mouth. Mellis screamed, easier now that her mouth was held open instead of stuffed, hoping that his indifference was a bluff. She turned her head away and leaned back over the chair as his robe parted and his pants slid down around his feet.

As calm as ever, he caught her hair in his grasp and pulled her back into position. His erect dick was inches from her face now, close enough for her to smell it. He put his hands on either side of her head, guiding it onto his cock. She first felt it on her lips, hanging over the ring. It slid over the top of her tongue, rubbing against the roof of her mouth as well. Deeper and deeper it went. It wasn't the first penis she'd ever tasted, but it was by far the largest and least welcome. She gagged on it, convulsing while he still held her in his strong hands.

"It's going to stay in there until you're used to it. Come on, all the way."

Mellis couldn't imagine getting used to this. She tried to get off, to get it

out, but he only let her go a fraction of an inch before pushing it deeper than before. She whimpered, all of her other cries for help turning into a wet gurgle.

She heard him chuckle. It made her skin crawl, and she could see his dispassionate facade slipping away. Soon her face was pressed into his groin, nose and lips flattened against it. She stayed there, miserably, while his cock soaked in her spit and its taste permeated her mouth. Drool spilled out from her lips and ran down her chin. He shifted it around, and she gagged again each time. He was good on his word; she spent an eternity learning to accept his whole length without choking.

It was worse when he started actually fucking. He worked slow at first, grinding over the top of her tongue. He didn't seem to care for finesse. Soon he was thrusting into her throat, groaning and squeezing her head. Mellis squeezed her eyes shut, using all of her strength to hold herself together.

He tried her endurance like no one ever had. Her jaw and knees were killing her, and from her chest down to her stomach she was covered with drippings from her chin. He groaned deeply, warning her only an instant before her mouth filled with his cum. The idea of swallowing it disgusted her, but when he didn't pull out, letting his whole mess stew with her face again pressed against his crotch, she had no choice. When he finally withdrew he made sure to squeeze every drop out of himself first.

Even when his dick was gone the feeling and taste weren't. She couldn't even spit, unless she wanted it all over her own body.

"There," he said. "A perk of the job, you could call it. Anyway, I'm finished with you now. As I mentioned, you won't be walking out of here."

Mellis, worn down and after a complete demonstration of her helplessness to him, could do nothing but stay on her knees, waiting to find out what he intended.

He untied her feet from the chair, grabbed her by the hair again, and forced her to shuffle on her knees back to the trunk. It looked like a coffin to her. He toppled her into it, balling her up to make her fit.

"A couple of men will be coming here to pick you up. Have you ever wished to travel overseas? They'll be taking you where you won't be an inconvenience to me. I hope they aren't too rough with you. But- if you don't

mind a little honesty- I do hope you have to swallow every sailor's dick on your way to whatever foreign brothel you wind up in."

Mellis watched the lid close, sealing her in darkness. This couldn't be real, could it? Someone had to find her, to rescue her. Coddis would send help. Somehow he'd figure it out. She waited, naked and still drooling from her open mouth, for a miracle to happen.

Jask opened the door to his room, letting Valera inside. It was a run-down house, more spacious than the place she slept in, but from the looks of it also more likely to collapse in a heap of rotten wood while she did. The place was near the south wall, not too far from the gate. On the way she'd ditched the dress, snatching a boy's tunic and a hood from a clothesline. They weren't a perfect fit, but she could move and sneak in them, which was what mattered.

Valera sighed and sat down, resting her back against a wall for want of any furniture to sit on. It had been her first chance to truly rest in a long time. While danger still stalked after her, certain to pick up on her trail eventually, for the moment it was out of sight. Jask joined her, sitting to her side.

"Everyone's gone to ground," he said. "I don't think they got anyone when they raided the hideout. Smokey got wind of them coming and gave the word to scramble. I haven't heard from anyone since then, though."

Valera was glad to hear it. She had enough to feel guilty about without knowing that somebody else was in the justicar's hands because of her.

"Gang's a bust, though," said Jask. "I don't know how we're going to be safe doing anything with the law hunting after us."

"I don't know either. This whole thing is shit."

She didn't want to think about it right now. She'd rather just put her head on the floor and pass out. She felt herself lean to the side, stopping when she came up against Jask's shoulder.

"We should just leave. Yorshir, I mean. Leave this damn city and start new somewhere."

"Where? I've never left Yorshir before. You haven't either. This city is all we know."

"What about Sahndusk? It's close."

"I don't know. Leaving Yorshir? Leaving the whole gang?"

"Yeah. I mean... Yorshir's been good to us for a long time. So has the gang. I wish we could go back. But Coddis trained us good. We're ready. We don't need them anymore. We'll miss them, but you and me, we're good enough to start off on our own. A new city, a new adventure. Maybe we can start our own gang. Or find one that needs good talent."

"That easy, huh?"

Valera heard someone outside the door. It opened up and Phia stepped into the room. She looked tired as she closed the door behind her.

"Well," she said, "We're safe for now. But I hope you have a good plan for getting that justicar off your back, because not even I know how to do that."

"I have kind of an idea. Where's the necklace?" asked Valera.

"It's in the stash. I didn't quite want to carry it into the keep."

Valera knew what she was talking about. They had a shared hiding place they could put something for each other in case there was ever trouble.

"You need to find some way to hand it over," said Phia. "I doubt it'll get them off you completely, but if it gets you put just a little lower on their list of priorities it'll be worth it."

"Better to keep it," said Jask. "A bargaining chip if they do manage to catch her again."

Valera hit him.

"They're not going to catch me again. Besides, the justicar already told me that it'd only get me sent to a labor camp instead of the gallows. Screw that. I was talking to Jask, Phia. Telling him that we ought to leave Yorshir and set up in Sahndusk."

"Sahndusk, huh? That's not a bad idea. I've never been there, but I know some people who have. It's not much different from here; same kind of city, same kinds of people. Learning the who's who might be tricky, but if you can snatch a purse here you can do it there."

"Then we're doing it. Come on, Jask, what's your better idea?"

She knew she could get him to come along. She had to. She talked like it would be nothing, but it did scare her a little. She would need someone watching her back; together they'd be in much better shape than she would be alone.

"I don't know," he said, "You never like my ideas anyway."

"Then we're going. We can leave tonight, while it's dark enough to sneak over the city wall."

"We're better off taking some horses," said Phia. "It's a three day ride. I'll go talk to a friend of mine. She knows a lot about Sahndusk, and I can get some advice from her. Grab anything you need for the trip, but stay away from your apartment, Valera. I don't know if they've found it, but it's too much to risk. There's a stables near the south gate we can steal some horses from. I'll take them out the south gate by myself while you two go over the wall, and we'll meet on the road. We can ride from there; if we get out soon, we'll be farther ahead than any news about us."

"You're coming too?" asked Valera.

"Of course I am. I risked a lot getting you out of that prison. I'm not going to let that go to waste sending you two off on your own to a strange city. I'll come down and help you get started. I can spare a few weeks away from Yorshir."

Valera smiled. She reached for Phia's hand and pulled her close so that she could hug her without getting up. The sun would set before much longer, but until then it was safer to stay put. Maybe she could even get an hour or so of sleep.

"Should we let Coddis know?" said Jask. "It'd be crappy to leave him looking for us when we're gone."

"No," said Phia, "Make as clean a break as you can. Maybe if things have cooled off one day I'll tell him, but even then... no. Smart thing is for nobody else to know."

Valera's stomach growled.

"Shit, I haven't eaten today at all. I guess my gut's finally unknotted itself. You got any food around here, Jask?"

"Yeah," he said. "I guess we better go ahead and eat it. It sounds like this will be our last night in Yorshir."

A minute later Valera was sinking her teeth into some biscuits that probably should have been eaten a few days ago. She didn't worry about it much. She had a lot of planning to do. Her life had changed more than she ever thought it would, and it was time to make something of her own choosing out of it.

Chapter 5

Korsk's information was already proving true. He didn't need to wait after he arrived at the house where this 'Phia' woman lived. A woman was inside, and from the sound of it she was busy. He considered breaking in, rushing her, and taking her to question as he had the last one. He didn't even have to use his tools on that one to make her talk.

He backed off instead, waiting outside in his less conspicuous clothing. Phia was, supposedly, much closer to Valera. Close enough to give him some real resistance. She'd talk, that was a given, but he'd lose valuable time. He would risk following her instead. She wasn't just settling in for the night, not with the hurried footsteps he'd picked up from the other side of her door.

Night had come, the darkness offering to aid his stealthy pursuit. As predicted, her lamps were extinguished and she emerged from the residence, a traveling bag hanging from her shoulder. She was a wary creature, looking behind her and taking an obviously more complicated route than necessary. Her eyes were not practiced enough for seeking shadows, however, and Korsk evaded her attention.

She stopped at another apartment, one that was too nice to be his target's. He let her knock on the door and gain her entrance before getting close. He lurked in the side alley, outside an open window. He'd missed the first part of the conversation, but he was well in time for what he needed.

Sahndusk. The woman Phia was visiting was telling her how to get to Sahndusk. He listened, making note of each detail. He recognized each landmark mentioned, knowing the route well himself. Phia didn't let the conversation be dragged on after that. She was in a hurry, and Korsk had no doubt that she meant to leave tonight.

She wouldn't flee to another city just when her friend was in trouble. If he was confident in his information, at least, which he had good reason to be. Valera was either coming with her or already in Sahndusk, needing Phia's help. He could continue following Phia directly, but the longer he did that the more he risked being seen. Besides, if she was going to Sahndusk, he'd be best off fetching his horse. He could be ready to leave in very little time, and if he

missed her at the southern gate he'd catch her on the road.

His course was set. He caught one really good look at her as she left her friend's house. Perhaps he'd get a chance to question her later. He shouldn't have left his special gag in the other girl's mouth.

Dannis didn't yawn. He sensed it coming, and killed it with raw willpower. He wasn't going to give up his chase so easily, even if he was getting delirious from lack of sleep. He swayed in his saddle, his horse being a necessary replacement for his own legs to keep him going.

The rest of his gang had scattered long ago, spread out to cast a wider net when their leads ran dry. Dannis doubted that most of them were still looking. Only Geard was still with him.

"Now what?" he asked, obviously tired himself.

"We're near the south gate," said Dannis. "We'll ask there to see if anyone's seen him leaving town."

Geard grunted in approval, and after a couple of minutes of the hypnotic clip clop of his horse's shoes they rounded a corner to see the gate down the street. Dannis saw something else interesting enough to cut through his fatigue. It was- what was his name? Did he ever give it? The supposed representative of the jewel crafters stood, holding the reigns of a horse in his hand, talking to one of the guards at the gate.

Dannis' old suspicions about him came forth. He put his horse to a trot, but by the time he reached the gate the man was gone, riding into the darkness. He stopped his horse by the guard, hearing Geard slowly catch up to him.

"What were you talking to that man about?"

"Why is it your business, Master?" he said, sounding suspicious himself.

"Because he may have pulled a fraud on me."

"What sort of fraud?"

Dannis thought of a good lie, before realizing that the truth probably gave him a better case.

"A piece of property was stolen from my sister. I'm searching for it, but I think he may be trying to find it first. Actually, I know he is, he told me. But I'm not sure he intends to give it back if he does."

"I suppose that's fair enough. He asked me if some people passed through tonight. Two men and a woman."

"Were a young woman with black hair and a young man with brown curly hair two of them?"

"That's them. Wait, are those the thieves?"

"Yes, they are. Do you have any idea where they were going?"

"He didn't say, but Sahndusk is the only real place south of here within five days' ride. I imagine they'll be going through there, at least. If this is about a theft, Master, I'd be negligent of my duty not to tell a justicar."

Sahndusk? That made sense. It was close and they could sell the jewels there. That Justicar Dommia probably wouldn't follow them there, either.

"Go tell my father," he said, turning to Geard, "Ask him to send a man to Sahndusk with some things for my stay."

"Wait, are you-"

"And then go find a Justicar Dommia, to make our friend here happy."

Dannis didn't wait for comment from either man. He struck his horse into a gallop and threw himself into the night, letting only the limited reach of his lantern check his speed. It didn't take him long to overtake the other man, and he shot past him without worry. The dim light would hide his face well enough. He rode ahead, hoping to catch the thief before she got too far. He was well into his journey before wondering- did the guard actually tell him whether the three people had come through or not?

Valera watched the poor girl struggling on her bed. Hogtied, blindfolded, and gagged in her underclothes with strips of own gown. She was such a pretty, delicate thing, begging in a pathetic whimper.

She raised her weapon, a short, thin whip. She let it fall. The girl screamed, muffled by the gag, and a red line appeared on her thigh. Valera rolled her onto the side, an odd position for her with her legs still spread. She could watch every gentle motion of the bound girl's body, every small muscle tense and relax, every heave of her chest, and every subtle shift of her frame as she tried to find some mercy in how she was tied. She could see every way that her bindings held her in a shape that caused her such anguish and terror. She could see how she begged not just with her whimpering, but with her

entire body as her bound limbs pulled against knots that she knew wouldn't give.

Valera painted her body red. Her victim's screams and thrashing took on every character imaginable. It didn't matter. Valera held all of the power, and it was her desire to see this girl suffer.

As her arm swung the whip, over and over, she became aware of someone standing behind her, guiding her hand and showing her how to put the most cruelty possible into every lash. Valera accepted it. It was the justicar, teaching her craft. Valera let herself learn. Only when she heard the laugh over her shoulder did Valera notice her red skin, her talon-like nails, and her unnaturally hot breath flowing onto her neck. She felt something on her leg, and looked down to see a tail wrapping around it.

"It's your turn."

Valera saw the girl, now untied and holding the strips of cloth in her hand. She didn't resist. Luccela held her arms while the girl stripped her. She held her down on the bed while she was tied up, twice as tight as the girl had been. She opened her mouth willingly to allow it to be stuffed with a gag still soaked in the other girl's saliva.

She saw Luccela stand behind the girl, but the whip in her hand, and show her how to raise it. Valera closed her eyes. The next moment was as painful as she expected.

Dommia heard a knock on her office door. It took her a bit of time to understand this, since she'd heard it while sleeping. By the view from her window showed it was early morning.

"Come," she said, sitting and wiping the sleep from her eyes.

Back to work, it was. She was Justicar Dommia Bethor. Losing a prisoner was inexcusable, and she'd put it right if she had to die doing it. The few hours of sleep she'd allowed herself were a necessity, not a luxury. Her line of work required a clear head, after all. And now she had one again. So back to work.

A young man, about her age, entered. He had foppish blond hair and a measure of charm to his face. She didn't recognize him, but his clothing gave away his class.

"Hello, Mistress," said the man. "I, uh, have some information about a

criminal you're hunting for."

Dommia was too good a detective not to notice that he was trying to get a better look at her body, particularly her ass, hidden from his side of the desk.

"Which one?"

"The one that attacked poor Bescie. There wouldn't happen to be some kind of reward, would there?"

"If what you say turns out to be useful, yes, there's a small sum to be had."

"Well," he said, sitting on her desk, "I have something worth more than a small sum. Maybe you can offer an alternative? Some other way to make it worth my time? You know, you look like you've been working awfully hard--"

Dommia did not have time for this. She wished that she did; if it was Sir Elchar here...

"That was clumsy and awful. Get off my desk and tell me what you know before I have you flogged."

He took her seriously.

"I was with Dannis, Bescie's brother, last night. We had been hunting for the thief ourselves, and we finally found something when he questioned one of the guards at the south gate. Turns out they're skipping town. They're going to Sahndusk."

"Wait, who is 'they'? And if you found out about this last night, why are you only telling me now?"

"Oh, the thief has a guy name Jask with her. There's another woman, too; I don't know what she's doing with them. When Dannis took off after them he told me to go tell his father, and I was pretty tired, and figured I'd spend the night. His sister is still having a difficult time, you know."

"So your friend rode off alone after three potentially dangerous criminals, and you spent the night trying to seduce his traumatized sister instead of coming to tell me right away?"

The man's face was turning red.

"That's not fair at all. If anything ever did happen between me and Bescie- which it hasn't- it would be because--"

"Stop. I want the whole story, starting from the morning after the

robbery, right now."

Valera groaned, rolling over to resist Jask's prodding. He was trying to wake her up, the bastard.

"Come on, it's way past sunrise. We need to get going."

"Why? nobody's waiting on us," she said, burying her face in her arms.

"What if somebody is following us? We'll be easy to find on the road."

"Then we should stay here."

Trying to travel last night hadn't gone well. Riding a horse was more difficult than Valera expected, especially at night when they couldn't see. She and Jask were hopeless, and before they got too far they had to dismount and find a campsite. What they settled on was a clear spot on the other side of a patch of forest. It hid them from the road, but other than that all it offered was some grass to sleep on.

None of them had any camping gear. They were in a hurry to leave the city, particularly hoping to get out before the stables noticed three missing horses. Valera had almost nothing with her save for the money from her stash, most of it from selling the jewelry. They had a single lantern between them and some food and water. All three of them wound up sleeping on bare ground.

"Well, if you're not going anywhere, I might as well tie you up."

Jask started to make good on his word, and she felt him climb over and straddle her body.

"Hey!"

Valera scrambled out from under him and got to her feet.

"You prick," she said, brushing grass off her clothes.

"At least I'm a clever prick."

"Where's Phia?"

"Peeing, I think."

Valera checked her pocket. It was still there.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Huh, oh," she said, looking around to make sure they were alone. She pulled the necklace out just enough to show him.

"Lookit."

"That's- You told Phia that you wrapped that up and gave it a soldier as

something for that justicar!"

"Quiet! After all I've been through over this thing? Tied up, chained up, beat up, whipped, nearly killed- I'm going to get paid for this, even if it turns out to be fake and only worth a cold lunch."

"You got whipped?"

"Yeah," she said, solemnly, "and even-"

No, Jask didn't need to hear about the kiss. Valera just wished she had a chance to pay her back. She put the necklace away.

"Nevermind. I'm going to sell this damn thing. I have to now. Don't tell Phia."

Jask shook his head, but Valera knew he'd keep quiet. He was no snitch, and he was in this with her now. A little something more to get started with in Sahndusk wouldn't hurt, and he knew it.

"Finally, you're up."

Phia came out of the trees, looking far too groomed for their circumstances.

"How close is the first inn?" asked Valera.

"Maybe we should avoid those," said Jask. "That's the first place anyone following us will stop to look. Or ask about."

"We'll find a farmer's house next time," said Phia. "We'll tell him the inn was full. We might have to sleep in a barn, but at least they'll be a roof and some straw to sleep on. We can probably buy food from him too."

They mounted their horses, and as the sun rose higher in the sky Valera started to get a handle on managing the beast. Soon she was comfortable enough to start paying attention to the land around her. She'd never been in such a wide open space, not a building in sight, and it somehow seemed peaceful, despite making her nervous. The smell was unfamiliar- the air was just missing something. The quiet was strange.

The didn't talk much- traveling mostly in silence. Valera started remembering her dream. It was nothing like the one with the demoness. It wasn't nearly as lucid or real. But she didn't want to think she'd dream like that of her own accord. The sooner she could get rid of the necklace the better.

Dommia's horse was sluggish, too tired to keep the pace she wanted.

Three soldiers lagged even farther behind, now six hours into their ride. Dommia hoped they'd hold out. Ahead of them was the inn, the first most likely stop for any one of the people she was after, and she didn't want to rest until she arrived there. That way she could at least do some questioning while they waited for the horses to recover. If she was lucky, a fresh horse might be had.

Her real hope had been to find the thief and her confederates by now. They had a head start on her, but if they were on foot she still might catch up to them at any moment. The open farmland gave her a good view, but not a perfect one. She'd asked for reports of stolen horses, but didn't have time to wait for an answer.

She and her bear endured the road for a while longer before they saw a building on the side of the road, revealed to them after coming over the crest of a hill. She rallied her mount and her followers and finished this first leg of their hunt.

Domain's feet hit dirt. She took her horse by the reins and lead her over to the stables, or what passed for them. It was little more than a cover jutting out from the main building, not where she'd want to leave her over a cold winter night. There was only a single horse currently there. Dommia might be able to make a deal with its owner.

Her soldiers followed her inside, finding a cozy commons inside with a handful of travelers and an old man putting a meal of bread and cheese in front of them. She scanned each of their faces, not finding any that were of interest to her. It didn't take them long to notice her and show a nervous concern.

"My name is Justicar Dommia Bethor, and I am in currently I pursuit of a known thief, a suspicious individual, and an impetuous imbecile. All coming from the north, arriving last night or this morning. Is this everyone on the premises right here?"

"No, Mistress," said the old man. She knew well the look of a many who just didn't want trouble, and was inclined to believe him.

"There's a man upstairs. He arrived just before morning, barely talking sense. He asked about three people he was looking for, but I haven't seen anyone like that. He took a bed and hasn't woken up yet."

Barely talking sense. That sounded like Dannis.

"Was there another man? He would be easy to spot; he was very tall and we'll dressed."

"Yes- he came by as well, a few hours ago. He didn't stay for long, just to eat."

"Have you seen anything else relevant or suspicious?"

"No, Mistress. It's been nicely quiet."

"Thank you for your assistance," she said before addressing her soldiers, "Let's go wake up our friend."

Dommia found the stairs and climbed them. There was only one door shut, which she promptly beat her fist against.

"Master Culthorip, this is Justicar Dommia-"

"Shit!"

"-Bethor. Open up right now."

"The damn morning's gone!"

"Now, while I'm still in only a bad mood."

"Not today!"

Dommia heard a window open and his voice trail off. She immediately broke into action, pushing between her own shocked men and bounding down the stairs. She leaped over a table to reach the exit with her best haste, but even as she slammed the door out of her way, grabbing the frame to swing her momentum toward the horses, she was too late. Dannis's mount was out of the stables and he was hoisting himself into the saddle while on the move. He stopped once in control and out of Dommia's reach.

"I won't settle for a bad mood, so perhaps I'll see you in Sahndusk. With your job done for you, I hope."

"Master Culthorip, I will have you arrest and flogged right along with Valera and her cohorts."

"Is that her name? I don't think I knew that yet. Good woman! Pay the innkeeper for me!"

Dannis wheeled his horse and took off.

"Are we going to follow him?" asked a soldier, catching up to her.

"No, his horse is rested and ours aren't. Besides, he's not the important one. We'll find him when we find the thief."

Dommia had never punished a man the way she did her female

playthings, but this one was giving her the urge, and she'd make sure he didn't enjoy it.

Phia woke from her sleep. She rose from her makeshift bed in the cellar they'd snuck into for the night. The place felt oddly suffocating now, and she desperately wanted to get out into the open air. She padded over to the cellar doors, a hatch that opened to the outside with a roughly built set of stairs to lead up to it.

When she reached it she pushed, but it stayed put. There wasn't a latch on the outside, and the bar on the inside was gone. She tried again, but it was stuck. She started banging on it, only dimly aware that she should be keeping quiet.

"What are you doing?"

Phia jumped, only to see it was Valera standing at her side.

"I need to get out."

"Oh," she said, oddly distant, "You'll need my help to do that."

"What? It should just open! I can't see anything stopping it."

"Of course it won't open," said Jask, frightening her again with his sudden appearance. "It's supposed to hold you in. It's a prison after all."

"No, that's not right," said Phia, trying to remember how they got into the cellar in the first place.

"We can help her," said Valera, slowly wrapping her hands around Phia's arm.

Jask took her other arm, and before Phia could ask them to stop they pushed her down to her knees.

"Let go," she said, pleading, but they ignored her. Jask twisted her arm to keep her still while Valera locked a heavy iron collar around her neck. A thick chain hanging from the back dangled behind her, and she heard it rattle as Jask and Valera worked together to put shackles on her wrists.

"Valera... why..."

Chains started weaving around her torso and arms, coiling around and crossing in an intricate pattern. She heard locks being fastened behind her back, and every time one did the chains grew tighter and tighter, crushing the breath out of her.

Jask lifted her to her feet while Valera put them in irons as well. She had trouble keeping upright, not being able to stand straight because of the shortness of the chains that ran from her collar to her ankles. Jask and Valera took places on her flanks and guided her deeper into the cellar, down hallways and into a room that light simply couldn't stand to be in.

Phia could see almost nothing, but when her escorts threw her to her knees again she could make out the cage in front of her.

"No, you wouldn't do this. Valera! Why?"

"She wants us to."

She tried to resist them, but they slowly and calmly forced her into the cage, folding her body so that she was kneeling with her torso bend over her legs, balled up to just be squeezed into the tiny cell. They sealed it shut, and then simply stood and walked away.

"Come back!" she called, her voice weakening as she continued, "Don't leave me her..."

Phia sat quiet, listening to her own irregular breath in the otherwise complete silence. Her few experimental attempts at escape stopped fast against unforgiving iron links and cuffs. She told herself that Valera would come back. That she'd let her go and explain this.

When someone did come, it wasn't Valera. A tall, inhuman silhouette was birthed from the darkness.

"Now it's your turn, Phia," said the red-skinned demoness.

She slipped her hand through the bars and hooked a finger between Phia's collar and her neck. She pulled, forcing Phia to press her face against the bars, her cheeks smashed against the rough metal. The creature leaned forward, and pushed her naked breasts in Phia's face. Phia jerked, trying to recoil from the intimate touch, but the collar may as well have been fused to the cage for all it budged.

The creature moaned as she rubbed her chest against Phia's lips, using her hand to draw her nipple across the line where they held shut. She leaned in more, putting her weight into it. Phia felt her nose flattened, and had to try to draw breath through her mouth. It filled with the demoness' breast as well, and Phia began to slowly smother.

Her chains clinked as she squirmed, and she heard a condescending

chuckle at her increasing misery.

"I could hold you like this forever."

It was the waning hours of the day when Dommia saw the gates of Sahndusk. Much to her frustration, they'd come across none of their quarry in their days on the road. They'd ridden hard and rested little, but it seemed like they were last to reach the city. It would be much harder to track them now.

She slowed her steed only when she caught up to the traffic entering the city, mostly locals from the looks of it. She bullied her way through, not in the mood to wait while the thief got ever ahead of her.

"Watch it!" she shouted, "Urgent business, out of the way you filthy lot!" Both guards blocked her way, forcing her to yield.

"What is this? What business?" one asked.

"I am Justicar Dommia Bethor, and I'm pursuing a group of criminals. Have you two seen a group of three people come through? Two women and a man?"

"None that stick out, Mistress, although I've only started my shift. If you're hunting fugitives then you should present to Count Dhern. He won't like it if you're running around without letting him know what's going on."

Dommia wanted to start searching inns herself immediately, but she saw that she was being foolish and impatient. Talking to the local authority would not only be prudent, but if she could arrange any help from him it would be far more useful than wearing her horse out even further after three days of hard riding.

"I'll consider it. Let me through."

The guards obeyed and she crossed into the city. Her soldiers, still caught up in the crowd, took longer than she liked to join her.

"Start looking around the inns and taverns. I'll go see this Count. We can meet up at that inn over there after I'm done. Don't try to take any of them alone; send someone for help from the locals if you find them."

They each acknowledged their orders, and without another word Dommia wheeled around and started up the road. She could see the keep from where she was; she had only to find the way through the city streets, dodging horses and men who clogged the path. The sun was down by the time she reached the

keep's portcullis.

"Halt, please."

The guards here were more polished, as well as more confident and forceful in their manner.

"Is Count Dhern expecting you?"

"No, he isn't. I am Justicar Dommia Bethor of Yorshir, and have business with His Excellence regarding criminals who have fled to his city."

The guard turned and called out to a man inside the wall.

"Orsick, report. Escort Mistress Bethor to His Excellence' parlor, and send word that he has a visitor on official business."

"Yes, Sir," said the man as saluted his superior.

"This way, Mistress."

Dommia followed. They took her horse, promising to feed and rest it during her audience, then brought her into the keep. The parlor was elegantly furnished, and she smelled burning incense in the air. She found herself winding down while she waited, her anxiousness from the chase slowly ebbing as she had a chance to rest. She started worrying that she would fall asleep once she realized how tired she was.

Before that could happen a set of doors opened to allow in a tall and distinguished figure. He had short hair, black but with gray seeping in from his temples, and his closely shaven beard was similarly colored. He was slim in build, but with a hint of athleticism hiding behind his black silk robe. He wore some scent that Dommia couldn't recognize, but it was surprisingly pleasing. He had a book tucked under his arm, the title of which she couldn't make out.

"Mistress Bethor. I understand that you've followed some fleeing thieves here."

An attendant come in on his heels, carrying a tray with wine glasses and a bottle.

"Yes, your Excellence. There is a woman named Valera who committed a burglary, and attacked the home's occupant in the process. She has two members of her gang with her."

"Would this, by any chance, be the young lady who did such scandalous things to Mistress Bescie Culthorip?"

Dommia was taken by surprise. How could he be that well informed

already?

"Don't be too shocked," he said, apparently reading her face. "Rumors came with the first horse out of Yorshir. They've beaten you here by two days. What I'm interested in is this necklace. It hasn't been found yet, has it?"

"No, your Excellence. As far as I know, the thief still has it. She probably thought she could sell it more easily here."

The attendant poured wine into the glasses. The Count took one and offered Dommia the other. She took it gladly, thirsty and hungry from her journey.

"Mistress Bethor, I should confess that I have a special interest in this affair. I have some concerns about this necklace. You haven't see it yourself, have you?"

"No, I haven't. What kind of concerns could your Excellence have about a common, if rather nice, piece of jewelry?"

"It might not be as common as you think," he said.

He put his book down on a table in front of her, and it fell open to a page that he seemed to want. Dommia quickly saw why; she was looking at a detailed drawing of a ruby pendant that matched Bescie's description.

"Mistress, I have something of an interest in the occult. When I heard the rumors yesterday about Mistress Culthorip's unfortunate ordeal something about it tickled a memory. I had a look through my library this morning, and came up with this."

Dommia tried to read the notes on the page, but the language was unfamiliar to her.

"It's old Thaeric. A dead language, now; nobody even knows how to properly speak it."

"This is... interesting, I admit, but I don't see what the concern here is. Do you think Mistress Culthorip's necklace is cursed?"

"Not cursed, exactly. I think it may contain an evil spirit, one that has been dormant for quite a long time, but which is starting to show its influence again."

Dommia closed the book. She wasn't entirely surprised; she knew that nobles could be eccentric.

"This sounds a little far-fetched, if you don't mind my skepticism. This is

the first I'm hearing of evil spirits. So far it's been an entirely mundane case."

"Not entirely mundane. I've heard some rather salacious details to the story."

"Yes, but there's nothing occult about the... details."

"It's possible that there might be. The being I suspect is a highly sexual spirit. It could have been her influence that led the thief to her actions."

"I'll keep that possibility in mind, your Excellence, and if I catch her in the process of any more tie-up games I'll let you know."

Dommia knew too well that it didn't take a magic necklace to make one woman want to tie another up. She would be harsher to Bescie Culthorip than Valera was if she had the chance.

She thought about what other angle he might have- some ulterior motive. He might just be trying to get it for himself, but surely he had the money to offer to buy it, or if he was afraid of a refusal the resources to just find the thief before Dommia did and never let anyone be the wiser. This story was such a bizarre thing that it was hard to see any scheme coming out of it. Maybe he just spent too much time reading books like the one in front of her.

"Would you at least mind letting me see the necklace before you bring it back to Yorshir? Indulge me, Mistress, I can tell that you're not terribly interested in this. I will provide assistance for your hunt, of course. I have informants across the city I can draw on, and I'll order my captains to have the most likely areas searched."

Dommia wanted to say no, just to be cautious, but he didn't actually need to ask her in the first place. He was the authority in Sahndusk, and he could have her thrown in a dungeon if she acted without his consent. If he wanted to be more subtle he could just keep her off the proper trail; especially if she was going to rely on his informants.

"Certainly, your Excellence. Is there a priest who you can call in to give an opinion on it?"

"Useless, I'm afraid. It falls outside the current dogma of the five churches. They'll call the book heresy, or equally boring thing. If it is the one from those pages, at least I can give Mistress Culthorip a warning about it."

"I'm sure she will appreciate that."

"Have you eaten?" he asked, taking the bottle himself and refilling her

glass. "You should join me. My chef should have dinner ready any moment now."

"I wouldn't want to impose," she said.

"Nothing of the sort. Tell me, Mistress Bethor, do have any relation to the great Sir Gulthain Bethor?"

Dommia put her chin up at the mention of the name.

"Yes, your Excellence. He was my father."

"They say he was a model to all men. Always willing to go the furthest extent in order to fulfill his duties, large and small."

"Yes, your Excellency. It's a legacy I've always strived to live up to."

"It must be a lot of pressure, sometimes."

"Maybe sometimes," she said, "but I prefer to see it as positive motivation. As an example showing that it can be done."

She felt the pride in her chance to say the words, even if he was more right than she was admitting.

"Come," he said, "I'm sure there's an interesting story or two about your father you can share."

"I suppose there are a few, your Excellency."

Dommia followed the Count as he left for his dining room, still not sure what to make of him. She hadn't talked to him about Dannis or the yet unnamed man that set all their flights to Sahndusk in motion. Maybe she should keep a few details to herself, just in case she wound up needing an edge. If Dannis found the necklace first and ran back to Yorshir with it, she could hardly be held to blame. Maybe she'd even get to throw him in the stocks for it.

Chapter 6

"We should go one by one," said Phia. They could see a the glow of a city ahead, their three day ride close to an end.

"If word has gone ahead enough of us- we were certainly moving slow enough- and anyone is looking, we'll be harder to make that way. Recognizing a face by description is almost impossible, but 'two women and a man' is easy to remember."

"Who's gonna be looking for us? Nobody knows there's three of us together," said Valera. She was tired, and just wanted to lay down in a bed for once. She was hungry too, and not for the stale supplies they had finished off a few hours ago.

"That you know of. If anyone has gathered up the rest of your late gang, it won't be too hard to pick out who's missing, and a lot of people know we're friends. If they see I'm gone they'll put it together."

"Come on, we're safe. Let's just go in."

"She could be right, and we can't afford to screw up for a while," said Jask.

Valera sighed. Phia mocked her with an exaggerated sigh of her own.

"I'm going first," she said, trotting ahead. There were two soldiers at the gate, waving through most of the people in front of her.

"What's your business in Sahndusk," asked one of them, blocking her path when it was her turn. He gave her a thorough looking over while he spoke.

"I'm traveling from Loghnor down to Moin. Just spending a few nights here."

Guards liked to ask those kind of questions just to try to make someone nervous enough to do something stupid. They could hardly remember why every traveler was here and hold them to it.

"Alone? The roads here are safe, but not that safe."

"No helping it; I can't exactly afford an armed escort."

The man backed out of her way, gesturing her along.

"Try to find a group to stick with, plenty of them go that way."

"I'll try, thanks."

Valera rode into the city. It wasn't much different from hers; the same kinds of smells, people, houses, and streets. She waited from where she could see anyone coming through the gate, but out of view of the guards. A few minutes later Jask rode in. He spotted her quickly and joined her.

"I think I smell roast pork over there," he said. "I'm starving."

Phia took her time. Valera felt the necklace in her pocket. She would need to find a fence. And not just any old street seller, but someone with serious money.

Phia finally appeared. Valera watched her look around, not having her or Jask's eye for the shadows. Jask whistled, which got her coming in the right direction.

"I talked to the guard, asked him about which parts of town I should avoid. He said to stay out of the dregs near the east wall."

"Sounds like a good place to find a new hideout."

"At least for now," said Phia. "We can sell the horses- preferably to someone going farther south. That should fetch enough money to get you a proper room for rent while you start getting settled."

Valera started to ask how she'd get back home without a horse, but she didn't want to hear an answer. She knew that Phia had things good there, but Valera badly wanted her to stay.

"Let's eat first," said Jask.

Nobody argued.

Dommia fished her fourth glass of wine. Was it the fourth? It was good, the best she'd ever tasted.

"...and then there's Cukkukkia, the legend from the great southern jungles. It's an interesting one, but it's been filtered so heavily by passing through so many nations on its way here that I have no idea what the real local version is. I plan to go on an expedition there, someday. I'll be the first of our race- that I know of, at least."

She'd been listening for a while now. Count Norlis Dhern had plenty of this lore to share, and Dommia had to admit she found it salacious, if silly.

"What's so bad about one of these spirits, anyway?" she asked. "It sounds like the worst they do is push people to be a little more adventurous. Some

folks I know could use one whispering in their ear."

Dommia regretted the comment after she thought about it; she was in better company than that. Maybe that should be her last glass of wine tonight.

"They don't exactly encourage responsible 'adventures', as you put it. Cukkukkia, as the story goes, once caused a decade-long war between formerly peaceful neighbors because of what she encouraged a queen to do."

"Would it be improper to ask what that was?" she said, smiling.

"Probably so, if that sort of thing worries you. I wouldn't recommend hearing about how you can supposedly banish one of them if that's the case."

Dommia knew her interest was being played with. It was a transparent ploy, but she found it hard to resist.

"How's that?"

"Well, you... no, I shouldn't. It's not like I've seen proof that it actually works."

"You're toying with me."

"Am I? Maybe I should stop, then."

He finished his pheasant and chased it down with his own glass. The meal was good. His decor was excellent as well- she couldn't deny that he had taste. The room was lit by candles, positioned to draw attention only to the most interesting places. In particular, they drew her eyes toward the count. Many of his guests might not have noticed the trick, but Dommia was used to questioning where her eye was being directed.

"I really need to get back to my soldiers," she said, putting her utensils down.

"For what? It's late; you need some rest. I can send a messenger telling them you'll be staying here for the night."

"Am I?"

"Of course; you don't think you're going to find an inn as hospitable as my guest quarters, do you?"

"They might have something to report."

"If they do, my messenger is sure to find out. I've already given the command to put my street spies to the task. They'll have information for us by tomorrow, and you'll want to be ready to act when they do. Which you won't be if you try to keep working all night."

He had a point. She wasn't even sure she could find the inn she told her soldiers to meet up at again as drowsy as she was, and with a few glasses of wine on top.

"Maybe I haven't made my offer enticing enough yet?" he said. "Would you like to sleep in the most comfortable room in Sahndusk?"

Dommia gave him a conspiratorial look.

"I mean mine, of course."

Dommia was hardly taken by surprise. She didn't find herself in a hurry to say no, either.

"Are you trying seduce me?"

"If you can't tell, come along and find out."

A small voice in her head told her not to, but she was certain another glass of wine could drown it out. She stood and stretched.

"Let's see if you deserve to be called 'your Excellence', then."

Count Dhern stood and opened a door, standing aside and gesturing her to come. She obeyed, and he fell in behind her after she passed into the hall. He guided her with his hand on her waist, silently bringing her up a wide, curving staircase, through spacious hallways, and finally into his den.

She was impressed. He had the largest bed she'd ever seen, set in an ornate frame. More incense burned around the room, and a great window gave a view of the city below.

He turned her around and kissed her, firmly and confidently. She closed her eyes and enjoyed it. He held her close with an arm around her body while he used his hand to explore the curve of her hips and ass. She held him by the waist for a while, feeling her body relax, feeling his lips on her neck. She slid her hands to his belt and loosened it, letting his robe fall open. Her hands plunged inside where they found a bare chest to caress.

She let him pull her blouse over head, and discarded the undershirt herself. Norlis backed her against the wall, pressing her there by the shoulders while he kissed her along the jaw.

Dommia decided to fight back. She pulled his robe down, tangling his arms in it long enough to advance. She pushed him toward the bed, but before she could get him there the robe dropped and he stepped out of her way. She fell face first onto the bed, aided by a shove from behind. She'd make him pay

for that. She tried to lift herself, intending to throw him on his back, but to her surprise he pulled her arms out from under her. Dommia had tied up enough women to know what position she was in now. She yanked her arms free and rolled, using her wrestling expertise to grab his hands and lock them up. She saw that one held his silk belt.

"And what do you think you're doing?" she asked.

"Making you comfortable," he said, smirking.

"I'll be more comfortable with my hands free, thank you."

"You've never been tied up in bed before?"

She hadn't. Dommia liked her women bound and whipped like good little pets. Being the master felt like the role she deserved to be in. She'd been raised to be aggressive, and she took that out in the men and women she went to bed with. And the men she expected to be able to handle her without first restraining her.

Not that she could blame Norlis. She knew she'd look good stripped and bound.

"No," she said, "I prefer to have a say in things."

She raised her leg, hooking it around his. She didn't want him to stop. Dommia was surprised again to see him looking serious for a moment.

"That's too bad. You'd never be a match for Luccela, then."

Dommia recognized that name. It took her too long to figure out why. It was the name the man asked Dannis about, back in Yorshir.

"What's that supposed to mean."

"Oh, just a story."

He sank to her chest, kissing her there and sucking her nipple.

"Tell it to me."

Norlis put his head next to hers, whispering in her ear as he worked her pants free.

"In order to banish a spirit that has anchored itself to an object, you must face the spirit in a contest of wills. For the spirit Luccela, you must allow her to bind you so that you'll be at her mercy. She will then try to make you her slave, but you must not submit to her. If you can stay defiant until she exhausts herself, she will loose her grip on the object and vanish."

"And why don't you think I'd be a match for her? I have a lot of

experience not submitting to people."

"But you've never let yourself be tried. Once you're bound and helpless while someone gets to pick you apart- if you've never been there, you'd be unprepared for it."

"You're full of it," she said.

Dommia did know the effect it could have on people. How some well tied knots could turn a person into putty, to be shaped as she wished. But those women wanted that. They were built that way; Dommia knew it would take a lot more to make her a grovelling slave.

"I'd be happy to prove it to you, if you wish."

"I'm sure you would be."

"I would. And I'm only a man. If Luccela had her hands on you- it would be overwhelming. She could work you up into an inferno of desire, one that you've never had to endure without being able to indulge it as you liked. It would be a very bad time to find out that you have a part of you that likes it. One that you've never let be tested."

"Did you make up that story just to get me to let you tied me up?"

"No, but I was hoping it would have an influence on you. I've got plenty others I can try."

It was ridiculous, but for some reason she felt like she'd enjoy being in his hands. He had the attitude for it, at least. Why not? Maybe she'd learn something new about where to poke her playthings next time she had them. Dommia rolled over and presented her wrists to him, ready to be bound.

He didn't waste much time, and he knew what he was doing. He crossed her wrists and wrapped the belt in a pattern that coiled around each wrist alone, above and below where they met, as well as around both. She let him tie his knot and checked his work. He was clearly experienced. It was secure as bindings could be, but comfortable too.

Norlis slid off her pants. Dommia felt strange now that her body was completely unveiled. She had little modestly, especially not in front of someone who she'd already decided to be intimate with, but being physically subjugated made her more self-conscious than she could ever remember being. She thought about how she must look to him, and how he was preparing to do things to her against her will. But whatever base thrill was

there, she still felt no impulse to submit to him.

He climbed over her, pressing her body to the mattress. She felt his warm hands cover her bare skin, flowing over her curves. They slipped between her and the bed to fondle her breasts while he kissed her shoulder. Dommia started resenting her helplessness. She was hotly aroused, and she badly wanted to give her body what it demanded. Instead she could only let her lover take his time, wringing his pleasure from her while she had to survive on whatever he deigned to give.

Fingers slid down to her slit, teasing her by barely parting her lips and pulling away before she could get some relief by grinding on them. She needed those fingers, now, but Norlis preferred to watch her lust after them in vain. She grunted in frustration, and he punished her by taking them away entirely, taking a turn with her legs and ass instead. She tried to get onto her back, but he would have none of it, ruthlessly pinning her where he could continue his slow tour over her prostrate form.

"Stay," he said, sliding off the bed. She disobeyed as soon as she could, rising to her knees. She burned to have her hands free, but the count hadn't gone easy on her. Neither brute strength nor subtle dexterity showed any sign of hope.

"You must be enjoying yourself," he said, parting the doors of a wardrobe. "I clearly haven't bored you."

"If this doesn't turn out to be worth it I'm going to expect a chance to do it my way," said Dommia.

"Tough words. I'll work them out of you."

He returned to the bed. A mess of plain silk belts were tangled up in his fist. He wrestled her down again, putting her where he wanted, unconcerned with her protests. He tied her legs to the bedposts, parting them to put her intimates on display. He had easy access to them now, and he quickly abused the privilege. He sank two of his fingers inside just long enough for Dommia to figure out how to start satisfying herself before denying her and withdrawing.

"If you want mercy, you can try begging for it."

Any chance that Dommia might ask for his cock or admit that this was too much for her and ask to be untied vanished in a puff of pride.

"I can lay here all night," she said through gritted teeth.

"I'd like that."

He put his whole hand over her pussy, rubbing it a few times before giving it a light slap. Seconds later, her ass jolted with a much harder slap.

"Fuck!" she cried.

"Shush," he said, "If you aren't going to plead and debase yourself for me then don't bother me with crude outbursts."

He looped a belt around her neck as he delivered his commandment, drawing it tight. Dommia could still breathe, but a kink in her throat told her how little he would have to increase the tension to change that.

While he kept her leash in his grip he struck her again, alternating between the halves of her ass. Dommia was too tough to be broken by a little spanking, but she felt her resolve undermined by the base treatment. She'd never been degraded like this before, all the while threatened by the belt around her neck if she complained.

When he'd done enough damage he let up. Dommia lay quietly, soaking wet in anticipation but forced to wait until he found her deserving. Her deliverance finally came. He climbed on top of her again and lifted her hips. The head of his cock searched for her opening, and she shuddered when it slid home. Dommia grunted, this time in pleasure. He let her enjoy it, and she started working herself on his dick.

She found out that he wasn't going to let her cum that easily. For what Dommia swore was half the night he fucked her, bringing her to the edge and slowing down, choking her with the belt when she offered resistance. There was nothing for her to do but take it, her body racked with ecstasy for longer than she could stand. She screamed for him, over and over, until after untold false hopes he let her finish, climaxing furiously.

She was exhausted. He was no slouch, and she was sad to have him pull out and leave her empty. The belt around her neck slid off, but he wasn't in a hurry to untie her. She was too tired to press the issue- she needed to come down first.

While she rested she thought back to how she wound up like this. Whatever hidden desires of submission he thought she might have, she was now sure they didn't exist. Being trussed up might be worth sex this good, but she felt nothing like what she saw in her slaves' eyes. If she did meet this

'Luccela', the idea still sounding ridiculous, Dommia certainly wouldn't be begging at her feet.

"That was good," she said, "but I think I've passed my test."

It was looking to be a cloudy day. The sun had risen a couple of hours ago, but few of its rays hit Sahndusk. There was only a slight breeze, but at least the air wasn't still. The city rose anyway, its gears slowly starting to turn. It had no idea what an interesting day Korsk had planned.

He finished his breakfast, a meal of biscuits and sausage. It was a generous portion, even for him. He would be busy today; maybe even too preoccupied to take lunch, if things went well.

There was a pile of notes to go through when he was done. Most of them were disappointing. Nothing had been spotted at the inns, save for some soldiers from Yorshir asking questions. None of his informants from the city's gangs could report any rumors. He shuffled through the poorly-spelled and written missives, cursing the lack of genuinely literate men in such positions, until a single one caught his interest.

Korsk began preparing his horse, packing the tools needed for his upcoming mission. His rush to get to Sahndusk was about to pay off.

"This is a lovely piece. The opal is from the the mines on the Red Mist Islands, very exotic. Not many ringmakers can get their hands on such a rare commodity."

Valera feigned interest. This was the third jeweler she'd visited today, and while she wasn't buying his stories of unique gems from far away lands, he wasn't dealing in stolen goods. She knew the kind of wink-wink phrases to get someone who had some black market stock to cough it up, but he remained oblivious. She might be able to sell the necklace to him anyway; she could spin him a tale of a falling on hard times and having to sell her mother's jewelry, but acting was Phia's talent. If the guy turned out to be suspicious she might bungle her story. Besides, better to find someone who would be making sure that it never traced back to him, let alone her.

"That is nice. Mayhaps my Mistress will want to see it herself tomorrow."

"Mayhaps," he said. He was smiling. "Or mayhaps you don't have one."

Valera froze. Quick, what would Phia do?

"You aren't the first young woman with time on her hands who wanted to see some nice things close up. Happens once a month, at least. It's harder than you think to impersonate a proper staff member of a nice house." Valera rolled with it.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Master"

"Don't worry," he said, locking his merchandise back in a case. "I'd have thrown you out a while ago if I minded. It's nice to watch, sometimes."

Valera slunk out, embarrassed. She was even worse than she thought. She'd stolen a blouse and cloak the previous night, but they weren't doing their job. At least not well enough.

She had a couple more places on her list, and one wasn't far away. She re-thought her cover on the way, wondering if the other jewelers had seen through her too. It was almost midday, and she wanted to get back to their temporary new home before too much longer. Phia might ask questions, and Valera was no good lying to her.

The shop was hard to find; she had trouble remembering all the street names given to her by the old maid she'd interrogated this morning. After a bit of exploring she came across a sign with a crown painted on it. She had to climb a set of stairs to reach the door, but when she knocked it opened quickly. A woman stood behind the threshold, dressed in clothes that were of fine make but were now slightly worn and faded. She was slender, with Sandy hair in an elaborate bun and a fair complexion. She was slightly taller than Valera, and had a way of looking at her that emphasized that difference.

"Is there something I can help you with?" she asked.

"Is this Crown Jewelers?" asked Valera.

"Yes, why?"

"I was hoping to browse your collection, Mistress."

"You don't look like you could afford much. We don't sell tin rings here, and we don't let miscreants go over our merchandise so that some of it can wind up in their pockets."

Valera resented that; she hadn't stolen anything today. Yet. But this was a good sign. People who dealt a lot with thieves tended to see thieves everywhere.

"Who is that?" asked a man from inside the house.

"What about buying?" said Valera, "I have an old piece that I'm ready to see go."

"What is it, stolen?"

The door opened wider, and behind the woman Valera could now see a man, about her age and similarly dressed.

"Young woman, we don't deal much with common items. We're more of a specialty shop; we work for particular customers looking for particular things."

"I've got something more special than whatever's lying around here right now," said Valera. "Let me in and I'll show you something unbelievable."

The woman rolled her eyes, but the man pulled her aside and let Valera enter.

"My name is Javin," he said. "This is my wife, Seyene. I'd apologize for her manners, but she does keep the riff-raff out."

"I'm..."

Valera stopped before giving her real name.

"Leina."

She took the necklace out of her pocket and laid it in the palm of her hand, presenting it to him. He looked it over through a magnifying glass. He must have been interested; he took his time, holding her hand steady with his palm under hers.

"Let me see," said his wife, taking the glass from him and pushing him aside.

"It's real," she said. "And nice. But I don't see what makes it so special."

Valera readied herself; they weren't going to believe the next part without some perseverance on her end.

"It's magic."

Javin laughed.

"This must be your first time trying to sell 'magic' jewelry," he said. "You need to set up your story better than that. Also, pick your fake name ahead of time."

"Have you ever heard the name 'Luccela'?"

"No," said Seyene.

"She's a demon of some kind. And she's trapped inside the gem. I've..."

met her."

"Even if that was true," said Javin, "why would anyone want a necklace with a demon in it?"

"Who knows? There's sure to be some weirdo out there who'd collect that kind of thing. Those 'particular' customers of yours, what kind of stuff do they usually want? Old historical stuff? Exotic stuff? This is that times ten."

She could see that she had him. He probably did know exactly who he'd sell it to, if she could make him believe it was real.

"Look," he said, "it's a nice piece of jewelry. Maybe I could find a buyer. But nobody's going to believe that it has a 'Luccela' in it."

So he did want it. Valera saw through his bluff. He wanted to buy it at the price of a normal necklace and sell it for real money to someone else.

"They would if they knew how to meet her."

"How would they do that?"

Valera knew this was going to sound weird, but at least she had him following her now.

"You need to be tied up. Then, if you put the necklace on, you fall asleep and have... it's more real than a dream. It's like being there. You'll know it's different immediately. And she's in there."

"Hey Seyene," he said, smirking, "Want to be tied up so you can talk to a demon?"

"Why are you even still listening to her?" she replied.

"Because he wants the necklace," said Valera, "but he's not getting it cheap. Tell you what, go talk to a buyer. Someone you know would be interested. See if he's heard of her. I'll come back in a couple of days to see if you're naming a price I like."

"My buyers won't like having their time wasted by a fraud," he said.

"This is just some convoluted excuse to get one of us tied up so she can kill the other and rob us," said Seyene.

"I've been to half a dozen jewelers today," said Valera. "Most of them were alone. If I was just going to stab-and-grab, I wouldn't go through this much trouble."

Javin took his wife aside and whispered something into her ear. Valera strained to listen, but could only make out her response.

"You're actually taking this seriously?"

"Oh, what else do you have to do today?" he asked her.

"I'm not letting some strange woman with stories about a demonic necklace tie me up just in case she happens to not be lying about it. What if she's just crazy?"

"I'll tie you up. Come on, business is business. You know that."

Javin took his wife by the arm and led her into a back room. Valera followed him. There was a bed inside, as well as the other normal furnishings of a sleeping quarters.

"I can't believe you're doing this," said Seyene.

"Lay down," said Javin, pushing her face down onto the bed.

Valera tossed the two bundles of rope she'd hidden under her cloak to Javin. She thanked herself for coming prepared; she hadn't expected to find anyone interested in the necklace's true nature, but why not be ready just in case?

"It has to be tight. Don't half-ass it."

Valera wasn't sure if that was true, but there was no point in chancing it.

"You better not leave any marks," said Seyene.

"Yes, yes," said Javin. He followed Valera's advice instead, wrapping the rope around her wrists and firearms in multiple spots, cinching each set. He used the entire length of rope, leaving her arms almost encased below the elbow.

"Is that good enough?" he asked.

"It damn well better be!" said Seyene. "This hurts. How long is this going to take?"

"Tie her feet, too. It should only take a few minutes. Out here, I mean. It lasts longer... in there. She should fall asleep pretty fast. Once she does, we'll wait just a little bit, then untie her. Oh, and gag her too."

"What? No, no gags. Javin you-"

Javin had a rolled up cloth between her teeth already. She grunted, displeased, but he tied it behind her head anyway. He put her ankles against the bed frame and fastened them with the rest of the rope. Seyene voiced her discontent with unintelligible demands and groans.

"Now what?"

Valera walked over to where Seyene's head lay. The woman was staring daggers at her, but Valera ignored it and slipped the necklace over her head. She stepped away, finding a spot on the wall to lean against.

"Just wait. It shouldn't take long."

Just as Valera expected, Seyene quickly grew pacified, her complaints dying out. Her eyes closed and her body relaxed. Valera hoped nothing would go wrong with Seyene and Luccela. She still had to get a good deal out of Javin.

"What were their names again?"

The half-blind, half-senile widow had asked her three times now. Phia didn't mind that. It was part of why she chose the old woman. After hours of gossiping at the market she'd learned about the widow Creery, living alone now and looking to rent a room at her house to help make ends meet. Nice and caring, but with failing senses and just as failing sense. She was perfect.

"Eskas and Ortan," said Phia.

She hoped Valera and Jask liked their new names. She hadn't thought to run any by them before leaving this morning to hunt down a good place for them to stay.

"Ortan is very handy. I'm sure he can help you out a lot around here."

"I can't wait to meet them. Will they be by today?"

"I think so. I just need to go by the inn and see if they've returned. They're exploring the city right now."

"Oh, has anyone told them not to go near those dregs by the east wall? A lot of trouble around there."

"They're very even-headed; I'm sure they won't go anywhere that doesn't look safe."

"Well, it's been very nice meeting you, Cara. How long will you be staying in Sahndusk, after you get the young ones settled in?"

"I haven't decided, yet. I'm sure I'll be able to visit often, though."

"I hope you do. You seem like such a good friend."

"They're good friends too. You'll love the dears."

Phia smiled and squeezed her hand. It would be easy for Valera and Jask to get along with her, if they behaved. She was lonely and had a difficult time

living on her own. A little bit of help here and there and the old bat would be willing to take their side in anything, as much as she could. It would be a lot of help. If they didn't screw it up.

"It's about time I go. I don't want to worry them; they didn't know how long I was going to be out."

"I'll see you when you bring Eskas and... and Ortan."

"I'll be back before you know it. Have a nice day, until then." said Phia.

She left the window's house, sighed, and started walking back to the abandoned ruin they'd spent the night in. Phia traveled quickly. The place was in the worst part of Sahndusk they could find, after all, and she didn't have either a weapon or the skill to use one. It was only a little after midday, at least, and still light out.

She thought about old Creery's question. She would miss Valera back in Yorshir. Phia wished she could stay, keeping an eye out for her and having someone she could talk to that she trusted herself. Sahndusk wasn't the city she had built her life and her career in, though. She knew her Yorshir well enough to wrap it around her little finger if she wanted to. Starting over in Sahndusk would be so hard...

Phia put the thought out of her mind for now. She needed to be alert here. She found the street it was on and approached it warily. Whatever the place had been, it was burned out now. It was a large place, big enough to have a multi-room cellar underneath. The first floor was made with stone walls, which were all that survived above ground. Inside those walls was a mess of timber that had burned months ago, and what wasn't ash was now rotting from the rain. She descended the stairs to the dark basement. She had to find the lantern near the entrance and light it, as no others were lit.

Phia checked around for Valera or Jask. Neither were there, making her nervous. Jask was supposed to be selling the horses and buying some fresh supplies. Valera shouldn't have left. It didn't surprise Phia that she did anyway, but it still made her worry. She checked the surviving bed left down there, but found it empty.

A board creaked behind her. Phia started to turn, but her senses were knocked out of her by a heavy impact. She felt her body slam against the wall, and even as she just began to bounce off something clamped around her neck

and carried her to the stone surface again, this time holding her there.

Her assailant came into focus. He was a frighteningly tall man, dressed in a black coat that was too nice for a simple mugger. His long arm was as solid as an oak branch, his hand squeezing her windpipe shut as he stood beyond the range of her reaching hands. She stared into his eyes while he stood unmoving, strangling her. His face gave no clue as to his reason; he showed neither anger nor cruelty. It wasn't fair, she thought as her vision dimmed. She should know why.

Suddenly she was on her back. She didn't know how she got there, only that a heavy weight pressed her to the floor. Her awareness only came back when liquid splashed in her throat. She tried to stop it, to spit it out, but hands held her jaw shut, and fingers pinched her nose. Too weak to fight and her head too light to think, she swallowed.

He let her breathe again, but still kept his hand over her mouth. Phia hoped her strength would come back, to give her the chance to do something, anything, but instead her limbs stopped responding completely. Her consciousness stayed, but her body was paralyzed.

She wanted to scream in terror, but her throat wouldn't obey. She could do nothing, not even beg, as he rolled her over. She could still feel rope tighten around her skin, but she had no way to resist it. He was quick, tying her hands, elbows, legs, and feet while she lay passively, hoping that Jask and Valera would appear. Whatever the man poured down her throat didn't stop the strict ropework from hurting. Why did he need to tie her so tightly when she couldn't even move without the ropes? What his face didn't show his methods did- this wasn't just business, there was malice in it.

She felt fingers in her hair, lifting her head while her jaw hung open. A wad of cloth filled her mouth, tied in place shortly after.

The man let her head drop, and Phia could only listen as his footsteps took him away, leaving her doubly helpless on the floor. Every second that went by was spent in silent hysteria, imagining the things he could be planning to do with her. Who was he? Not a justicar, and not a common burglar or thug. Was he a hired assassin? An agent for the merchant Phia robbed?

Phia panicked as the footsteps came back. New fear welled up inside her when he took her feet and put them in a sack, one of her shoes falling off in

the process. The rest of her legs followed. He lifted her body to slide it in, Phia able to protest only in her head. Her last glimpse of light came when he pulled it over her chest and head, the thick, stiff material hiding her from the world.

The next hour was unbearable. Her body was lifted, jostled, carried, and hauled around as if she were a rolled-up rug. The bag was hot and suffocating. She smelled in what little air she could find the bad end of a horse, probably from being slung over its rump. Her arms ached from being pulled so close together, and all the while she pleaded with her body to move, to just scream for help. Her ride from Yorshir to Sahndusk hadn't been half as long as this one.

She had no idea where she was being taken. She could hear the clip-clop of hooves underneath her. An occasional shout from one of Sahndusk's dwellers to another broke the general murmur of the city. Her assailant's voice never did, and neither did anyone address him, giving her a hint of who he was or what he had in store for her.

Eventually they stopped, and Phia could only guess that they were moving indoors by the creaking and slamming, and by being taken from the horse. The last part of her unwilling journey came while being carried in the man's arms. She couldn't hear the city anymore, only footsteps and their echos.

Her body was dumped on the ground, and only then did the bag open. Phia welcomed the fresh air, but her relief was quickly cut short.

The room was less a dungeon than a temple. Restraints and whips hung along the walls, and were the tamer of the furnishings, but it was lit by wide braziers and decorated with strange banners. A stone slab took up the center of the room, waist high and large enough for someone to lay on. It looked like an altar, holes to slot candles in along the edges adding to the effect.

Phia had enough strength back to move her head, but hardly enough to try to free herself. The man saved her the trouble, removing the ropes and letting her arms flop back to her sides, blood flowing to her hands again.

This was no chance to fight back. Phia was still far from being able to roll over, let alone stand. The man scooped her up, and to her greatest horror yet, laid her on the slab. Hands gripped her dress, and though Phia tried to raise her own to stop them, they brutally tore the fabric to pieces. Phia's scream

came out as a pathetic whimper, and he continued to rip her clothes off, taking her arms and pulling them from the sleeves while she barely had the power to use them to cover her now-naked breasts.

She rolled to her side, needing to hide her body from the man, but failed to make it and fell onto her back again. Her hose disappeared from her legs, and when they were tossed aside she was left completely nude. She stared at the arched ceiling, breathing the damp air while her captor doubtlessly prepared the next phase of her torture. She tried again to roll, to get off the altar.

Just as she thought she might have enough strength to make it her arm was yanked away and stretched to the corner of the altar. She looked in time to see a metal band placed across her wrist, the ends meeting flush against the stone. She saw that her last chance to save herself was about to vanish. She gave everything she had to pull her hand out of place, willing her fear to turn into action.

Her efforts just managed to fumble his first attempt to push a pin through the end of the metal band into a hole in the stone. His second succeeded. He pounded it in place with a hammer, every impact telling Phia how impossible it would be to ever pull it free with her own muscles alone. Squeezing her hand through the band was just as unlikely, and trying pinched her skin painfully. When both ends were fused to the surface of the altar he moved on, letting Phia test his work. She tried to stop him from clamping her other arm to the slab in the same way, but she knew that all hope was gone.

When he spread her legs and put bands on her ankles she fought, but only because it was too horrible not to. She shut her eyes, not wanting to see him take pleasure from staring at her naked loins. The terrible pounding of metal on metal set each of her legs in place, her body now stretched out in absolute vulnerability, not even a scrap of clothing to protect her. The final and worst came when he placed one of the iron half-circles across her throat, holding her head down and denying her even the ability to look around the room. Just like the rest, it was tight, and if it had been only slightly smaller it would slowly strangle her.

Then, without a word, he gathered the used rope and torn clothes and carried them away, leaving Phia alone.

It was no mercy. The stone surface was hard and the air was chilly. The goosebumps on her flesh and breeze on her nipples drove home how exposed she was. Her limbs were extended as far as they could go, and she couldn't appease an aching joint or cramp by shifting around. But all of her physical discomforts would be mercies compared to the thought of the man's inevitable return. Phia knew she was doomed. Anything he desired to do to her he would be able to do, no matter how unjust and cruel. No matter how much Phia wished for this to be a dream. Everything she saw and felt told her that this room was not meant for happy endings to the poor souls brought here. For her.

Chapter 7

Seyene was going to kill her husband. She hurried through the strange, twisted halls, aware that this was something more than a dream. She didn't remember how she found her way there, but she remembered with crystal clarity being tied up, definitely more tightly than could be necessary, by that lackwit she'd married so she could figure out if a necklace was magical.

That he'd been right wasn't making her less angry. This place was unnerving her. Being in a dream sounded a lot more comforting when there wasn't a vivid harshness to the world it was set in. Would she just wake up if she died here? She didn't want to count on it.

The labyrinth she was in was grim, filled with cages, chains, torture devices, and other madness. They were only supposed to leave her in her for a few minutes, but she felt like she'd already been wandering for an hour. The only mercy was that she hadn't encountered the creature she was supposed to be here to find. As far as Seyene was concerned, she'd seen enough.

That mercy came to an end. She rounded a corner and immediately froze in her tracks. There, in a small cage barely large enough to fit her, was a creature of lurid fantasy. A winged and horned monster with the body of a woman, although one that could never be real. She was bound in chains, and from the smile on her face Seyene thought that she must be enjoying it.

"Hello," said the creature.

Seyene took a step back. Just seeing her was creepy enough, but having her attention chilled her. She wanted to flee, but a strange instinct kept her still.

"Are you Luccela?" she asked.

"Mmm... how did you know? Have you met one of my darlings? Did they send you to me?"

Seyene didn't like the implication. She'd done what she was supposed to. It was time to leave. She didn't know how yet, but she could start with leaving this hallway. Without another word to the demoness she turned on her heel and rushed away.

She was only supposed to be here for a couple of minutes. That's what

they said. She did say it might be longer inside the dream, but as time passed in the still, comfortless ruin that loomed around her she began to doubt. At first she thought that she must have waited an hour, but that stretched into many. She wasn't getting tired or hungry, but the nothingness of the place was torture. There was no way she'd only been on that bed for a few minutes. Had that bitch thief done something? Was her husband in on it? She told herself that it didn't make sense, that the necklace must be valuable after all, and that they wouldn't just leave it on her. But as her duration refused to end she had plenty of time to think up theories and nightmares of all kinds. Soon she wandered if she was even still alive.

The weight of time sat on her more and more heavily. Seyene didn't even remember when she first started considering it, but thoughts of the demoness in her cage were at the forefront of her mind now. She- it- must know something. Seyene had fears aplenty about the creature, but could Luccela have anything worse in store for her than an eternity here?

Seyene resumed her exploration, long since ceased for worry of finding something she didn't want to. It wasn't long before she was in front of the cage again.

"Still here?" said the demoness. "But of course you are. You can't leave, after all."

Seyene summoned up her nerve to speak.

"They said I'd only been in here a little while. That they'd untie me in a few minutes and I would wake up."

"That might be true. I can't say. I have no idea what's happening out there."

"But I've been here for days!"

Seyene had to fight not to break down. She wouldn't even be talking to this thing if she wasn't at the edge of her sanity.

"It is a dream. Time in here isn't what it is out there."

"She... she just said that it would move slower. Not anything like this."

"She might have said anything... she doesn't know, really. She was just a visitor here. She didn't even talk to me, almost at all."

"Tell me how to wake up. How to stop the dream."

"You could say 'please'. I don't mind helping if you ask politely."

"Please, tell me how to wake up."

"You just need to be untied. Or have the necklace taken off."

"How do I do that from in here?"

"You can't. You have to wait."

"I've been waiting!" cried Seyene.

"This place must like you. It wants you to stay. Time here doesn't have to move more slowly. It doesn't have to move at all. Especially if you don't make it."

"Are you telling me I'll be here forever?"

"I'm sure it won't be that long. But I have been a prisoner here for longer than you could imagine, so my impressions of time might be a little different than yours."

"Don't screw around with me. How do I... how do I make it stop? Or go? How do I make time go again?"

"You? I don't think you could. You need power for that. The kind you don't have."

"Let me guess- you do. But I'd have to let you out."

Seyene wasn't going to do that. This was a trick, not that there was any other course of action she could see.

"I do have some ability to stir it out of its sleep. And yes, you would have to free me. But why worry about that? You can't be harmed here, and I am not a creature of violence. The worst I could do to you would be absolutely heavenly for the both of us."

Seyene didn't want to find out what her idea of 'heavenly' was.

"I don't have any reason to trust you. You're some kind of evil monster, sealed away in here for a good reason."

"That's a little rude. But if you don't trust me, how am I to help? Besides, even if I did have to power to help you from in here, why would I, if I were as evil as you say?"

Seyene didn't have a good answer for her. She recognized the impasse, although Luccela seemed less bothered by it than she was.

"If you would prefer, you could bring me to one of the larger cells. You could lock us both in, throw the key away, and then unchain me. That way, I would still be caged."

"How would that help? I'd still be in a cage with you."

"Only until you wake up. The key to this little thing is around here somewhere. Go look for it, while you decide."

Seyene left. By the time she came back she'd given up trying to estimate how long it had been. It was becoming a haze, each moment too much the same as the next to separate them.

"How is this going to work?" she asked, the key in her hand.

"Open the cage and let me out. Then I'll show you where the best cell for us is. Once we get there, you can unchain me, and I'll do what I can."

Seyene practically watched herself as an outsider while she did as the creature said. Luccela unfolded when the cage opened. She was tall, and the chains that bound her scarcely seemed enough to contain her presence. She led Seyene to a large room with a door made from iron bars. The key to unlock it was hanging on the wall nearby.

Inside it was much like the rest of the labyrinth. Chains hung from the ceiling and the walls. Whips and other tools were laid out for use. The room had furniture, although it was exclusively the kind for strapping some poor soul to torture them. Was this really the place she wanted to be when she unchained that strange and menacing being? She closed the door and locked both herself and Luccela inside.

Seyene started to throw the key three times, stopping before she let it go and backing away. This was an insane thing she was about to do, but she couldn't take this place anymore. She did her best to calm down, and in a moment of resolve let the key fly. It clattered down the hallway, way beyond any hope of reach.

She turned around and crept toward the creature. Luccela showed no signs of annoyance or impatience. She waited, a lustful grin on her face, while Seyene picked up a tool and started fumbling with it, trying to remove the pins. She started with the collar, and again Luccela sat calmly with Seyene nervously knocked at it.

The iron circle came open, letting her neck free. Luccela's moan gave Seyene goosebumps, but she continued, working until her arms and hands were free. She knelt down and started removing the chains from her ankles, creeped out by the sensual way Luccela was stretching. Being in that

cage and in those shackles should have left her aching and sore, but instead she acted as if she was just waking up from a nap.

Seyene stood up after the last cuff fell to the floor, backing away a few steps. Luccela was free now, at least inside the chamber. She moaned again and spread her wings out, giving Seyene the chills.

"Okay. Now get me out of here."

Luccela knelt, scooping up the shackles that once imprisoned her and dragging them up with her when she stood. She closed on Seyene slowly.

"What are you doing?" she said, trying to back away, but finding herself trapped against a wall.

"I'm doing what you asked. First, you just need to let me chain you up nice and snugly."

"No! I'm not going to let you do that! You promised to free me, not put me in chains!"

Luccela laughed, her rich voice echoing strangely through the cell.

"It's what I need to do. Besides, it's too late to be doubting my intentions now."

Seyene tried to dart sideways, but Luccela easily caught her, hand locking around her arm. Seyene resisted, but Luccela was monstrously strong, and she dragged Seyene toward her as easily as if she'd not been contesting her at all. She wrapped the chain between the shackles around Seyene's neck, gripping the ends with one hand. She used it to pull her against her body, her other hand resting on the back of Seyene's head, nestling into her hair. Seyene put her hands on Luccela's midsection, pushing as hard as she could, but the creature may as well have been made of iron. The metal links around her neck hurt, but the contact with the demoness' naked body, Seyene's hands touching her bare skin, was the worse of the two.

"It's been so long since I've had a friend that I could embrace like this. Just let me indulge a little. What will it hurt you?"

Luccela pressed Seyene's head against her chest, moaning in pleasure. Having her face buried in the creature's flesh was repulsive, but none of her efforts could dislodge her.

"Let go!" she said, the aroma of her unearthly captor filling her nostrils. Luccela sighed.

"I suppose if you want to get on to things that badly..."

She let Seyene slip back, stopped still too close to her by the chain leash. Luccela turned, her hips swaying as she walked to the other end of the room. She dragged Seyene along, her shoes skidding against the cell's floor as she tried to resist.

Seyene saw where she was being led. It was a wooden wedge, the point facing up and supported like a bench by the legs underneath it. Each side of the wedge was just short of a foot wide, and the whole thing was a few feet long. Sticking up from the center was a smooth wooden peg, and dangling down the side was an iron collar, manacles attached to it by only a few links.

Luccela pushed Seyene against the wedge, bending her over the top. The creature straddled it herself, not bothered apparently by the hard edge pressing into her crotch. She reached over Seyene and grabbed her leg, hauling it over and pulling the chain around her neck. Seyene was twisted around roughly, her legs now split over the top. She was face to face with Luccela, sitting just as she was with the wooden rod poking up between them. Being on the fixture was as uncomfortable as she'd imagined. Her weight was supported almost entirely by the tip of the wedge, which sat in the crook of her leg, right next to her pussy. She put her hands on the wedge and pushed up, trying to get the pressure off.

"Not like that," said Luccela.

She let the chain fall out of her hand, but before Seyene could slide off and get away from her the creature took her by the hands, twisting them behind her back. Luccela had her locked in place, her arms reaching around her and keeping their bodies close.

"Fuck!" Seyene groaned, now having the full weight of her body crushing down on that one spot.

"Yes, we will, I hope. But first..."

Seyene heard the chain rattling behind her. She strained herself against Luccela's grip, but her hand was locked like a vice around Seyene's wrists. She was stronger than any man or beast Seyene had ever contended with, and dexterous enough to only need one hand to lock the collar around Seyene's neck.

Luccela pulled her hands behind her head where her wrists could be

fettered to the collar. She didn't need to beat the pins into place; her fingers were strong enough on their own. Once Luccela left Seyene to the mercy of the shackles she clawed at them, trying to pull the pins out and finding them unable to budge.

"What are you going to do to me?" she asked, forced to lean back by the chain that now secured her to the wedge.

"I'm going to tell you something fun about how it works here."

Luccela tore at Seyene's dress, ripping it as easily as tissue and slowly stripping her.

"The less you experience, the slower time moves. Wandering around the hallways, alone, I'm sure got very numbing after a while, didn't it? But, right now, with all of this excitement, it's harder to compress that into so few seconds while you sleep in the real world."

Seyene was slowly being exposed, bit by bit, while the creature playfully ripped pieces of cloth from her dress. All the while she had a lustful smirk on her face. Once enough of it was gone she gave the rest one big jerk, tearing it completely off. Seyene's underclothes were next, and went faster for their comparative lack of material.

"Stop! This is enough! You don't need to-"

Her plea was cut short by the feeling of her bloomers being torn and being pulled off, sliding between where her crotch met the wedge.

Seyene screamed, wishing her hands were free to cover herself. Luccela picked off the remain bits of cloth on her, taking her socks and rendering her completely nude.

"I'm the expert, remember? Just leave it to me. You're in absolutely ravenous hands."

Luccela grabbed Seyene's ass, and with her freakish might casually lifted her body. The collar pulled her head back, but Luccela kept her from falling backward. When she let her body slide back down it was onto the peg. Seyene cried out in shock, but had to way to support her own weight well enough to keep it from pushing the wooden rod into her vagina. It was large, much bigger than her husband's dick, which was the only thing aside from her own fingers she'd ever had. She felt like it was stretching her, both with its length and its girth.

Luccela backed off, letting Seyene get a taste for her predicament. The rod had a second evil in that it forced her pussy to be directly over the wedge, and the lowest part of it was now the point of contact between her and the hard edge. She squeezed with her legs, hoping to take the pressure off, but it had little effect and it tired her quickly.

Her feet dangled, and while she was trying to find a way to bear the device she was now perched on Luccela was busy putting them in manacles as well. It didn't matter; Seyene couldn't find any way to lift herself from the peg, and with it inside she couldn't hope to slide off the wedge.

"Isn't that good?" asked the monster. "You should be waking up in no time at all!"

"Get me down! Ahh! I can't take this..."

"That's why I put the chains on you! That way you can take it, as long as you need to. But I can make things even better."

Seyene watched Luccela approach a table full of tools. She could only look on in horror as the demoness picked over them.

"I think you'll be waking up very soon. Any day now, in fact..."

Dommia pulled the feedbag from her horse's face. They were both well rested now. The Count was very hospitable, even aside from the special attention he gave her last night. She was embarrassed by the absurdity of the stories he'd lured her into bed with, but she didn't regret a bit of it.

It was later than she intended, past noon, but despite her own feelings of urgency, there wasn't anything she needed to directly attend to at the moment. She had no leads to pursue, and she wasn't familiar enough with Sahndusk to start digging at the end of a cold trail.

"Mistress Bethor,"

Dommia turned around. Norlis was approaching her, more dressed than when she'd seen him last.

"Count Dhern. Come to try out any more of your theories on me?"

"I won't say it hasn't occurred to me, but I am a man of duty as well as pleasure. I have word from one of my eyes on the street. A trio matching the descriptions of your fugitives was seen the dregs. They've taken up residence in the cellar of a burned-out building."

Dommia's blood was up already. She was ready for a decisive end to the game between her and Valera.

"Where is it?" she asked, already planning the raid in her head.

"It's on Burk street, between Malce and Torner. It was an old brothel, one that clandestinely kept slaves even after it was made illegal. It operated in secret until a fire forced them out into the open. The owner was hanged, and the property hasn't been sold yet, probably because of the stories people tell of it being haunted."

"Haunted by sexy ghosts that you'll have to teach me a special technique in order to put at rest?"

"No, there's nothing to those rumors, although I would be happy to make something up, if you feel you need the excuse."

Dommia sighed.

"I need to get my men and go. Duty before creative excuses."

"I've already sent word to your soldiers, but you should expect to get there before they do."

Norlis handed her a slip of paper. She glanced at it, and saw a rough map that would lead her to Valera's new hideout.

She took advantage of him getting close to force a kiss onto him. She wanted him to have some fresh ideas the next time she saw him.

"Good luck," he said, "We have a place here we can hold your prisoners until you're ready to head back to Yorshir. And... please be careful with the necklace, if you find it."

Maybe he took the whole thing more seriously than she was giving him credit for, if he was still concerned about it even after bedding her. She ran over the story in her mind again, remembering the supposed method of banishing the spirit. A question popped out at her.

"How is that thing supposed to work, anyway? What makes Luccela pop out?"

"She doesn't come to our world. You go to hers. It isn't something you could do accidentally; there's some ritual involved that I'm still researching. I'm more worried about the subtle influence she may have on anyone who keeps the necklace in their possession."

Dommia didn't have to worry about that. She had enough desire to

punish the thief in some very sexually satisfying ways without the necklace. If Luccela wanted a turn with Valera, she'd have to wait in line.

"I'll keep it in mind," she said.

She lead her horse out of the stables and climbed into the saddle.

"Hopefully I'll be back in a few hours, at most. Thank you, again, for your help. The citizens of Yorshir are sure to appreciate it."

"It's been my pleasure."

Dommia struck her steed and started off.

Phia lay on her slab, too afraid to cry lest it break the silence and attract some awful beast of the labyrinth to her. She wasn't any more comfortable now than she was when the man first bolted her to the altar. After he left she had a naive hope that she could get used to being spread across the hard surface, but her hips, shoulders and back told her how foolish that was by hurting more and more as time went by. She wished she could ignore it, but there was little else to focus on.

She heard a noise. Someone was close by- closer than she thought someone would get before she heard them.

"You must be Phia."

It was a man's voice. It was smooth and rich, and his words carried the accent of the upper class.

"Korsk told be he'd left you here. He's been looking forward to getting his hands on you for a few days now."

"Who are you?" she asked, twisting her head to catch a glimpse of him.

He was a less brutish figure than the other. Maybe she would find him handsome in a different time and place. His brown robe was plain, but well made.

"That doesn't matter. Not to you, at least. What matters is what we're going to do with you. Are you afraid?"

He touched her. It was gentle and intimate, fingertips moving over her naked skin. That only made it worse. It was a sick mockery of the loving embrace other men had shown her, ones that had given her reason to let into her bed. It proved that she was at his mercy, and promised the much worse to come.

"Yes," she said, trembling too much to lie.

"Are you afraid of being raped?"

Phia thought she was already resigned to it, but hearing it out loud, made real from his own lips, hardened her insides into a knot.

"You shouldn't be. It might hurt, especially when Korsk gets rough, but nothing like if you fell off your horse and broke a leg. The real fear you have- the sense of violation, the anguish, the shame- you have the power to reject those things. You can decide, if you want to. I'll help."

He was mad. She felt like her very chest was cut open, waiting for someone to thrust in their hand and rip out her heart.

"What do you want? The necklace? I can get it for you, I swear. Just don't do this."

"Korsk would have already left his seed in you, but I asked him to wait. I've got some techniques I want to experiment with on you. A little bit of training for your big moment."

The fingertips on her skin guided the rest of his hands onto her flesh. Phia shut her eyes, wishing she could go away somewhere. Her breasts were his playthings, fondled and squeezed, their sensitivity used against her. He rubbed his hands along the rest of her torso. The contrast of his warm palms against her skin, cooled by the chilly atmosphere in the chamber, added an intense edge to the sensations assaulting her.

He inevitably found his way between her legs, to that which she most preciously wanted to guard. His fingers entered uncontested, defiling a sacred place with their unwelcome presence. Phia wailed, any other action denied her by the metal bands that sealed her limbs against the stone.

"That's good. You're feeling. Accept it. This is the only type of kindness you can expect from now on."

Phia only felt humiliation and fear. She didn't want to know what sickness coursed through his head to make him think she could ever enjoy this on any level.

He came into her view again as he leaned over, his mouth closing in on hers. His free hand held her jaw, keeping her from turning her head away from him and leaving her nowhere to go. She pursed her lips, but it didn't stop him from kissing her. He played with her closed mouth, spreading his saliva

over her lips and chin and pushing the tip of his tongue along the line where her lips held shut. All the while his fingers prodded where only her lovers should dare.

The man gave her a reprieve, taking his hands away. The feeling of his touch lingered, as if she could feel a filth that they left behind. The room felt even colder now, and the slab even harder.

He wasn't gone long, and upon his return he held the object of his search over her face where she could see it well. It looked like a pair of shackles, but the cuffs were oddly shaped- too large for a wrist or ankle, and fashioned into domes. Inside were short spikes, not sharp enough to pierce skin from the looks of it, but they would be horribly uncomfortable wherever they were placed. Phia had a very bad feeling about where that would be.

"Your first lesson will involve these fine fellows," he said, lowering them onto her chest and confirming her fear.

"No!" she cried, racking her brain for any words that could encourage him to have mercy and coming up with nothing but the most obvious pleas.

"Please, just tell me what you want."

"I've been perfectly upfront with you. You're going to be used as a sexual slave. In particular, by myself and other men who see our toys' physical suffering as an end unto itself. The way you squirm and beg right now is very pleasing, don't be mistaken about that. This position flatters you, and I'm sure there would be great beauty in the way your body responded to having mine lay on top of it and filling your void with a proper cock. But I want to train an even better reaction into you. I want your first time being raped to be a work of great art, where your own body betrays you and welcomes me with dripping wet loins. I understand that you are against this idea but, alas, our desires are mutually exclusive. Only one of us will have their way. As I'm sure you're acutely aware, your ability to contest my decision is sharply limited."

He gathered her breast in his hand and worked it into the open dome.

"Please," she called out, "You can't do this!"

Phia couldn't help herself, even knowing how unmoved he would be, even knowing how he'd probably heard the same cries many times before from other poor women. He was something inhuman, but she could do nothing else.

He fiddled with her breast, carefully arranging it to his preference. As he

did it scraped against the spikes, an unpleasant precursor to what was coming. The top of the dome had an opening, and the man made sure that her nipple would be under it, pinching and holding it with his fingers. The dome closed. Phia bit her lip and squealed as a thousand teeth bit into her sensitive flesh. While she struggled hopelessly, her body demanding action to protect itself that she knew she couldn't give, he groped her other breast, letting her reaction to his last act of sadism play out. Phia was as helpless to stop him from taking pleasure in her misery as she was to stop him from causing it in the first place.

When he judged that she'd calmed down enough he moved to double her hardship. The chain between the domes pulled her already ing to nothing to prevent it. The second dome took her in its wicked grip.

Phia cried out. The chain was too short to allow either breast to sink to its natural position, letting the maw that held each one increase its cruelty, pulling as well as biting. He stuck his finger in the dome's top hole, poking her nipple. He pinched it, stretching it up to the hole while Phia continued to wail. Metal teeth sank into it, a biting clamp now fixed onto it. Her other nipple wasn't spared, and a matching instrument was put in place.

"No more," she said. "I'll be good. I'll beg you to fuck me. I'll call out your name. I'll scream for you. Just stop this."

"I could have that from a whore," he said. "I don't want you to pretend. I have no interest in the feigned. And this... it's going to get a bit worse. These are just a warm-up."

He made his point as he spoke. Metal touched her pussy. She couldn't see what it was, but his fingers separated her lips and let the thing slip between them. It didn't go deep, but at one point it forced the open, letting cold air find a place that should never feel it. The thing ran the length of her slit, and it didn't seem like it could easily stay where placed its own.

Her first clue to its purpose came with the most vicious torment yet. Another clamp pressed its fangs into her, this time on the tender skin of her vagina. She shrieked, caught off guard by the man's unimaginable degeneracy. Being prepared for the next one didn't make it any more bearable, or her any less defenseless. Six times, six places, and six screams to accompany them.

"Please," she sobbed, "Please... please... stop..."

He answered her by slipping his finger back in where the device, now clamped solidly and inhumanely in place, held her open. She squirmed frantically, the pain and the indignity driving her to find some escape, one that simply didn't exist.

The man let her, content to grope her thighs until she exhausted herself. She lay, all her effort for naught, panting while still in agony. She wondered what he could do to make this worse, having no doubt now that he would. She didn't have to wonder for long.

A cold metal rod took the place of his hand where the device offered entrance. Longer, thicker, and harder than his fingers, it pushed slowly in, making Phia shudder. It was like ice, and the size of it meant that it would be a long time before her body warmed it. She could barely breathe for the way it froze her womb. The man twisted it in farther, reaching the very limits of her body to accept it. A clicking sound, metal against metal, gave away that he was locking it in place.

This time his kiss took her by surprise. Her eyes were shut, and her mind too dominated by the things wrought onto her body to notice him coming close before her open mouth was covered with his. She twisted her head to the side, but the damage had been done.

"Tell me how you feel," he said.

How did he think she felt? Phia gave him nothing, seeking only to keep avoid his touch in the severely limited way she could.

"I can give you more to talk about, if this isn't enough. Your anus is yet untouched. I have a very interesting collection of things that could be tried out there."

"I hurts," she said.

"I know that. I've been dutifully arranging it. Open up to me. Tell me everything. It won't be anything I can't guess, but I want to hear it from you."

"I'm scared. I'm so scared. I just want to go home, and I'd do anything if you just asked me."

Tears filled her eyes. She knew how pathetic she was. And resolve she had was gone, drained by this degradation.

"Then I'll ask you."

He was very close when he said the next words. His lips brushed against

hers when he spoke.

"Kiss me."

Phia didn't want to. He hadn't even promised her anything. But the thin glimmer of a chance that obedience could earn her mercy forced her to act against her reluctance. She surrendered her mouth to him, fighting not to recoil as his taste washed into her. He took and took from her, until his tongue parried with hers.

He withdrew, but left behind a taint that Phia could never imagine washing out of her mouth. Her hope that he would remove the torturous apparatus went unfulfilled. This time it was her clit that his fingers focused on.

"That was a good start, but we've got a long way to go. Now you must cum for me. I'll spend as much time down here as I need to, so don't feel rushed. Think about whatever you can to help. Old lovers, a young crush, some forbidden fruit that you dream about."

He was asking the impossible. No memory or desire was strong enough to distract her from the horrible reality she faced.

"This time will be the hardest. It'll be easier as we train you."

"What if I can't?"

"Then I won't have any use for you, and I'll lock you in a box and leave you there until there's nothing to remove but bones."

Phia didn't say another word. She would fake it, if she had to. Maybe he would be able to tell, but she would try. She tried to focus, to find some sliver of physical arousal in the way he rubbed her. If only the clamps weren't there, she thought. But there was nothing she could do. Nothing but try to satisfy his insane desire, her life depending on it.

"That's long enough," said Valera. If Seyene was experiencing anything like what Phia had, she would be completely convinced by now.

Javin untied his wife's ankles, tossing the rope aside. He leaned over to remove her gag, but before he could she started stirring. Once she did it quickly turned into a violent revolt, and Javin was nearly thrown off the bed. Seyene sat up and put her back in the corner, where the bed met the wall.

"Woah! What are you doing?" asked Javin.

Seyene gave a passionate, but muffled, answer. After a few seconds she

calmed, and Javin was able to take the gag out of her mouth.

"Ugh! Get this off of me!"

Valera stepped in to get her necklace. Seyene was visibly relieved to see it gone. She let Javin get behind her, where he started getting her arms loose.

"I guess you're convinced." said Valera.

Seyene gave her an evil glare. It worried her. What happened in the dream? She shouldn't have been in there long. She told herself it didn't matter- she was going to make it somebody else's problem, and they were going to pay her for the honor.

"Yeah," said Seyene, "convinced."

"So how much are you going to give me?"

"We have to talk to someone," said Javin. "We don't have much coin on us right now. If you give us until tomorrow, we can talk to a buyer we know. We'll be able to tell you how much we can pay then."

"I don't like that. I'd rather get done with it today. No offense, but I don't know if I can trust you."

"You'll have to let it go cheap, then. We can give you a decent amount for if it was a normal piece of jewelry, but if you expect more than that, we need time."

Valera thought about it. He was probably trying to get her to name a number first, just to see what he could get away with. He knew it was worth a lot, and either he was trying to weasel her into accepting a lot less for it, or he was setting her up.

"I want to meet with the buyer, then. I'll give you ten percent, but if I'm going to take the risk, I want to be sure I'm getting paid for it."

It took a bit of haggling, but eventually they agreed. She'd come by the next day, in the afternoon, and they'd bring her to the meeting place. It would be an upscale establishment; some sort of society-club place. The buyer they had in mind was too wealthy and respected to go mucking around in alleys or abandoned buildings. It suited Valera; she could make an impressive scene if they tried anything.

Valera walked home. Or at least what was making do for the time. She'd done well today. Better than she'd ever expected. She was still keeping an eye out for anyone following her, but so far she looked to be in the clear. It was

strange to feeling a bit of normalcy after so much chaos, but for the first time in near a week Valera was truly on her feet again.

She entered the building they'd spent the night in. She was surprised it didn't have any squatters in it; it only took a little cleaning up to make a decent shelter out of it. She didn't announce herself, preferring to sneak in quietly. Nobody was there to greet her. She checked out all the rooms, but didn't find either Jask or Phia. She must have been the first back from her errand.

She started back toward the stairs, planning to wait for them outside. Outside of the cellar, at least. She would be well hidden inside the stone wall, but would still have the open air to breathe.

Before she reached the first step she stopped, noticing something on the floor. It was a shoe. Valera didn't take long to recognize it; it was Phia's. She launched into a second search of the cellar, this one hurried but thorough as a sinking feeling set in her stomach. She found no sign of Phia, no place where she might be sleeping or hiding. It was the same upstairs; empty except for the ruined timbers. The only clue Valera could find was a small bottle; it was unmarked, but smelled of a powerful drug or poison.

Valera cast it down and threw off her cloak, expecting the need for unencumbered action. She didn't know what she was going to do, but she had to do it fast. Maybe whoever took her was still nearby. On her way out she froze, sensing someone else approaching. She hid, spying on the staircase.

To her relief, it was Jask that came down into the cellar.

"Jask!"

"Oh, there you are. How did your, uh, scoping out the market go?"

"Phia's gone!"

"Gone where? Are you sure she's just not back from trying to find a-"

Valera tossed the shoe at him. He caught it, and after a moment of confusion his face showed him coming to the same conclusion she had.

"Shit! What happened?"

"I don't know. I just got back, and it was lying on the floor. She must have gotten back first, and someone was here to grab her. What are we going to do?"

"Let's just calm down and think. We... we need to get out of here first.

They might already have more men coming. They wouldn't have just taken her and left."

"Right, right- we can grab everything, no problem. We'll stash it somewhere and start looking. They might not have taken her far."

"Come on," he said, rounding up the few items they had and tossing them into the traveling packs they'd been brought to Sahndusk in.

Valera ran outside, peering over the top of the wall. She couldn't find anyone watching them, and there was nobody marching up the street to attack. Her good day had gone to crap already, but her feet weren't out from under her yet. This was a fight she was going to win, no matter what it took.

Dommia rode as quickly as she dared through the city traffic. People parted to make way for her, but the occasional fool held her up, oblivious to her urgency. She cursed and shouted, clearing a path by force of her presence. The street grew more deserted as she passed from the bustling center to the dregs, and soon she was riding clear.

She stopped and dismounted before coming in view of the ruin. She was confident that she could make the arrest alone, if needed, but waiting for her soldiers would be wise. She peered around the corner, but saw no signs of life. There was nobody serving as a lookout- understandable, if there were only three of them.

Her soldiers were taking their time. Dommia knew she should have patience, but after the chase she'd been led on she was eager for the end. The possibility that they were gone, that they had slipped away and were building a head start in their flight, gnawed at her.

Her wait came to an end, although only half the way she'd hoped. Two figures emerged from inside the stone wall. One of them was Valera, her long-sought prey. The other was a man, presumably the one named Jask. They looked like they were about to leave. Dommia couldn't let that happen. Dommia threw her foot into her mount's stirrup and with great vigor hurled herself into the saddle. She kicked the horse and with a shout charged at the thieves.

They spotted her, of course. She could hardly sneak up on them this way, but she didn't want to risk getting into a foot chase without backup to help

hem them in. Her charge worked as intended, sending both of them diving back into the doorway.

Dommia leaped from her saddle, pursuing them with sword in hand.

"Valera!" she shouted, "Surrender now, or you won't get the chance to bargain for your life this time."

"You mean I won't live to be tortured while you get your jollies off on it?" said the thief. "Screw you."

"Hold on, what?" said the man.

"Just take her down somehow!"

The man picked up a piece of wood and threw it at her. She let it deflect off her arm. If they were going to fight her, she'd have to disable one of them to have a chance to restrain the other. She needed Valera more, in case the necklace was hidden somewhere, so she advanced on the man with intent to put him on the ground. He might not survive it, but there wasn't much chance of leniency for them at this point anyway.

She glanced toward Valera and saw that she was being played. The coward was abandoning her friend and scurrying up the wall. Dommia gave chase, judging she could yank her down before the man could catch up to hit her in the back. She was nearly in arm's reach of her when she saw the trap being sprung. Valera kicked a blacken log, shifting an unstable pile of debris. One that Dommia was standing on. Clever little bitch. Dommia's fight foot slipped into a hole, and before she could secure her balance to pull it out an impact hit her on the side of the head. Her helmet took the brunt of it, but she fell backward. She controlled her fall well enough to avoid breaking her ankle, but not enough to grant herself a soft landing.

She hit the ground hard. For a moment she was paralyzed, and then she was able to shake her head clear her weapon was pointed at her own throat. The stupid little thief clearly didn't know how to hold it. Dommia swatted it aside with the back of her forearm. She started to sit up, ready to grab Valera's leg and bring her to the ground too, but something slipped over her head and found a home around her neck.

"Pull it tight!" said Valera, just as Dommia felt the cord jerk hard, cutting her breath off and jamming her back up against the man's knee. She reached blindly behind herself, but couldn't find a solid grip to fight back with. Worse,

her leg was still trapped, keeping her anchored in a bad position.

Valera's weight came down on top of her. She grabbed for Dommia's hands, and soon their arms were entangled, fighting for control. Dommia was stronger, at least at first, but the thief had only to keep her engaged while her friend slowly strangled the life out of her. Her chest felt like it was going to implode. No amount of willpower would force air down her throat.

Dommia couldn't believe it was going to end like this. Failure and an ignoble death. Would they even find her body? She couldn't even speak to offer her surrender, even if they would have it. Even if Dommia could bring herself to offer it, even to save her life.

The fight was gone from her body. She could only stare blankly at her killer's face as her mind shut down. Were they saying something? She couldn't tell.

This kind of helplessness was nothing like what the Count had shown her. She felt what Lady Cellis felt now, death taking hold of her, slowly but unstoppable. No wonder it could reduce her to such begging and pathetic resignation. Dommia wished she could have one more chance. She could appreciate it so much more now. Her hands stopped gripping, and things went black.

Chapter 8

Valera watched the justicar stop moving. They'd won. It wasn't a nice thing to look at, but it didn't take much for Valera's memories of the humiliation and torture she'd suffered at that woman's hands to come back. This was more than just necessary; it was satisfying, even if it was horrifying in the same measure.

Jask suddenly let go, dropping her to the ground.

"What are you doing?" asked Valera. "She's not dead yet!"

"I know! I don't... I've never killed anyone before."

Valera picked up the sword. All it would take is one good thrust to the neck. She stood in position, sword raised, but making the final motion was more difficult than she'd expected. She saw the woman shake, her eyes staring to the sky while her chest heaved irregularly.

"Dammit!" she said, the weapon weighting heavily in her hand.

"Tie her up. Hurry while she's out."

Jask worked her foot out of the hole while Valera went outside to get the justicar's horse. She coaxed it inside, but didn't have much to do with it. She tied the reigns to a loose piece of wood and hoped it wouldn't know the difference. There was an abundance of rope hanging from the saddle. It was thin, but strong. The justicar doubtlessly planned to use it on Valera. She liked the immanent turnabout.

Jask was already dragging her into the cellar. Valera followed him to the farthest room from the entrance where he plopped her down.

"Now's your chance to do the meanest thing you've ever wanted to do with rope and a defenseless girl," said Valera, showing him her spoils.

"I didn't think you approved of my passions."

"This time it's not happening to me. Hold on- let's see how she likes being naked."

Valera saw the look Jask was giving her. She didn't care. She stripped everything from the woman, tossing the bits worth keeping in a pile. Justicar Dommia Bethor looked much different lying on the floor without her clothes, beaten and robbed of her dignity. Valera hoped she would feel every bit of fear and humiliation she was due when she came to.

Jask lifted her upper body, pushing Dommia into a sitting position.

"Hold her there," he said.

Valera did as he asked, watching him get to work. He twisted her arms behind her back, bending each one so that her hands were almost between her shoulder blades. He put her wrists against each other, crossed, and enveloped them with rope. He wound more of it around her chest, half above her breasts and near her shoulder and the other half below, squeezing her bosom between them while pinning her arms, chest, and hands all together. Dommia definitely wasn't escaping from that, and Jask left nothing to chance, removing all of the slack that could be found. Valera could see the rope press into her skin, showing off how tightly she was wrapped.

"Shit!" said Jask, and Valera quickly saw why. Dommia's head was starting to bob, and a low moan came from her throat.

"Hurry up and gag her," he said, grabbing Dommia's blouse and tossing it at her.

Valera ripped a chunk of cloth from it just in time to greet Dommia's coming to by stuffing her mouth full. She tried to spit it out, tossing her head from side to side, but Jask pulled the yet unused rope across her throat, forcing her head back and pacifying her. Valera sank a strip of cloth deep between her teeth, knotting it in back. It was as tight as she could make it, pressing into her cheeks. Valera saw the death glare in her eyes, but it just made her smile. She gave in to an impulse and slapped her across the face. Dommia tried to lunge a couple of times, but the rope around her neck stopped her, forcing her into resignation.

"Here," said Jask, "hold this while I get her legs."

"What are you going to do, hogtied her?"

"Even better."

Dommia grunted loudly, prompting Valera to punish her by jerking the rope, threatening to strangle her again. Valera was enjoying this. She worried herself, remembering that how much it sickened her to see Dommia enjoying Valera's misery back in her interrogation room. But that was different; it was a weird sex thing for Dommia. Valera was just getting some perfectly natural revenge.

"Are you sure we couldn't make this a little tighter?" she asked.

"Let me finish what I'm working on. Get her on her stomach."

Valera helped him roll her over, making a special effort to push her face into the dirty ground while still keeping ready to wring her neck if she tried fighting back. Jack folded her leg, putting her foot against her ass. He tied it there, leaving a piece of rope between her ankle and thigh. That same length ran through the other leg as he bound it to match. He took the piece and slipped it under the rope that was wrapped around her chest, right where it crossed her hands. He tied one of his special knots, and when it was ready he pulled on a loose end.

Dommia's back arched a little as the loop that ran from her ankles to her hands. The knot only allowed it to adjust one way, and it stayed taught even after he let go.

"Okay," he said. "Now flip her over again."

Valera took her shoulders while Jask used her legs as leverage. They put Dommia on her back, her feet and hands now between her body and the ground. Valera stood up, looking down on her furious captive.

Valera heard Jask whistle. She glanced his way and saw him admiring his work. It was certainly worth something to be admired. Dommia was trapped on her back, unable to quite lay flat, her chest and pelvis sticking up. Valera could see her tensing and flexing, her abdominal muscles taught with effort. Maybe she was trying to roll over. It wasn't going to happen; all her strength was useless against the bindings holding her limbs, arms and legs folded under her and twisted into positions where they couldn't move.

She must have noticed Jask leering at her crotch, because she tried to hide it by closing her legs. Valera could see that she had to strain to do it, pushing against the unnatural posture the ropes held her in, and before long she gave up, letting them fall open again.

The bitch was lucky. Her tits and pussy might be showing, putting a spectacle on for a creep, but at least he wasn't beating them with a whip.

Despite her gag, Dommia was making as much noise as possible, calling out for help. Valera didn't know if anyone outside the cellar would be able to hear it, but it was annoying her anyway.

"I've got something that'll shut her up," she said.

She knelt down by Dommia's head and drew the necklace from her

pocket. She held her by the hair as she slipped it over her head. When Dommia saw what she was doing the tone of her muffled curses changed, an edge of fear and pleading seeping in. Did she know about the necklace? What it really was? She would now, anyway.

"Say hi to Luccela for me," she whispered.

"What are you doing?" asked Jask.

"Watch. She'll fall asleep in a minute."

"Because you put the necklace on her? Is she going to feel so pretty that it literally knocks her out?"

"Shut up. The necklace is magical or something."

"Hold on- magical? What? This got crazy really quick."

"Yeah, it gives anyone using it while tied up horrible nightmares. Unnatural ones. Guess how I found out."

"Oh... I didn't know. Why didn't you tell me?"

"It didn't matter. Watch-"

Dommia grew quiet. Her tense muscles relaxed, her eyes closed, and her form went still, save for a slow rising and falling of her chest.

Jask sighed.

"Now what? If they found us here already... Do they know? That it's magical, I mean? If they do, they'll hunt us a lot farther than we were counting on."

"I don't know. The justicar never mentioned anything about it."

"You should have given it up like Phia said."

"No. If I did that this bitch would've won. Besides, she still wanted to punish me. She's vicious, Jask. She'd have at least followed us here."

"Well, maybe Moin? It's much farther south. Maybe we could make her promise to stop hunting us if we don't kill her. If they make a promise they have to keep it, right?"

"I don't want to trust it. Besides, it's not all up to her. Maybe we should go north. They wouldn't be expecting that. Maybe you could find out what happened to the gang on the way."

"Too risky for that last part. If we go that way, we should skip Yorshir. Go around it."

Valera looked around.

"We have to find Phia first, wherever we go. Do you think they got her?"

Jask hugged her. She didn't mind it. Valera felt like she'd aged ten years in fewer than half as many days. She hadn't forgotten the things she wished for while strapped to that table, waiting to be mangled by a sadistic monster.

"I'm sure she's okay," he said.

"What if she isn't? What if she's in their dungeon right now? How would we save her?"

"Well... we have a hostage."

Valera smiled.

"I guess it was a good thing you chickened out on killing her."

"You did too!"

Valera and Jask were quiet for a while.

"This almost makes me want to try honest work," said Jask.

"No way. I'll gut you if I hear any more of that."

He was going through a lot for her, she realized. He'd be smarter to run, to leave her in the mess she'd made. If he was still around after all this, maybe she'd be better off keeping him that way. She buried her head in his chest.

"Jask, if we can get out of here and find somewhere else to settle down, I might have to let you tie me up one last time, the way you've always really wanted."

"Careful," he said, "Give me a chance to do that and I'll make sure it's not your last."

Valera looked up. His face was warm and inviting. She kissed him. He was a little surprised at first, but he didn't let the opportunity slip away. Her body squeezed against his. He put his hand behind her head and the other around her waist. It felt good, being in someone's arms and not having to fear it. Even when he pinned her against the wall she was loath to break away. Dommia was still right there, even if she was sleeping, and they had work to do.

She escaped his lips, which found her neck instead.

"Okay, stop, we need to watch out. If she knew where we are, someone else might too."

"You don't say?"

Jask threw Valera behind him, and in the same motion drew his knife. Valera reached to her belt for her own, but remembered that she was still unarmed.

The man wasn't a soldier or a justicar, but he was holding a sword, and he handled it gracefully. He knew what he was doing with it, and there was nothing to trap him with like they'd done to Dommia.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Dannis Culthorip. I think you've met my sister."

"Ah, shit," said Jask. "I don't guess you're just looking for an apology?"

"We've got your friend," said Valera, wishing she still had the sword to make a better threat with.

"Nice; I can see her back there. She's gonna hate being rescued by me of all people."

He wasn't going to give them time to think of anything. Jask and Valera could scrap when they needed to, but neither of them knew how to deal with a competent swordsman. Jask had to jump back to dodge a lunge, hitting the wall behind him. The man followed, but stopped to swipe toward Valera, keeping her at a distance. Jask tried to use the opening, to rush him and get inside his reach.

Dannis was ready for him. Maybe he'd planned it that way. He carried the momentum from his swing around and jammed his blade into Jask's chest.

Valera froze. She watched Jask try to keep fighting for just a moment. Without a word, he fell. His body dropped, and the most he could do was take the sword with him.

Valera screamed in fury. She charged him, his sword stuck long enough for her to reach him. She aimed for his throat, and her hands got their mark. She carried both of them to the ground as her fingers dug in. He was unprepared for her strength, fueled by grief and madness. She pinned him on his back and put her weight down on his windpipe. She just had to hold on.

He was still the stronger of the two once his surprise at her burst of ferocity wore off. He grabbed her own throat, and with his longer arms he pushed her away. She had a good head start, but it was easier for him to hold on. Against her every hope her fingers relented, and her hands left his neck. He toppled her, and now it was her turn to be on her back. Her turn to be

strangled lifeless.

Jask's knife was nearby. She went for it. Dannis noticed, and grabbed her wrist before she could strike with it. Valera fought him for every second of breath he denied her, but he had size and weight on her, and he used a few tricks of his own to keep her down. The dagger fell from her fingers for want of strength to hold it.

Valera gave up. It was over.

She was caught off guard when he let go. She wanted to throw him off, to go for the weapon again, but her body wouldn't move. At least not until he moved it for her, rolling her onto her stomach. Valera knew what was coming now.

She tried to stop him, but she was still too weak. He was tying her arms above the elbow. It was crude work, at least from the feel of it, but it was enough to keep her hands from where they could help her fight him off. He looped the rope around her neck, and again she had to endure the creeping death that slowly gripped her.

Valera took her last chance to see Jask. He was still now, murdered because of her one stupid little decision to go into that woman's room.

When he let her have her breath back she silently wished that he'd just ended it there. She was beaten, hurting worse than when Dommia had merely scourged her with a whip.

Dannis lifted her and dragged her toward the other room, leaving behind Jask's body. She was in a daze, but she didn't need too clear a head to know what being picked up and dropped on the bed meant.

"What did you do with Phia?" she asked, desperate to hear that she'd gotten away, to have one spot of good to hang onto.

"Who, the blonde? I don't know. Some other man grabbed her. I hired a few spies to help look for you, but I guess his were better. Good news- my spies were also looking for him, and he was easier to pick out of a crowd. They saw him leaving this area, carrying a body-sized sack. Guess he got the wrong girl."

He fell on top of her, putting his hand around her throat to remind her of his power over her.

"Now it looks like I have the real prize. I was hoping you would be cute-

looking. See, I think that note- the one you made my sister write- I think that was a little something you wanted but couldn't admit to. So I had to chase you all across two cities to come give you what you were begging for. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to enjoy it if you were an ugly little bitch, but I think I'll like this."

"Fuck you!"

It was a weak retort, but Valera didn't hope that any stinging rebuke would convince him not to take his revenge. With one hand he stripped her tights off, and promptly tied them around her feet. He was just as brutal with her blouse, tearing it off and pulling it back around her arms. He rolled her onto her stomach, and managed to pull it completely off of her, tearing it in half and working each one through the loose ropework about her elbows.

He tied her hands properly, pushing her wrists together and winding rope around them. She gave him as much trouble as she could, but it was only a matter of time before the rope tightened and cinched. The coarse fibers pressed into her skin; he wasn't being gentle. He followed by fixing the rope around her upper arms, removing his original work and replacing it with something far more secure.

He turned her over now and put her on her back, his hands making contact with her her bare skin. It felt intimate in a horrible way. She had to lay with her arms pinned between her and the bed, a taste of what they'd done to Dommia. It was uncomfortable on its own, but that was a minor evil compared to what it would allow him to do to her uncontested.

Dannis slid the tights that were binding her feet up past her ankles, leaving them free to have rope tied around each one, with a long loose end emerging from the knot.

Valera kicked his hands away, but he put his weight on her legs, flattening them against the hard mattress. Her arms ached already, and every attempt on her part to twist away or sit up tired her almost immediately, making her muscles burn.

Dannis tied the loose end of each rope to a bedpost, and tested the knots by pulling some of the slack out. Valera pulled back, but the knot only allowed it to go one way. He untied her tights, disposing them over the side of the bed, and knelt near the baseboard between her legs.

"Time to open up," he said.

He slowly pulled at each rope, and despite all her strength trying to keep her knees together, her legs gradually parted, exposing her nude pussy to him. Valera thrashed from side to side, rolling on top of her own arms, hands squished under her ass.

For the second time, twice too many for one life, Valera was naked and restrictively bound, helpless in the hands of someone intending to show her no mercy. This time her allies were gone, one of them cut down, and there was nothing she could offer him for even the slightest reprieve.

Dannis closed in on her, crawling over her to put his head above hers. She felt his erecting press against her through his pants. He was going to do the unthinkable, and her physical exertions were no match for the cords that bound her.

"Get off!" she said, squirming as his hands slid up her sides. "I'll cut your damn throat, you disgusting pig!"

He laughed.

"With what? Your sharp wit? I can feel you trying to get loose. Isn't working, is it? You are well and ready for a good, hard length of cock, no matter how much of a cunt you decide to be about it."

He grabbed her breasts with both hands and squeezed. Hard. Valera winced, afraid he was going to leave bruises.

"Are you a virgin?"

"Fuck you."

There was no way she was about to let him know that he would take her innocence.

"You already said that. I'll be able to tell."

"No," she said, her voice weak.

"I bet you're a liar. You never let your lover boy back there have a go, huh? Well, too late now and better for me."

Valera felt like there was a deep gash in her gut, and Dannis was pouring salt in it. His hands moved freely over her, finding places she never knew she had to be violated in. His mouth moistened her breasts, sucking on them and biting her nipples. He was enjoying himself, and he was in no rush to end her torture. He kissed and fondled her all the way from her hips to her neck,

dragging out the ritual of defilement.

He was having fun, and knowing it made every second longer for her. Every moment that passed was the new worst one in her life. Every press of his mouth against her body and every touch of his hands, coming without end, was terrible in its own special way. When he came to her head she offered him only the side of her face, which he dragged his tongue across, wetting her from her jaw, to her cheek, to her closed eye, to her nose.

She turned her head, needing heinously to wipe it off against the mattress. He stopped her half way by locking his hand around her neck again. He licked her a second time, spreading his saliva over her lips and across her other cheek.

A sudden pressure on her already tender throat made her gasp, but instead of air it was his tongue rushing into her mouth. Valera gagged, biting down and tasting a hint of blood. He clutched harder, and she let up, expecting to take it out. He lingered instead, and when she tried to push it back with her own he intertwined them, moaning in approval.

Valera couldn't even scream with her mouth filled by his. Instead she whined, and more submissively than she'd intended. She wanted to pour her anger out on him, but everything she did- every futile struggle, every defeated attempt at defense, every noise that let fear and misery bleed into it- only highlighted how in control of her he was. How unable she would be to defend herself when the moment came for him to penetrate her. The abuse lasted longer than Valera ever imagined it could. As much as she dreaded him finishing the act, she couldn't bear for this to continue. All over her body was prodded, sucked, pinched, caressed, and grouped. She had to let him kiss her time and time again, under threat of being throttled, all the while her arms growing more numb and her sides cramping from her strained breathing and striving to push him away.

Dannis sat up and pulled off his shirt. As he fumbled with his belt, intent to breach her written in his every movement, Valera's last bit of defiant facade crumbled.

"Please, don't," she begged, throwing herself on his mercy. "I'm sorry. I swear I'm sorry. Just take the necklace and let me go. It's on that woman-"

"Why is it on- nevermind. I don't care. I'm not here to get the necklace

back. I'm here to avenge my family's honor. That cunt of yours is much more interesting to me than an old piece of jewelry."

"No," she said, needing all of her will not to break down completely. "You've done enough. I've lost my home and all of my friends. You murdered Jask. I've been arrested and beaten. I've been tortured enough. You don't need to rape me too."

"You don't really think I'm going to stop, right now, after how hot you've gotten me?"

"I've never done anything this bad. Not to you. Not to anyone."

"I'll take your word for it, right along with your maidenhood. But good retribution comes in tenfold. You've done enough to deserve whatever I can come up with to make you suffer. Especially if it feels as good for me as this is going to."

It wasn't about revenge, she thought. He just wanted to fuck her, to hurt her, for his sick pleasure, and 'honor' was just an excuse.

His pants were off now, and she could see the erect member that he was about to impale her upon. He lowered himself onto her, and his entire body pressed against hers, bare skin to bare skin. He reached down and guided his cock to her opening, the head parting her lips. Valera poured very last drop of her remaining strength into the battle against the weight of his body and the indifferent cruelty of the ropes that dug into her skin. With a slow push he advanced into her.

A pain shot through her as her virginity was broken. As his length further pushed into her tight space it turned into a lasting ache, his size too much for her inexperienced sex. Other sensations flooded her as well. Her vagina had never been this sensitive before, and it screamed at her as it accepted his cock. If she'd had the choice, she'd have taken the simple pain of her pussy being stretched over the vileness of her body's sexual response. She welcomed neither, but had both forced on her.

Valera realized that she wasn't breathing, and had to let the air coming flooding into her lungs with a loud gasp.

"Feels better than you thought it would, huh? Just wait until I get going."

Valera didn't answer him. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. Begging, crying, screaming, fighting, insulting him- nothing would get him out

until he blew his load into her. The fucking began, and the waves of physical passion that washed over her were more intense than she was ready for. Her will and her reason were gone, crushed by their failures to save her. She let her body do as it would, jerking and writhing by instinct that she no longer had the power to control. She panted, screamed, and moaned as the impulse came to her, making no secret of the toll he was taking on her.

He grunted in approval. The thought that he was enjoying the suffering he was causing her drove her mad, but she had nothing left inside her to hide the humiliating weakness to his touch with. He drove steadily into her, now well lubricated by the fluids he'd wrung out of her.

"Tell me if you want me to slow down," he said. "I want to make sure you get everything you can out of this. I'll take all the time you need."

She wanted to tell him to just end it, but even that was beyond her now. He kept pounding, sometimes fast and sometimes slow, sometimes with hard thrusts and sometimes with steady motion. He knew where she was vulnerable, her moans and spasms giving her away. He used it without remorse. Her body was in his hands, and he made it do as he pleased. Valera thought she was going to pass out from the heights and depths he brought her to. He punctuated his most intense moments by seizing her breasts, now inflamed enough to make her scream on their own.

Valera couldn't believe how long it was taking. The time before he'd trespassed into her, making his manhood part of her loins, seemed like a different age. The idea of her body not being on the edge of exhaustion, ready to give out completely at any moment, was strange now. She could hardly even breathe.

"You've got a good little cunt, you know that?"

He was out of breath now too. Valera didn't know how he still had the stamina to continue.

"Good for being fucked. That's all you'll be good for now. I don't know what that bitch Dommia has planned, but I'm going to make sure you wind up in a slave brothel where you can get fucked all day and night until you're used up and they can throw you in the garbage."

The threat meant nothing to her. She couldn't think past the need for this time to end. When his hands wrapped around her neck for yet another time

she welcomed them and the oblivion they might bring. He was thrusting more intensely than ever. He hardened his grip, and her panting stopped.

For some reason, this was what finally set her off. A climax built and thundered through her, fueled by a physical arousal she couldn't understand, and hadn't realized existed. Even as her lungs burned, she shuddered with an unwelcome pleasure, a tension that he'd slowly beaten into her releasing uncontrollably.

In the middle of her violent convulsions Dannis grunted loudly and savagely. Goo filled her cavity, adding a fresh kind of repulsion to the storm of shame that ravaged her. Her rape had been completed.

Even as he slowed down he kept his hands rigidly clamped under her chin while the aftershocks of his orgasm faded. Valera trembled as the last of her adrenaline burned away. When he let her go she had trouble even getting air down her throat. Her body was traumatized, pushed past its limits. Her heart and mind were even worse off.

He pulled his cock out and left her empty. It felt strange. She had no love for its presence, but now her vagina felt foreign, as if it no longer belonged to her. She felt a void where something very personal of hers had been stolen, leaving nothing behind but a ruin, sore and bruised.

Soon she lay completely still, breathing slowly and shallowly. Moving even slightly in any way hurt, and it took too much effort to try. She rested. She'd been ripped apart, and she didn't know if she could be mended. She couldn't imagine what tomorrow would be like. She couldn't think at all. For now, she rested.

It was a cold, dark place. Dommia felt the chill run through her body. She noticed that she was naked. She started to remember why. The damn thief and her friend had gotten lucky, and she was paying the price for going after them alone. How that turned into the dream she was in now was still a mystery. She was starting to think she wasn't in a dream at all. She'd never been able to think this clearly in one before, and why would she have fallen asleep? She remembered being incredibly uncomfortable, lying on the floor and nearly choking on a gag when Valera put the necklace-

The realization chilled her more than the air. Was that the ritual Count

Dhern had spoken of? How did Valera know it? Dommia wondered how much deeper the mess she was caught in went.

She took stock of her surroundings. The hallways were carved, rather than built, but polished smooth. The stone was black marble, with grotesque decorations and odd, irregularly shaped rooms, large and small, branching off here and there. Sometimes they simply intersected the hallway, as if dropped there randomly.

She tried to make an orderly search of the bizarre network of corridors, but she kept losing her way. She had nothing to make a map with, but her memory was usually good enough. Either she couldn't trust it in the unearthly tunnels or it was the hallways themselves she couldn't trust.

The first sound that Dommia heard other than the soft padding of her feet on the floor or her nervous breath was a metallic rattling. She hesitated before finding the courage to follow it. It led her to a corridor, and down near the end she saw a cell door, the sound coming from inside the iron bars. Dommia crept up on it, not able to see much inside the room until she stood before it. Inside was what Dommia could only assume was Luccela. She was more than the count had ever promised.

To call her gorgeous would be trite. She was tall, proportioned like no woman Dommia had ever seen before, and had a strikingly beautiful face with full lips and fierce eyes. Her skin screamed to be touched. Dommia noticed her other features as well; the ones that immediately showed her to be something other than human, even if her impossible, flawless form hadn't already. They took nothing from her allure, and if anything their exotic figures added to the intense sexuality that radiated from her.

Luccela noticed Dommia too. She showed no shock, but a sort of pleased, underplayed surprise at Dommia revealing herself. Her intoxicating nature didn't stop at her mere appearance. Her every movement was lustful, her every mannerism and expression naturally arousing. Dommia could see how, if any being could tempt her to submit, it would be this one. Before now she'd been covering her chest with her arms, but she almost wanted to bare herself to this creature.

"Hello," said Luccela, sitting on top of a wooden horse with her legs crossed. "My, I've had a lot of guests recently. And this one..."

"Are you Luccela?"

"Yes, of course. May I know your name?"

"Mistress Dommia Bethor."

"Oh, a Mistress this time? That sounds exciting. Would you... do a small favor for me?"

Dommia could think of a few favor she'd like to do for her.

"What's that?"

"There's a key, somewhere down that hallway. Could you get it for me? I'd be very grateful, and I can be so, so pleasing when I'm grateful."

Dommia knew what she meant. Probably more than Luccela expected. She had little doubt that the awesome being locked away in that room could overpower her and use her in ways she couldn't imagine as soon as the door was opened. As much as she burned to put her hands on that glorious body, her rationality still held sway.

Then she remembered how Luccela could supposedly be banished. Getting rid of her would be a shame, at least as Dommia saw it. But, again, reason told her that it would probably be a good thing. And it might be the only good thing Dommia would get a chance to do. Right now, outside of this fantasy, she was in the hands of two criminals who were likely to cut her throat any minute now. Even if her soldiers came to rescue her, she was in such a humiliating position that she'd likely lose her title when she got back to Yorshir. She'd failed, badly, and this might be her only chance to fulfill her duty, at least in some way. Even if nobody else would ever learn of it, she could do this one thing and die with some honor intact.

She looked for the key, finding down a hallway opposite the door. She returned, put it in the lock, and with a motion of the wrist Luccela was free. She opened the door, injecting the same kind of seductiveness as she did into everything else into the simple task.

Dommia hadn't noticed the leather cord in her hand, hidden until now by her misdirection. She was expecting this anyway. She held her hands out in front of her, and looked Luccela in the eye.

"This is what you're planning on, right."

Luccela didn't hide her pleasure at Dommia's offering.

"It's a start," she said.

She took her time, tying the cord neatly around Dommia's wrists.

"You're quite the present I've been handed. This is going to be something very special."

Luccela walked behind Dommia, and started trying out her new slave to be. Dommia stood still while silky hands coursed over her hips and fondled her breasts. Luccela knew how to touch a woman's body, and Dommia had to bite her lip to keep herself from getting caught up in it.

"You're much more receptive than the others. I think I know where to take you. It's my favorite place in this temple."

Dommia felt a gentle nudge against her back. She walked, letting Luccela guide her to the place where their contest would be held. The march took longer than Dommia expected, but in due course she found herself approaching a pair of intricately carved wooden doors. The artistry depicted submission, with naked slaves bowing to their masters.

Luccela pushed open the door and dragged Dommia through. Whereas the other room had been made for imprisonment this one was for ceremony. Statues of demons and ghouls held real whips in their hands, ready to be taken and used. Burning stones in wide bowls lit the room. Statues of bound slaves held leather and metal gags in their mouths.

In the center of the room was a raised platform, a foot-high cylinder wide enough to comfortably stand on. Above it were a pair of mechanical hands made of a black metal Dommia had never seen before, each on the end of a strut that descended from the ceiling. The fingers were articulated, capable of moving in and out. Dommia could guess from their position what they were for. On the floor, on opposite sides of the cylinder, were fetters attached to metal plates.

Luccela urged her onto the cylinder. She took back her leather cord, and before Dommia could rub feeling back into her wrists Luccela was guiding them toward the hands. She closed the fingers around Dommia's wrists, the clinking of a ratchet promising that they wouldn't be opening back up. Her arms were stretched above her head now, fixed solidly where the hands gripped her.

Luccela approached one of the statues and pushed its head down, as if making it bow. There was a mechanical grinding, and the cylinder under Dommia's feet fell away, leaving them dangling while her arms had to support

her weight. She reached for the floor with her toes, but they could just barely brush it.

Luccela soon denied her even that. She put the shackles around her ankles, adjusting the chain to stretch Dommia's body out as much as possible, further increasing the strain on her arms. Her legs were spread wide now, and no doubt Luccela would be taking advantage of it.

For the third time in less than a full day Dommia was someone else's captive, ready to be used as they pleased. This was wholly different, however, from her night in the count's hands. It was already both more cruel and more tantalizing. There was nothing gentle about how she was splayed, no concession to her body's physical needs. Breathing was an act of effort, and any escape was out of the question. The desire she never thought she would feel- to beg for mercy and throw herself at Luccela's feet- showed the first glimmer of itself in her soul.

"I'll never submit to you," she said, giving an oath to set her mind straight.

"What do you call this?" asked Luccela as she caressed Dommia's taugt arms.

"You've been very accommodating so far. What else can you even do? Everything is in my hands now."

"I know how this works. I have to resist you. I had to let you chain me up, and now if you can't force me to submit, you'll be banished."

Luccela didn't seem worried. In fact, she looked intrigued. Even with Dommia off the ground they still meet at eye level. Luccela put her arms around Dommia and kissed her.

Phia writhed gorgeously. Her restraints did their job admirably, holding her still to experience all of the pain and pleasure she had coming to her without letting her interfere with their application. Still, the subtle movement of her frame, the tensing of her muscles, the occasional spasm that came to her- they all validated the work being done. They were exquisite to behold, paired with her moans, sighs, and whimpers. Her captor appreciated those immensely.

She'd faked the first orgasm. That wasn't surprising; these weren't easy

lessons to learn. But by pretending, by taking that first step, she would start to internalize the idea. This time, she would be more ready to listen to what her body told her. He'd given her a rest, removing the clamps on her nipples and vagina. The iron brassiere remained, and she hadn't dared complain about it. Now he was caressing her again, warming her back up for her second round of training.

Her skin was still smooth and healthy, and he wished she could see herself as he did; see how lovely she looked, how beautiful her face was when it wore than plaintive expression, and how divine the curves of her form were as the slab presented them to him. Her naked body promised him innumerable delights, unspoiled by any clothing to insulate her flesh from his touch. Her outstretched limbs, bound by iron, offered complete freedom to do as he pleased. And freedom to her, to endure new realms of sensation that she would never be able to if she had to rely on her will alone to keep from fighting them.

Her pussy was such a magnificent thing. One little touch allowed him to do so much to her. Her breasts allowed much the same, and were firm and nice to feel in his grip, but the reaction he could get with just a light brush against her clit made him long for the moment when it would be his cock slipping into her warm embrace.

"I'll cum for you again," she said, "Just please take these off."

"Your cumming again was never in question. But we've barely started on the other delights."

He tugged on the chain holding the brassiere's cups together, injecting a fresh energy in her struggles. Once she settled from that he lit a pair of candles, holding their wicks above one that was serving as a light source. He let the wax warm and start to melt. When he judged them ready he let them hover over her belly.

The first few drops fell, and once again Phia's body sprang to life. He drew a trail of red wax splatters down her stomach, over her hip, and along her leg. Her foot, a rare part of her that was able to move, danced under the rain of hot beads that fell upon it. He eventually took it in his hand, holding it still so that the space between her toes and the soles of her foot could be covered.

"Stop!" she begged between her cries of pain. "No! No more!"

"Yes," he said. "There will be nothing but more."

He switched to her other foot, painting it red as well. He worked his way back up her leg, letting streams pour down the side where her skin was more sensitive. The inside of her thighs produced the best results, the most struggles, and the most sensual lamentations.

He spent a good portion of his ammunition on her torso, running it down her sides, filling her belly button, creeping lower toward her sex and backing away after threatening it. He moved higher, letting it drip on her shoulders. He traced up her arm, stopping before he reached her elbow, and coming back down to catch her armpit. This was another place that she took particularly well, and he used the anticipation while matching the trek along her other arm to torment her further. He highlighted her collar bones, and filled the little notch inbetween them. He even let a few drops fall on her neck, which made her gasp fabulously.

With one hand he released the domes that held her breasts, letting the iron contraption slide onto the floor. Her quickened breath showed that she knew why he'd done it. He stopped, first, to fondle them again, noting the red marks that dotted them. This itself made her wince; they were doubtlessly sore.

He took his hand away and let the wax fall. Phia howled and her breasts jiggled from her jerking against the bands that held her. He switched between them, sometimes doing both at the same time, one candle on each, but never letting up entirely. He covered each one completely, using most of the rest of the candles. The last bit he saved for his finale.

He wanted her to savor this. He let her know with his fingertips that his attention had gone back to her loins, and he traced the lips of her vagina a few times to remind her of how sensitive it was.

"No... no... no..."

She was beyond the delusion that he would stay his hand; that was obvious from the weakness of her pleas. He didn't want to disappoint her. The burning red goo poured across her pussy, slowly burying her clit. He didn't stop until he had to, or risk burning his own fingers from the open flame.

He let the wax sit, sticking to her skin while it cooled. She quivered, her

body offering itself to him with its display of helplessness. The sounds of a trapped and beaten animal flowed from her mouth. On a lark he covered it with his hand, muffling her and letting her know that even when she cried out she did it because he allowed her to.

He discarded the remnants of the candles and fetched a small bottle from his belt. He removed the cork and took his hand away from Phia's mouth. He put the bottle's opening inside and poured, holding her face still with his other hand to make sure she didn't spill any. He held her jaw shut and pinched her nose, and it didn't take long for her to understand his message and swallow.

It was an expensive drug, and difficult to get a hold of, but it was invaluable when training had to be done in a hurry. He wanted her ready for when Luccela was released. A present for the demoness to indulge herself with.

He peeled the wax from her breasts while he waited. Soon her reactions to even the briefest, lightest touch were lively and intense. The drug was working, making her more sensitive. The effect was especially strong on her sexual organs.

With her breasts clear of the wax he filled his hands with them, squeezing them firmly. Phia was rendered breathless, her body locking up in tension and her gasp cut short by her chest freezing, overwhelmed.

When she did breathe again it was ragged and noisy. He kept one hand clamped around her lovely orb while his other slid along a scenic route down to the mound of wax covering her pussy. He tore it off, a scream filling the chamber. He let it die down before placing a single digit on her clit, bringing an entirely different scream to his ears.

"What did you do to me?" she wailed, "I can't take this, please, sto-"

He cut her off by plunging his fingers inside her. All she could do then was howl. He let her go, leaving her to anticipate the coming storm. He picked through his collection of whips to find a stiff crop with a wide head. He stood over Phia again, rubbing the end of the whip against her belly. Her squirming intensified.

"Not that... Not that..." she said, on the edge of delirium.

He put the whip against her lips, covering them with the leather tip.

"Kiss it," he commanded.

She obeyed, her pained expression telling him that she knew she would still suffer its touch. Did she think that she'd bought herself any mercy at all? Was she just too afraid to refuse? Her eyes were tightly shut and she was bracing herself for its return kiss.

He tapped her a few times, lightly on her breasts. In their heightened state even this was enough to send her into a fit. The first real hit came on her stomach. He let her convulse in pain, enjoying ever intricacy of her misery. He hit her again, higher up, and a few times on her thighs. This was still only the warm-up, but Phia was exhausting herself with her struggling.

It was time for session to begin in earnest.

He touched her between the legs again, gently caressing her. He moved in to her sex, and Phia screamed again in carnal anguish. This time she would get not reprieve. The drug made her more sensitive, but it would still take time to make her orgasm. He didn't mind, but the crop was a necessary part of this exercise.

Soon Phia's frantic cries and mad thrashing could not be separated between those from pain or those from pleasure. The whip assailed her as passionately as his fingers, and his fingers as viciously as the whip. He let her rise and fall, forced to let her come down occasionally when he saw that she was strangling herself. She was pulling so hard against her shackles, even the one around her neck, that her face was turning red and she wasn't breathing. Letting her pass out had some appeal to it, but he'd rather bring her to that point as many times as he could, burning the association between sexual bliss and physical abuse into her brain.

He saved her breasts for the moments closest to her climax, now with such a powerful current behind it that not even the excruciating bite of the crop against her inflamed nipples could slow it down. He counted three times that he was able to back her down from that edge before it took over, beyond his power to stop. What tiny bit of freedom she had in her hips she used to thrust against his fingers, covering them with her juices as he beat her.

His hands came to a rest, letting her grind on them as she would while he put the handle of the crop between her teeth. She hadn't faked it this time. He pulled his fingers out, fondling her thighs to help her relax. It would take some time. He envied her, somewhat, to be able to feel something so intensely.

There was as much benevolence as evil in this training, and soon Phia would be a slave to her body's most base desires. If he was lucky, some of her higher reason was already permanently destroyed.

Count Dhern looked upon the mewling woman with unbridled anticipation. She was going to be an excellent toy, for him and Luccela.

Luccela's mouth tasted like nothing Dommia had ever known before. It was sweet, perhaps a little tart, and strongly so. There was actual flavor to her kiss, and Dommia was so enraptured by it that she didn't notice the aftereffect until it was in full force.

Dommia's mouth was burning. It felt both like an overwhelmingly intense spice and like hot metal pressed against her tongue at the same time. She tried to pull away, but Luccela held her head in place, her tongue already deep in Dommia's mouth. She felt it slide in even farther, gagging her and spreading the burning saliva to the back of her throat. Dommia whined like a dog, not prepared for this kind of punishment. Luccela was practically fucking her mouth, and Dommia had given up any defense against it.

Luccela took an age to get bored with the kiss, but she finally let Dommia have her mouth back. Dommia let it gape open, sucking down air to try to cool her burning throat, now feeling almost scalded. While she waited for it to cool Luccela demonstrated that it could have the same effect on the rest of her. She licked Dommia's chest, from the top of her abs up between her breasts and to her shoulder. Where she left a trail of wet skin it burned, just like her mouth. Dommia held back a scream; she couldn't let herself break so easily.

"I don't know where you obtained those silly ideas of yours, but if you'll allow me a counterargument-"

Luccela put her hands on Dommia's hips, her fingers reaching to the small of her back. For the first time, her sharp, pointed nails touched her skin, the tips pricking her lightly. Where they did she felt something like a wasp's sting, ten of them at once that she couldn't swat away. Dommia's scream came loose this time, and while Luccela's nails stayed in place the sting only grew worse.

"First, I don't know what hope you think you have of resisting me, but you should know how long I have to completely shatter your feisty little spirit.

You might stay tied up outside for a few minutes, or an hour, or even a day, but in here-

Luccela chuckled richly.

"Even if it's only a few minutes outside, I'll have a couple of days to play with you. Didn't they tell you that? I admit that the first one- Valera, the sweet thing- got off easily. I was just waking up, bound in the place that most sealed my power. The second I did better with, but she refused to let me free. The third, mmmm, she was delicious. I had a little time with her, but she wasted too much of it before loosing me. But you- you've wasted nothing. And I doubt it really will only be a few minutes. I think I'll have much longer with you. These chains should hold you here for weeks."

It was a bluff. It had to be. Even she knew she couldn't endure that. She was already much weaker and harder pushed than she'd expected. As Luccela spoke she scratched her claws across Dommia's body, moving higher up her back and out toward her sides. It felt like an entire nest of hornets was loose on her. Her muscles all went taught, but she couldn't budge, and the stings kept coming. Luccela stopped her words to listen to Dommia howl like she never had in her life.

"Second- I don't need you to submit to me, whatever that involves. I think, perhaps, I will make you, just for fun. But even if by some heroic, impossible strength you hold out, it won't matter. What I need is to feed. I need to devour your agony and your ecstasy. I will gorge on your anguish. Then, when I grow powerful enough, when I fill the hole that a thousand years of starvation has left me-

Luccela laughed heartily. Her nails crept closer to their destination, one that Dommia could guess because it was obvious and was a horrible thought.

"Don't," she begged, "No- no- no-"

The venomous nails took Dommia's breasts in their clutch. The pain was unreal, enough to rip all control over her body from her. She would die before a single day, let alone a week, of this could pass.

Luccela granted her respite, but the hundreds of points of bitter pain, the worst and the most recent on her bosom, were in no hurry to fade. Each one throbbed, hurting barely any less than when first inflicted on her. She was shaking now, cramps already forming where muscles pulled at a body that

couldn't move. Dommia had no action she could take to distract herself, no drive to funnel her pain into as fuel. She merely hung and suffered, her helplessness magnifying the distress.

Luccela knelt, her face inches away from Dommia's pussy. She cupped her hands around the back of Dommia's legs and kissed it. Her clitoris was just as sensitive to the caustic saliva as her mouth, probably moreso.

"Why don't we see if I can make you drip for me?"

The familiar sensation of a woman sucking on her sex pulsed through Dommia. The sensation that followed was entirely new; her gap lit up, seared by the juices that were penetrating it. She squealed loudly as it spread, covering her lips and finding her deepest regions.

Pain wasn't new to Dommia. She'd felt it while training, while fighting, and while exploring the wilderness. This was different. It was targeted, taking her where she was most susceptible. She was used to fighting pain, to working through it and letting the pride of her accomplishments soothe it. There was no fighting this. She could only passively accept it. She could only remain stretched out, denied the slightest protection while Luccela slowly made more and more of her body scream out in agony.

The creature worked on her patiently, giving no heed to Dommia's occasional outbursts and constant groaning. Dommia couldn't believe it when she actually grew aroused enough to meet Luccela's fluids with her own. It barely took the edge off of her misery, but Luccela seemed to approve.

"Mmm... tasty. That has you warmed up for now. We can come back here with a little more vigor, but later. I think our next activity should be..."

Luccela took to her feet. She perused the row of statues, considering each of their offerings. The one she picked was a thin bullwhip, a leather knot and tassel at the end. Dommia had seen them used on others before, but had never tasted the kiss of one herself. She wasn't eager to.

Luccela cracked it in the air. Dommia pulled at the hands that crushed her wrists in their grip, begging something to give as she watched the demoness loom closer, her wings spreading and her tail swishing from side to side. Nothing did. The whip landed against her ribs, just below her breasts. It forced her breath from her, and it took great effort to get her lungs working again. Luccela wasn't going to give her much time to heal. She wrapped the

whip around her ass, the head curving around to hit her thigh and leaving a line of pain the whole way.

She repeated the technique, this time across her back to let the tassel smack against her breast. Dommia shrieked, and far from the last time. Luccela had an unquenchable appetite for this savagery, and the beating continued as Dommia's body trembled and drenched itself in sweat. She was ruefully amazed at how long her body was able to hold on, expecting to black out halfway through the assault. That halfway turned out to be only a quarter way, and soon a tenth of the way. She couldn't gulp in air fast enough to satisfy her lungs. Luccela went on, picking her places with whimsy, but eventually covering Dommia's whole form from sheer volume. The new strikes now had to come on top of old ones, and hurt all the more for it. The slaps of the whip against her flesh refused to cease, and Luccela seemed to enjoy each one more than the last.

Dommia could scarcely believe it when a few seconds went by without bringing a new well of pain across her figure. Phantom lashes still hit her, her mind so conditioned to expecting them that it jerked every few moments, matching the rhythm that they had come in.

Luccela put the whip away and came back to caress her. She dangled limply from her arms, still pulled taught but with no strength to even squirm where she was. Her touch, still smooth and warm, still brought misery to her inflamed skin. Her hands ran all over her torso, as if to soothe her after the violence she'd perpetrated.

"Tell me," said Luccela, "Do you think you would submit, right now, if I offered mercy? Are you ready to trade your pride for a change in how my attention is applied to you?"

Dommia wanted to refuse, but she didn't know if she could. She was too traumatized to speak at all, as far as she could tell, but she wondered if such an offer could jolt it out of her.

Luccela nuzzled her head against Dommia's and spoke into her ear.

"That grace will never come to you. The blessings I have chosen for you will come, whether they are met with defiance or welcomed with ecstasy."

Torture after torture followed. Dommia noticed that no physical wounds appeared on her, no matter how hard the whipping or how many times and

where the nails stung her skin. The pain stayed, and built up over time. Soon she couldn't even tell what hurt from what- her entire body was a beacon of soreness, aches, and rawness. Only the newest of each torment could stand out, and stand out they did.

A dozen crops and flogs were tested on her, from her breasts, to her back, to her pussy. Clamps with hard teeth clasped her nipples before being torn off. Candles were held under the skin between her sex and her ass. For a while, a leather strap was pushed between her teeth and used to pull her head back, attached to a hook that was fit into her ass, making her stare at the ceiling while hot oils were dripped onto her neck.

Dommia broke. She broke long before her nightmare came even close to ending. She broke time and time again, begging for reprieve and offering any service she could in exchange. She pleaded in the hope of finding some thread of humanity in the sinister being that rendered excruciation after excruciation on her. Luccela gave her only words of false comfort in exchange, occasionally letting her down on her knees to please her orally, as Luccela often did herself to Dommia in between other cruelties. Dommia discovered the first time that her sexual juices, which flowed easily and generously, were just as harmful as her saliva. Dommia didn't care; she would be tortured either way, and the delusional hope of kindness if she served Luccela well enough became a comfort- the only she had.

A metal rod penetrated Dommia's ass. It was thick and covered with studs, and she would have cried out if Luccela's tongue wasn't down her throat once again. Dommia swore that the burning saliva was getting stronger and stronger, but she was no more able to stop her this time than she was the first. The rod started fucking her, jammed in hard each time. The studs were the highlight of the experience. She'd been violated now more times than she could remember- anally and vaginally. Orgasms had been forced upon her, but never without a price. She could no longer even try to resist. Her muscles had long since turned to jelly. A jelly that screamed every time she sent it the slightest suggestion.

She'd wished for a long time now that Jask had finished the job he'd started when he choked her unconscious. But, strangely, she also wished that she could just be Luccela's slave for a while. She would take the pain of

sucking her clit, and even of being fucked roughly, if she could just lie in peace next to her afterward. She wished she could serve her new goddess instead of just being tortured, maybe even more than she wished she could finally wake up. She couldn't think of anything she wouldn't give to be taken into her embrace, to be rewarded for giving her so much joy from her suffering. Her hate for the magnificent Luccela had long since died, burned away in the throes of Dommia's agony. She loved her now. How could she not? How else could she be sacrificing so much to her?

Dannis pulled his shirt back on, covering his chest. The girl had been damn good. She was passed out now, still looking absolutely delicious, even after her thorough punishment. He wasn't sure how he was going to make good on his plan to get her in a brothel. Justicar Dommia was probably going to want to hang her. She was probably uptight enough to raise hell over him fucking her in the first place.

Then again... Dannis entered the room with her naked, brutally tied body laying on the ground. She probably wasn't going to be desperate to let the details of what happened here get out. She'd be mad enough just for being left there while he played with the thief. But better to wait through that than to still be in their hands.

At first he thought she was just too embarrassed to draw attention to herself, but when he got close he saw that she was sleeping. Did they knock her out? He looked over the woman in detail. The man- Jask- must have done this. It was good work. She wouldn't be escaping, either, or even objecting in any practical way if he decided to do something like slip his fingers in her open gash. If he hadn't just spent himself he'd be sorely tempted to take advantage of her.

"Hey," he said, slapping her face lightly. "Wake up."

She didn't move.

He saw Bescie's necklace around her neck. He asked himself what fancy had come over Valera, but didn't have an answer. He eased it off of her and put it in his pocket. For some reason, that was what made her stir.

She groaned, her gag blocking any more articulate comments. Dannis had to work to get it out of her mouth. Her jaw must have hurt like mad with

how packed it was.

"Untie me," she said, drowsily.

"So... how did you get taken by two lousy street rats?"

"Dannis, you are going to be in a lot of trouble if you don't untie me right this instant."

"Nah. I think I'll be fine if I wait a little. It's not like you have other options."

"Dannis!"

He'd made his point. Maybe he should untie her before he did something he really would be in trouble for. She looked amazing right now.

He rolled her over and freed her feet, letting them straighten out. When her hands came free she stood, less crippled by the punishing position she'd been in than he expected. She moaned and stretched, arms above her head and rising on her toes. Dannis saw a glimpse of a smile on her face.

Dannis sensed something wrong. Or maybe it was her apparent lack of modesty- she was in no hurry to cover herself- combined with her seeming contentment with her experience that made it blatantly obvious. He didn't know what, but alarms were going off in his head.

She faced him, her breasts proudly displayed, and stalked closer.

"That's better. Now, if you were getting any ideas before, now is the time to share them."

Dannis found himself pinned to the wall. She'd done it quickly, taking advantage of his retreat to close on him when his back hit the wall. Her hands were on his chest, although they were starting to wander.

"What's wrong? Don't you want your reward for rescuing me?"

Her voice dripped with sexuality. Her hot breath fell on his lips. This was not the woman who'd interrogated and chased him. He had no idea what or how, but he knew he was being lured into some game, one he didn't know the rules or stakes for.

"Sure," he said, "How about letting me have the thief as a slave when you drag her back to Yorshir?"

"You mean Valera? No, I've got plans for her. Maybe you could play too. Have you ever considered letting me arrest you? I could have both you and Valera at my feet."

Dannis shoved her back.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

She stared at him, more rabid lust in her eyes than he'd ever seen from the most desperate whore. Whatever was happening here, he didn't want to be a part of it. The justicar's cunt looked fuckable enough, but cunts could be bought. He didn't need this one badly enough to find out what the cost was going to be.

He picked his sword up off the ground and backed toward the stairs that led into the daylight.

"I'll be waiting," he said, "when you get back to Yorshir. I expect to see her hang."

"I'll look for you when I get there."

Dannis hustled toward the stairs. It'd be a shame if he didn't get to fuck the thief again, but he doubted that whatever madness took Dommia would be pleasant for her. His revenge was had.

He emerged into the city air, leaving the building to rejoin his horse which was tied up across the street. He rode it away, fast but short of a full gallop. At least he'd be able to give Bescie back her necklace.

Chapter 9

Valera arched her back, transferring her weight to her shoulders to give her hands a rest. She was dimly aware of something happening in another room, but what did it matter? Right now she only wished for oblivion.

She sensed someone entering her room. Valera didn't need to look to know it wasn't someone she wanted to see. She was surprised to feel another naked body, this one smooth but firm, climb onto her stomach. An unwelcome hand took her face and she saw that it was Dommia, now untied but still unclothed. Valera resisted her embrace, but what little energy she'd built up since Dannis had left her was spent futility against the same bindings that held her then. Dommia would have her way with Valera just as he had, perhaps even more cruelly given what she and Jask had done to her. An ember of fury burned deep in Valera's soul, but she had no fuel left to feed it, and instead bitter despondency reigned over her.

"This suits you, my precious damsel," said the justicar, sliding her leg against Valera's. "Last time we met you didn't want to even talk to me. I'm so glad that you had a chance to taste such passionate attention as that man must have given you. It must have been wonderful."

Dommia practically purred as she spoke. Valera sensed that something was off, not that there was anything right in the first place with the way Dommia's hands were greedily fondling her.

"I'd rather you beat me again," said Valera with the paltry amount of defiance she could muster.

"Again? I've never beaten you; I never even got to touch you last time. Not that I mind playing that way..."

Dommia kissed her. Valera hardly cooperated, but she could scarcely put up much of a fight either. Her mouth was taken, and belonged to Dommia until she deigned to release it. Valera tried not to taste or feel it, but this was a deep, invasive onslaught, and it wormed its way into her senses. Dommia's words confused her; she couldn't focus enough to make sense of it.

When Dommia migrated to her neck, and then slowly to her shoulder, Valera took her chance to speak again.

"You lying bitch. Or do you just beat and rape so many girls you can't even remember?"

Dommia didn't let the insult stop her from rubbing her whole body against Valera's captive form. Valera felt hard nipples poking into her and a wet cunt against her hip.

"You have me confused with someone else," said Dommia during a few brief breaks in her slobbering all over Valera's chest.

"Bullshit. Like I could forget who tortured me."

"No, you luscious thing, that was Mistress Dommia who did that. She wished she could be here to do this, but I think you'll find me a much better lover."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" said Valera, trying not to sob. "Who the fuck are you then?"

"You don't remember me at all? I thought I'd left a better impression on you than that. It's me," she said.

"Luccela."

Valera went cold. In a moment of clarity she wondered how long Dommia had been lying there, tied up, with the necklace around her neck. What could have happened with her in that world?

If this was Luccela, now in Dommia's body, and loose in the world, what did she want, and what would she do with Valera?

The sickening answer for the immediate future came when Dommia- no, Luccela- sat up. She positioned herself over Valera's face, the smell of her aroused sex inches away from her mouth. Her thighs boxed in Valera's head, keeping her from turning it to the side. One hand wove itself into her hair as Luccela's sex descended on Valera. She held her lips tight, but they were still covered by the creature's juices, and as she began to grind against Valera's face they smeared all over her.

"Kiss me, my treasure. Don't be shy. Once you get a good, hearty taste of it you'll never want to stop."

Valera had tasted enough already, but Luccela wasn't giving her a choice. She shut her eyes and held her breath, but Luccela's pussy pressed and dragged all across her lips, nose, cheeks, and chin. Luccela moaned in deep satisfaction, her hot sex burning against Valera's skin.

For a while she was content to gratify herself this way, fucking Valera's face in absolute bliss. She only grew more and more wet, her odor stronger and stronger. Valera wanted to scream, to cry, to beg for help, but if she opened her mouth it would be instant filled with Luccela's disgusting cunt.

Then the time came. Luccela covered Valera's nose, smothering her. She wanted to hold out, but she was still exhausted and the inevitability of her defeat had been driven into her soul too well now. As soon as she gasped for air Luccela adjusted, pushing her pussy into Valera's mouth. She still denied her breath, smothering her while forcing her to taste her sex.

"Let me feel your tongue," she said, already well into the throes of passion.

Valera did everything she could to refuse- she would rather pass out- but Luccela was diabolical in her torment. She kept Valera on the edge, never long enough to make her lose consciousness but always feeling the burning need for air. It worked. When Valera couldn't take the abuse anymore she gave in, letting her tongue press against the lips that were her instrument of torture.

"More," Luccela demanded.

She gave Valera little relief, expecting her to work harder and harder for each stretch of breath. Every time Valera stopped, or even retreated in the slightest, she found herself smothered again.

Valera heard Luccela grunt furiously, and felt wrath of her orgasm being thrust against her face. Cum poured over her, dripping down her chin and bleeding into her mouth. It wasn't enough for the demoness, and she played her game unabated. Valera had to learn to suck her pussy, how to push her tongue into her hot gash, and how to work her clit to keep her happy. She had to force herself to go a little further each time, every tiny step revolting her, while Luccela howled in euphoria.

When Valera had been compelled to eat enough of Luccela's climaxes she was finally allowed to taste air again. Luccela slid down, lying on top of Valera again and pressing her head against her breasts.

"See? You turned out to be a natural. I can teach you more, though."

Valera couldn't imagine having to go through that again. It was impossible to think that this could be her fate; being tied to a bed and violated repeatedly.

As if to prove the naivete of her disbelief Luccela moved to the foot of her bed and put her face between Valera's legs.

"Pay attention," she said. "I'll expect you to return some of these tricks to me when it's your turn again."

"No, you don't need to do that. Just let me rest. Just let me get some fucking rest."

Valera felt warm lips against her pussy. She groaned as another foreign presence invaded her sex. What this one lacked in its size and punishing force it made up for in its slithering dexterity. Luccela lapped hungrily at Valera, and the elation she took in it was almost as appalling as Valera's forced servitude.

She was already drained past the point of reason, and when her unwilling arousal drew still deeper from her Valera could only hope that it happened quickly. Luccela had no such mercy; she brought Valera up to heat and held her there, her skill at manipulating her body not of human make. Death from sheer exhaustion seemed like a grimly possible end as Luccela drew an orgasm from her and she felt her chest growing too tried to keep up with the hard breathing that was demanded of it.

The demoness ended with a simple kiss to her sex. Valera only knew that she was leaving the bed. It took forever for her heart to calm and to feel like she wasn't out of breath. She wanted to sleep, to escape to some dream where this heinous reality could be gone for a while. It was more easily hoped for than gotten. She could still taste Luccela in her mouth, and feel Dannis between her thighs. Her arms were still bound and throbbing, and she started shivering once her body cooled down.

By the time Luccela returned the world had become distant and surreal. Valera was untied and dressed, her torn blouse put loosely over her and her cloak placed over it. Her hands were tied again, her resistance throughout the whole affair too weak for Luccela to bother noticing. This time rope was wrapped around her chest, binding her arms to it and thankfully holding her cloak from falling open and exposing her. She was put on her knees and gagged, the cloth in her mouth feeling like a welcome barrier to the indignities that it had experienced before.

Soldiers descended the stairs and spoke with their commander. Valera was an official prisoner again. She collapsed trying to climb the steps, and had

to be roughly hauled up to the surface. A rope leash was tied around her neck and her feet hobbled, as if she wasn't already barely able to stand. For a second time she was marched through a city's streets, a conquered prize for all to see. She swayed as she walked, each step harder than it would normally be for her to climb a wall. She stumbled, and had to be saved from falling to the ground multiple times.

A keep loomed before her. Valera looked around as she plodded toward its gates she took one good look around her, expecting it to be the last glimpse of the open sky she might ever see.

Count Dhern drained a glass of one of his finest wine. Phia was coming along nicely. He'd coaxed three orgasms from her, each while punishing her harder than the last time. During the last session he'd made her wet from a light caning alone, focused on her loins. She was learning.

Once Dommia returned he could put her through "the ritual", and when Luccela took over her body Phia would be a ready offering. Korsk was preparing a chamber for it now.

One of Norlis' guards entered his study. He bowed briefly before speaking.

"My lord, Mistress Bethor has arrived, and is ready to meet with you."

"Show her in, of course."

The guard bowed again and left. It was a few minutes before Dommia stepped into his dining room again.

"Justicar, how went your hunt?"

"Fabulously," she said.

Norlis noticed an immediate difference. It was in her voice, her tone, her expression, and her walk. She approached him boldly and slid into his lap, arms wrapping around his neck.

"Valera is being put in one of your cells right now. She's a bit tired, after our intimate time together, but I think you'll like her. I want to compliment you on your storytelling skills. Mistress Dommia was fooled rather handily."

It didn't take Norlis long to guess what she meant. He didn't dare try to throw her off quite yet.

"Luccela?"

"Yes, of course it is, who else?"

"This is unexpected. How did... I was sure we would have to employ some special measures to-"

"No, no, you were right. But Valera did that part for you. Dommia was superb. The lavishness of her suffering was a unimpeachable. And now you have me, here to thank you in person. But, I wonder about one thing..."

"Yes?"

The count's heart beat quickly. He didn't know what whimsy could take an unleashed demoness next, even if Dommia's body limited her.

"You expected to have me in chains when you gave Dommia to me, didn't you? Well, of course, that was needed... but you weren't going to let me go once I took her body, were? Don't lie to me, even wrapped in this meat I can see more deeply than into a person's mind that you can. You were going to be naughty and keep me in bondage as a pet."

"I would have been very, very hospitable," he said. "I have a present for you in my dungeon. I was going to let you have her when you came out. I've been training her all while you- or Dommia- were gone."

Luccela played with his hair. She was as unnaturally sexual as he'd hoped, and Dommia's body was a nice fit for her.

"I suppose I can forgive you. After all, if not for you I might have been stuck in there for who knows how many years more. Just don't try anything from this point out, understand? I lust for the carnal, not for carnage..."

Luccela picked up his chin, putting their faces eye to eye. He saw a flame dance behind her iris and smelled an hint of sulfur when she next spoke.

"...but do not underestimate what a demoness scorned might find wets her loins."

Count Dhern understood her point.

Valera lay on the cell floor. She was naked again, stripped and put in shackles by a large and brutish man. She thought he'd been called 'Korsk'. She'd been passed to him from Dommia's unwitting soldiers, now in the employ of Luccela, to some count's men. They'd passed her in turn to Korsk, who'd brought her through a concealed door to a part of their dungeon that the count apparently didn't want most of his own men to know about.

Her hands were chained closely to her feet, obliging her to lie as if hogtied. It was still the coziest time she'd spent since Dannis had thrown her into this nightmare. She nodded off, her face pressed against hard, damp stone with the gag still tied in her mouth.

She didn't know how long she was allowed to sleep, but it wasn't enough. No dreams had come to her. No pleasant memories succeed in piercing through her current wretchedness to grant her leave from the series of abuses and humiliations that was certain to continue.

Korsk removed the link from her hands to her feet, allowing her to walk. She was brought to another chamber, and there her worst fear was realized. It was Phia, chained to a stone slab and as nude as Valera was.

Valera could see whip marks on her body, as well as places where red wax clung to her skin. Metal clamps were on her nipples, a bit of pointless sadism that betrayed the monstrosity of their new masters. Those were minor things, however, compared to the look she saw in Phia's eyes. Valera saw only a small spark of recognition and sorrow when their gazes met; the woman lying on that slab had been hollowed out, destroyed by the two men that shared the room with her. Phia wasn't even gagged, but she made no attempt to call out to her friend. She just wasn't there.

Luccela was there as well. All three were wearing simple robes, and from the way Luccela's was barely fastened they probably had nothing underneath them. Valera's hands were locked to a ring that was bolted to the wall, keeping her on her feet, while the other man spoke.

"Valera, I understand? You've apparently played a large part in helping our mutual friend here gain her freedom."

"She has," said Luccela, walking over to Phia and rubbing her hands across her body. "She even sent three different ladies to me until she found one who cooperated. This one here- I've seen her as well. I was hoping I would get her like this, one day."

Valera filled the room with her muffled protests. She saw the pained look on Phia's face, albeit a shadow of what it should have been. Still, it was there.

"We're going to have a celebration," said the man, opening his arms in a gesture of demented welcoming. "You and your friend are going to have a place of honor in it."

"Let's start with this one," said Luccela. "She's been waiting so long."

"So have I," said the man.

Valera screamed and rattled her chains, but it only earned her a slap across the face from Korsk. He held back, probably not wanting to bruise her, but it still hurt, and it still made his point. He held her head, forcing her to watch what was happening to her friend.

The other man dropped his robe, showing him to be naked underneath. He mounted his helpless victim, and their 'celebration' began. Phia resisted briefly, but as he started to fuck her he also smacked her with a short leather strip, and rather than simply be cowed she began moaning. Valera couldn't understand it, but she saw Phia enjoying what the man did to her. No- it wasn't enjoyment. It was just the physical response that Valera had seen forced from herself. But to Phia it came so easily, and it took her so thoroughly.

Phia came at least twice before the man finished. He congratulated her on her screams of pleasure, heaping kisses on her mouth and fondling her writhing body. Valera wanted to shut her eyes, but every time she did Korsk would twist her arm, demanding that she see every detail.

When the first man was done Korsk took his turn. Luccela took his position, keeping Valera's attention on Phia while the brute inserted himself into his victim. He was hard and rough, forgoing the leather strap to torture her with his bare hands, squeezing her breasts until she squealed, slapping her, and when the time came choking her while he prepared to empty into her. Even in his savage grip Phia couldn't help but reward him, her body gyrating in an intense climax even with his hands locked around her throat and her face growing red.

It was Luccela's turn next, and Valera saw a repeat of what had been done to her in that cellar. Phia didn't put up nearly as much of a fight, not that it brought her mercy. Luccela sat, facing Phia's feet, with a whip that she smacked against Phia's pussy in regular intervals. When she wanted Phia to work faster or go deeper she hit harder, and to Valera's amazement even though it was her tongue buried in Luccela's slit Phia was the one to start squirting first. Luccela would not be outdone, however, and the jubilation she showed as Phia sucked at her clitoris made Valera queasy.

Korsk unlocked Valera from the wall. She was shoved over to the foot of

the slab, and bent over with her head between Phia's legs. The man who'd first taken his turn with Phia was ready again, and this time it would be Valera taking his cock. He entered her from behind, holding her by the hair and pressing her head against the slab. He drove into her, and with his first orgasm spent in Phia he would be lasting a long time. He groped her with his free hand at first, but soon he picked up a candle from the side of the slab and used it to drip hot wax on Valera's back. Every cry of pain that came from her throat was greeted with an extra hard thrust. The entire candle was spent before he was, and Valera herself long before that.

She came for him, just as she had for Dannis and Luccela, her body unable to refuse them. The man continued, even as her own cum dripped down her leg. She felt his squirting inside her, but by now she knew well that it would hardly be the end.

Before she could even catch her breath she was on her knees again, her back up against the slab. It was Korsk who would have her now, and when he ripped the gag out of her mouth she quickly discovered that it wasn't her pussy that he wanted.

Valera couldn't think clearly enough to stop him before it was too late. He shoved his cock down her throat, and with her hair in his hand she had no choice but to take it. It was the most foul thing she'd ever had to do. His dick was already covered with Phia's and his own cum, and to save herself whatever barbaric wrath he could inflict on her she had to grant his wishes and stroke it with her tongue. He didn't mind making her gag while fucking her mouth- he even grunted in delight when the worst came upon her, and she had to fight to keep going.

Valera swallowed his cum, doing as he demanded and making sure to get every last drop from his shaft.

She expected her next to be Luccela again, but they had even worse prepared for her. Korsk lifted her onto the slab, putting her on her knees and bending her over to press her face against Phia's sex.

Valera could see the red tenderness of it up close, at least before she shut her eyes. This was wrong, so deeply so, but they would have what they wanted, and they made the point with a few cracks of a whip across Valera's back and Phia's stomach. She licked her Phia's, appeasing them while trying to

get a handle on what she was about to do. She could tell from Phia's moaning that she was sore, but at least Valera could be gentle with her. To her disgrace she made her friend cum again, adding her juices to the collection that had been in her mouth.

Luccela took her turn then, and Valera obediently performed on her, no more happy about it than the first time but having experienced worse now. She ate Luccela's orgasm, and then stayed, at the demoness' urging, for another.

Valera was lifted onto the slab again, this time put mouth to mouth with Phia. A special gag was put in their mouths, holding them together in a forced kiss. Valera's shins were put against Phia's sides with her pussy in the air. Luccela crawled behind her, and Valera soon felt her tongue returning to her slit. Why Luccela even wanted to taste her cunt, fresh with that man's cum in it, she couldn't understand.

When it was all done they left her lying on top of Phia, their thighs tied to each others' as an extra measure. Luccela was promising the men turns with her body, or at least the one she'd taken from Dommia. Valera and Phia were alone, at last. It didn't take either of them long to drift into sleep.

Coddis stared out his window. The sun was rising, although he was facing the wrong direction to see it. He was in a tiny apartment that overlooked the port, or at least part of it. It was a shithole, but it was a safe one. Being run out of their old territory had put Coddis and what was left of his gang in dire straits. He had enough money stashed away to keep himself fed for a while, but losing the position he'd spent so long making for himself stung. He had no idea when he'd be able to bounce back.

It would be hard. It was never a secret that him and his gang were criminals, but Yorshir had too many petty criminals for the justicars to bother with as long as they weren't robbing anyone important. And even that you could get away with as long as you made sure nobody could finger you on it.

But now that his name had a special place on their shit list it wouldn't take much for any rival, snitch or discontent to send them his way. He needed to find a new niche where he could get himself a whole new name and never have it connected back to his old one.

He spotted Tickers under his window, and went to open the door for him.

"Well?" he asked, hoping that Tickers had some news for him.

"It ain't good," he said, slipping inside. "Smokey's dead. I hope.

Blumoor's shitheads got their paws on him, so dead's the nicer thing. Breg's set on getting one of them and tying him to an anchor. I tried to tell him off of it, but he's mad. I think he needs someone to hurt right now. For a lot of stuff."

"I could use someone to hurt myself," said Coddis. He'd kept a close eye on the gallows since the raid on their hangout. Valera hadn't shown up there yet. He wasn't sure whether he was relived or angry. She'd screwed everything up for them. Gotten Smokey killed, at least, now that Blumoor had enough of the upper hand to wage open war on them if he wanted. Having the justicars on your side made it an unfair fight.

But she was still the girl he'd know since... since she was a girl. Maybe he should just never know what happened to her.

"What about Mellis? Or Jask?"

Tickers shook his head.

"If Valera got away, Jask is probably with her. I asked around, and apparently Phia's gone too. No reason for the justicars to be after her, so I figure she's got to have decided to help Valera hole up somewhere."

"But Mellis..."

"Yeah, Oink wouldn't be with them. And I still can't find anything on her either. I figured that maybe Lady Dusk would of taken her in, but she says she ain't seen her. Maybe she's lying. Wouldn't blame her, if Oink's worried about one of us being a rat."

Coddis sighed.

"Maybe the three of us should take a ship somewhere."

"Like where?" asked Tickers.

"Fuck if I know. Just don't see much of a future around here."

They ate breakfast, each keeping their thoughts to themselves for a while.

"So, what are we calling you now, boss?"

"Huh?"

"Coddis eyepatch?"

"Shut up, Tickers."

Valera's wrists were being put into shackles that were intended to stay. The pins that held these shut were beaten in red-hot; removing them would take tools and a lot of time. First her hands were put into a double cuff that would hold both of them together, and then they were chained to the cell's wall, above her head. With her feet flat her arms were just barely able to relax, but if her knees bent at all her arms would have to bear her weight.

She knew that the extra measures to secure her were for show; escape would have been impossible without them, but they wanted her to know that they were serious about making this cell her permanent home. Valera cried as the links were beaten closed, not to come apart again. Luccela licked the tears from her face while Korsk fitted cuffs for her ankles. She kissed her while they were shut for all time, the hard metal to press against her skin forever. She put her fingers in Valera's slit while her legs were fixed to the wall, a bit more than a foot apart where her sex would be available for use as long as she lived.

The whipping came next, with Luccela and Korsk taking turns, taunting her by telling her of the things the count was doing to Phia while as they spoke. Korsk was brutal, but Luccela was as precise as the finest craftsman, always finding the most tender spots and the perfect timing to put the most agony into each swing.

When they were done Korsk raped her again. Valera felt his cum drip down her leg as he pulled out, leaving her in Luccela's hands.

The demoness raised her drooping head, intent on showing her what dangled in front of her face. It was the necklace, the cursed thing that had damned her to this fate.

"Guess what I have for you? Or better yet, what I have for that poor girl, Dommia. She's very lonely in here; I should know, it used to be me. Dannis was going to bring this back to his sister, but I thought it would be better in my hands, so I made sure to take it before he ran away. I think Dommia could use a friend."

Luccela put the necklace on her, carefully pulling her hair out from under the chain.

"Without my presence in there... well, time used to run more 'normally' while the prison had me to focus on, at least until I exerted my will on it. Without me, I'm not sure what will happen. You'll have to ask Dommia, when you see her."

Luccela pressed her lips against Valera's again.

"Goodnight, and thank you. I'll never forget what you've done for me. And I'll never forget this last kiss."

Valera spent the rest of her time before the necklace dragged her into its dark pit with Luccela's tongue intertwined with hers, and her last memory of the real world was her body pressing Valera's against the wall.

Valera returned to the ruined city. She walked the streets, knowing where to go, and knowing somehow that she had no choice. The temple drew her to it, compelling her against reason to step into the twisted prison. Once she gave herself to the temple there was no going back, no hallway that would lead out. Valera wandered in a stupor, searching for something in the desolate place that might provide some semblance of warmth or humanity for her impending eternity among the stone walls.

What she found was a woman, hanging from her arms with her legs chained to the floor. It was Dommia.

The woman raised her head when she noticed that she was no longer alone.

"Va... Valera?"

There was nothing of the strength or dominance of the woman Valera had known in the face that she now looked into. She'd had a turn as Luccela's ward, and had obviously met her better.

"Please... let me down. I've been here for... I don't know. Nothing ever moves here. I think it's been years. I just want to come down. I swear, I just want to lie down."

Valera felt a tiny spark of pity for the former justicar. Then she remembered being strapped to that table and beaten. She remembered her friends being murdered, run out of their homes, or made into sex slaves. She remembered the string of men who'd had their way with her. She remembered Dommia's own body, in the possession of that demoness, being used to fuck her. She remembered that all of this, as well as her being cast into this place,

was because Justicar Dommia Bethor couldn't just let her go.

"Let you down? Fuck you. Do you know what they did to me? Do you think I came here because I felt like seeing you again?"

Rage poured into her words. She saw Dommia cower, her pride long since taken from her.

"I... I don't know. But I've served my sentence. You can't imagine what it's like, being here for so long. Hanging here, with nothing. With absolutely nothing."

"Well guess what? I won't have to. Because I'm stuck in here with you now, probably forever."

Valera picked up a flog. She'd never used one before, but she expected to have plenty of time to practice.

Captain Bunt stood at attention. He hadn't received word that Justicar Bethor was back from her pursuit of the criminals outside the city walls, but now here she was, finding him in her office tending to things while she was away. It didn't surprise him too much; Mistress Dommia was precisely the kind of woman who would ride straight to the keep upon entering the city gates to receive his report. The woman's commitment to duty was absolute.

"Justicar," he said. "Welcome back. Things have been in order; you won't find much that needs your attention, at least not right away. Did you catch the fugitives?"

Dommia removed her helmet and sat down on her desk. He'd never seen her do that before. She was strangely relaxed, especially given that she must be coming in from at least three days of riding. More, if she'd been hauling prisoners.

"Yes, all three. Well, I should say two. One of them didn't survive to see a dungeon."

Captain Bunt was taken aback by her casual attitude toward the affair.

"Are the prisoners here now?"

"No, we didn't bother bringing them back. We let Count Dhern hang the both of them. Saved us the hassle. Master Dannis made off with his sister's necklace. The whole thing is pretty much wrapped up now."

Captain Bunt couldn't find fault on any particular point. Letting the

thieves be hanged in Sahndusk was certainly reasonable. But the Dommia Bethor he knew would never let "the hassle" stop her from hanging them from her own gallows to make sure that everyone in the city knew that justice had been served.

He left her chair to stand in front of her desk, expecting her to take her seat. She stayed where she was, toying with helmet.

"So, is there anything exciting I should know about? Any prisoners to interrogate? I would love a good interrogation about now."

"No, Mistress. I suppose there is one small matter, if you wouldn't rather rest from your journey first, but it's hardly urgent. Lord Hennisfair wanted to know if you could stop by to discuss something when you returned. He wasn't specific about what, but he said it was a matter you were familiar with."

The justicar looked up at him and smiled. He'd never seen that kind of smile on her face before, and it made the hair stand up on the back of his neck.

"I know what he needs help with," she said. "I'll be very, very happy to serve."