

*Fettered
Soul*

*by
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Fettered Soul



immilina Hocar stepped outside the adobe shack she shared with her father, Gil. She'd finished all the chores and hoped to steal some time alone. Father was gone, no doubt drinking at *The Pickled Squid* tavern. She hurried through the cobbled streets toward the harbor.

The wharf bustled with activity in the late afternoon. Normally, she loved to walk among the fishermen to see who might let her clean their nets for the sea-reeds to make baskets from. Sometimes, they'd toss her some junk fish, too mangled or scrawny for the marketplace, as a bonus. Today, however, she needed solitude. She passed the wharf and headed to the beach.

The sand was crowded with children. Little lords dug for sand crabs while little ladies sculpted dream castles. Every now and then, a lad with a wiggly crustacean would employ the tiny monster to drive the girls to squeal and abandon their castles, chased until the lad's mother or nanny caught up to him.

Timmilina hurried to the rock jetty. Waves surged against the boulders, calming her with their stolid attention to ageless rhythms. Sea-breath sprayed over her face. She inhaled deeply of the fresh salty breeze, glad to be upwind of the fishing boats.

With stones wet and slippery from sea moss, she didn't trust her slick leather soles. Besides, the sand in her shoes was irritating. She eased off her sandals and navigated the jetty with care.

When seagulls' cawing and pounding surf muffled the sounds of carefree playing, Timmilina sat. She pulled her skirts up and dangled her feet in the lapping tide.

She gazed west on the endless waters of the horizon. Twin suns

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shone brightly, reflecting motes of sparkle from cresting waves. Seagulls soared around her, ever watching for easy prey.

When Mama lay dying, she'd charged Timmilina and her father to take care of each other. Timmilina had kept that promise of her childhood, even though her father hadn't. She'd tended the gardens that fed them when Father didn't bother to hunt or fish. She'd woven baskets by the light of the moons and sold them to pay the rent when Father squandered what little he earned on mead and carousing. The carousing Timmilina could stand. The mead, however, made her life miserable. Father became violent when he was in his cups.

From time to time, Timmilina dreamed that someone would marry her even without a dowry. Mama wouldn't have denied her that. If she could marry, she could leave Father without guilt. But no one wanted her. She was too skinny and too plain.

Timmilina looked over her shoulder to be sure no one watched, then removed her headcloth and pulled the pins from her bun to allow long charcoal tresses to wave freely in the ocean breeze. The mages said that the wind carried the voices of the Heavenlies and the Elva could hear their whispers if they were quiet enough. If anyone needed supernatural guidance, she did. She bowed her head and prayed, then turned her face into the wind and listened.

Pointed ears caught the distant flapping of a sail upon a mast, the gurgle of the sea foam trickling off the rocks, and the downstroke of gulls' wings. But no chimerical voices spoke.

By the time the suns touched the sea, her skirts were soaked. Her butt grew sore from sitting on rocks. That and the growls from her stomach persuaded her to concede failure. The Heavenlies would not speak to her.

She repinned her windblown hair, replaced the headcloth, then stood, hooking her fingers through sandal straps. Her free hand lifted her skirts. In the amber light of suns-set, she retraced her steps down the jetty. The lighthouse bells a mile away tolled the sixth hour. She ran home.

With any luck, Father was still at *The Pickled Squid*. Candlelight streaming from her shanty's crooked window dashed all hope of that. For a moment, she froze. Would Father be angry that she'd been gone? Two shadows played upon the inner walls. Perhaps Father would pay less attention to her if he had a guest.

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She took a deep breath and entered. Father was glassy-eyed and unsteady on his feet. She'd seen his companion before at *The Pickled Squid*, but she didn't know the name of the blotchy-faced, corpulent stranger. She hurried toward the wood-stove. The sooner Father had food in his stomach, the safer she would be.

"Where in Byntar have you been?" Father bellowed.

"At the jetty," she said.

"You went all the way to the shore and didn't bring back any fish?" he said in a slurred voice, then belched.

She shook her head, mentally berating herself for not having thought to bring something to placate him.

Father's hand flew in a blur, delivering a resounding smack to her left cheek. She reeled with the blow. Before she could regain her equilibrium, he grabbed her arm, wrenched it behind her, and then forced her across the room to where he kept his punishing switch. "Please, Father, no!" she screamed.

Father sat and pinned her over his knee. She writhed against him, but he twisted her arm so hard that she was sure it would break. He lifted her skirts, lowered her bloomers, and bared her buttocks right in front of the stranger.

He switched her with what had to be all his drunken strength. She tried to keep silent during the beating because she knew that protesting only incited him, but she couldn't suppress her cries of pain.

Father released her arm. Timmilina couldn't decide what was worse, the pain or the humiliation. While she turned her naked backside away from the stranger and struggled to maneuver wet clothing, Father laughed at her.

The seawater in her bloomers stung like fire on her welted skin. She pushed her damp skirts back down.

Timmilina looked up to find the stranger staring at her. His gaze lingered on her bosom while he licked his lips. "She'll do nicely, Gil," he said.

"I should hope so. Prime virgin stock," Father said. "She's all yours."

She whirled around and gaped at her father in disbelief. What was going on? While her head was turned, the stranger clapped rusty iron shackles around her wrists before she knew what happened. She

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stared at her wrists, then back at her father. “How *could* you?” she cried. Timmilina lunged for him, but the stranger held her back.

“Don’t resist me, or I’ll have you whipped before the night is out,” the stranger said.

“Please, I haven’t done anything.” Desperation fluttered in her words. “Whatever my father said I did is a lie.”

The stranger’s acrid sweat and breath reeking of mead and peppered mutton filled her nostrils. He shoved her into the table. Strong fingers clamped her neck. Gasping for breath, she pulled at his hand. “You’re not accused of crime *yet*, girl,” he grunted, “but if you don’t behave, I’ll charge you with disobeying your owner. Now hold still.”

The truth sank in. Father had sold her into slavery. This stranger was now her master. Her puny efforts wouldn’t stop him from strangling her and the man she formerly called Father made no attempt to help. She ceased her resistance.

The stranger released her neck and locked an iron collar in place. She gulped for air. He yanked her leg and closed a shackle around her ankle. His stubbled chin scratched her knee. He locked the last fetter on the other leg. “Good girl,” he said condescendingly. He gathered up chains and locks, studying her.

He joined the manacles behind her back and snapped a padlock between them. Rounding her, he slid his hands down her chemise, cupping her breasts while he smiled a lascivious grin.

Revulsion filled her. She wished she had something in her stomach to vomit on him. Instead, she narrowed her eyes and glared. He locked a chain to the ring in her neck band and yanked. Timmilina lurched forward and landed face first on the dirt floor. “Never look a freeman in the eyes, you got it?” he barked.

“Yes,” she panted. She tried to stand, but her legs tangled in wet skirts. Both men laughed at her futile efforts.

“That’s a good place for you to stay right now, slave. Catch your breath. After we sign the contracts, I’ll take you to the ITC.”

Timmilina shuddered. The Institute for Training and Correction was an ominous fortress that she’d always avoided. She remembered passing it when she was very young. Mama had squeezed her hand and hurried past the crowds that surrounded the public whipping post. Timmilina had seen the tip of a whip just before she heard a crack and

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a scream. When she asked what was happening, Mama whispered, “That’s where all the bad people are punished.”

Of course, there was more to the stronghold than the simple explanation offered to a young girl. It was the hub of the slave trade: the prison where criminals were processed, the obedience school where everyone from galley drudges to scullery maids were trained, the labor camp for incorrigibles, the market for all manner of restraints and punishment devices.

Timmilina remembered how Mama had cooed soft assurances that she’d never have to go there because she was a good girl. A lump caught in her throat next to the iron collar. Gil Hocar had made Mama a liar and she hated him for it.

Gil signed away his daughter’s freedom for three hundred gold pieces and then claimed magnanimity. “It’s just three short years. Hannon here will teach you what a woman should know.”

Timmilina didn’t look up from the floor. She wouldn’t rebut just so they had excuse to hurt her more, nor would she give them the satisfaction of seeing her tears.

The men scratched quill marks onto the contract and sealed their agreement with an exchange of slaps to each other’s backs. “A pleasure doing business with you, Hannon,” Gil said.

“Yes, let’s have a drink sometime. I need to get this girl down to the ITC, but maybe tomorrow?”

“First one’s on me.” Gil shook the sack of coins he’d just acquired.

It sliced her to the core that they were so jovial and mundane, talking about her like she wasn’t sprawled helpless beneath them.

Meaty hands grabbed the chain attached to her neck band and pulled. She scrambled her legs to try to relieve the pressure on her throat. Choking, she stood. Damp skirts were muddy from contact with the dirt floor. Her face had to be just as filthy, but she couldn’t wipe it with her hands bound behind her back. Careful to avoid the stranger’s gaze, she tried to win some favor with courtesy. “Thank you, Master Hannon,” she said.

He backhanded her right cheek. “Who said you could use my name, wench?”

Timmilina barely kept herself from falling again as she staggered with the impact. Her eyes filled with tears. Yet, the pain in her cheek

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was nothing compared to the ice gripping her soul. “I—I’m sorry,” she whimpered.

“Good. You call me ‘Master’. If someone asks who owns you, tell them *Master Hannon Jonpur*—never the first name without the last. I’m not some damned Itzi.”

She wished he *were* Itzi. Though simple-minded and feeble, Itzi weren’t prone to violence. “Yes, Master,” she said.

Jonpur tugged on the chain and marched out. Timmilina followed, struggling to keep slack in her leash so that he wouldn’t yank her down again. Rusty iron chafed against her skin. Her skirts were heavy with seawater, but she treaded carefully. Cobbled streets would not be kind if she tripped.

To her dismay, few townsfolk had retreated indoors yet on the balmy summer’s eve. Two full moons and oil lamps illumined their path. She bowed her head, trying to hide her identity. Surely, the whole city witnessed her disgrace, paraded through the streets like a criminal. Hushed wisps of speculation buzzed from the crowd: gossip, waif, scold, harlot, thief, adulteress.

Timmilina wanted to scream denials, but she feared the man who held her leash. When she heard her name whispered among the throngs, she gave up on hiding and lifted her face, hoping to lessen their scorn with feigned bravery.

Her forced trek through the scandalmongers seemed to drag on forever. Yet, the sky was not completely dark when they reached the ITC. No stars were visible. Timmilina was vaguely aware of men struggling against chains and women crying. Her own tears no longer flowed. Nothing seemed real. It was like watching a nightmare.

A scribe in purple silk with a gold ITC crest asked for the slave contract and quilled information onto a parchment form. Numbly, she followed her leash until Jonpur locked it to an iron ring in a long, stone-lined passage. “Sit,” he ordered.

She sat on an oak bench. He disappeared through a door at her side. Sconces flickered with lamplight in the hallway. Her nose wrinkled with irritation, assaulted by fumes from smithy furnaces. Distant screams and barked orders echoed through the corridors. Owners and slaves passed by, but Timmilina was too engulfed in private fears to give them more than transitory glances.

Jonpur reappeared, unlocked her from the wall, and motioned

toward the door. "In there, slave."

She stepped through the doorway. Her leash landed with a clank on the floor. She blinked, looking back with surprise. The door slammed in her face. She shuddered, then turned to find another man scrutinizing her. He was muscular, clean, and neatly dressed in purple and gold. She didn't look above his neck.

"I am Lord Galen Blackthorn. Your owner requested that you be trained to address him only as 'Master', so that is how you will address me. Forget who you were. Right now, you are 'slave'. Do as you are told and we should get along fine."

She caught her lower lip between her teeth and nodded. Blackthorn scrawled notes to parchment as he watched her. "Come over here, slave." Timmilina approached. He made a subtle hand signal to stop. She heeded it. He slipped a key into the padlock behind her back and released her arms. The iron fetters remained on her wrists. "First we need to get you out of those clothes and Mark your forearm."

She gulped. Would she have to take off her clothes in front of him? She was afraid to ask. The other question was safer. "Mark?"

"Your Number. Your master isn't bothering with an Owner's Mark... unless you have plans to run away?"

Heavens, how she wanted to escape. But they sent hounds and horses after runaways and no one would dare help her remove the irons. The only chance at freedom was the Barbarian Wastelands, impossibly far away. She lowered her head and shook it. "No."

"Wise choice." He unlocked the leash and pooled it at his feet. "I'm going to fetch a tattooist. There's a stack of training tunics on the shelf. Be wearing one when I return." She nodded. He quilled more notes and exited.

She struggled to remove wet, dirty clothes around the iron bands. She wiped her face on her chemise before she discarded it to a heap on the floor. Even after she had the brown muslin tunic on, Timmilina felt exposed. The sleeves barely covered her elbows. There would be no hiding the Mark or the manacles. The hem ended at mid-calf. Her ankle bands and bare feet would show and her bloomers would be too long.

She shuddered with humiliation and rummaged through the stack. Tunic after tunic, she held them up, only to discover that she already had the largest one on. With a resigned sigh, she discarded her blood-

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stained bloomers with the rest of her old clothes.

The door sprung open without warning. Blackthorn and another man wearing purple and gold entered. “Sit, girl,” the strange man ordered, pointing to a wooden chair behind a table. Timmilina obeyed.

Blackthorn hovered behind her, writing on his parchment. “Are you afraid?”

“Yes,” she admitted with a squeak.

“It hurts, but probably less than those bruises on your face,” the tattooist said as he took a chair on her right. He arranged ink and implements on the table.

Her back cheeks hurt more than the front ones, but she tried not to think about it. She bared her arm, sucked in her breath, and closed her eyes. Just then, her stomach growled.

“Hungry?” Blackthorn asked.

“I haven’t eaten since morning.”

“You missed supper, but if you do well with tonight’s training, I’ll see you get something to eat.”

“Thank you,” she murmured.

Blackthorn scrawled more notes.

“Her release date?” the tattooist asked.

“*Queen’s Jubilee*, one thousand twenty-two,” Blackthorn announced with an official air.

“Hold still, girl,” the tattooist ordered. Blackthorn stepped around the table toward where her fettered wrist lay. Timmilina expected him to hold her hand down, but she felt the sting on her forearm first. She sucked in breath through gritted teeth, drew her fingers in a fist, but held her arm still. Her eyes squeezed shut again.

Blackthorn said, “Hmm.” She heard his quill scratch on parchment.

She endured the burning invasion in silence. “Done,” the tattooist announced. Timmilina breathed a sigh of relief. She opened her eyes, focusing on the newly inked “22”. She regarded it with ambivalence. While it was another shameful proof she was a slave, it was less cumbersome than the irons. If she survived three years, she could hide it under sleeves.

Blackthorn nodded approval to the tattooist. He gathered up his tools and left. Blackthorn turned to Timmilina. “Training starts now, slave. Kneel.”

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Timmilina knew she had to, but she dreaded it. She looked for the closest rug to kneel on, then stood.

“Obedience must be instant,” Blackthorn said.

She turned from the table and dropped to her knees on bare stone. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not going to punish you for something before I teach it. Just don’t hesitate next time.” More quill scratchings. Timmilina suspected he was writing down all her mistakes. He’d wait until he saved up a long list and then whip her good. “How did you get those bruises?”

“My... *father*,” she said with as little contempt as she could manage, “did the left; Master did the right.”

The trainer rummaged through a box of padlocks. He paused. “Why did they hit you?”

“Father hit me because I didn’t bring him any fish tonight. Master hit me because I said, ‘Thank you, Master Hannon.’”

“He hit you for saying ‘thank you’?”

She felt rather vindicated that Blackthorn didn’t realize what so deserved the blow either. “No, for saying his name.”

He muttered something, then asked, “Who is your owner, slave?”

“*Master Hannon Jonpur*,” Timmilina said with the same inflections Jonpur used.

“Very good.” Blackthorn crouched behind her. “Hands behind your back.”

She cringed, but remembered to obey quickly. The padlock clicked, securing her wrists. It took all her will not to moan. Maybe Gil had broken her arm after all.

The trainer slipped out the door. For several minutes, she remained motionless, expecting him to return at any time. Her mind conjured dozens of scenarios for what impended and none of them were pleasant.

She looked around the room. Sconces lit it reasonably well. The walls and floor were stone, but there were several rugs to lend a cozy feel. Besides the table and wooden chairs, there were two upholstered armchairs, a couch, and a desk with a padded chair behind it. There was even an inhouse with a hand pump and a watercloset.

Arms ached, her punished buttocks burned, and her legs grew numb. There was no hourglass in sight, but it seemed that she’d been

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on her knees for hours. “Master?” she called.

He returned as quickly and mysteriously as he left. “Did I give you permission to speak?”

“No,” she admitted with a wince.

A long silence followed. Blackthorn scribed more notes. “Questions are permitted if you have not been ordered to silence. What did you want?”

“Are you going to punish me?”

“If you disobey me, yes.”

“Why did you lock my hands then?”

“I don’t have to give you any reason. You are property. You may not question orders except to clarify your master’s wishes.”

A sigh escaped. “My knees and arms hurt.” She wasn’t about to tell him about her backside.

“Complaints are not permitted either.”

“I’m sorry.”

Blackthorn’s quill on parchment was the only sound for a long while. Another growl from her stomach interrupted the silence. He stared at her.

“May I be allowed to know how long I must stay like this?”

“That is the first permissible question you have asked. The answer is ‘no’. You will stay there as long as I see fit.”

She swallowed hard and shifted her legs, maintaining the kneel. Tears slipped down her cheeks and she had no way to wipe or hide them.

“Why are you crying?” he demanded.

She sniffled, then moaned her answer. “Because I hurt and I’m hungry and I don’t understand what you want from me. And even if crying is forbidden, I can’t help it.”

“Crying isn’t forbidden,” he said with slightly less ice in his tone. He wrote more, looking back and forth between the parchment and her. Finally, he set the writing implements down. “The purpose of this session is to teach you that you are no longer free.”

She nodded, resisting the urge to point out that she was acutely aware of that already.

“You do not need to know why an order is given. All you need to do is obey. You must not question your owner’s right to lock you up. He has invested gold in you. You owe him unquestioning obedience.

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You're here to learn the proper attitudes toward your station."

"I understand."

"Excellent." He gathered his parchment and quill and headed for the door.

"If I have learned the lesson, won't you unlock my arms now? Please?"

"You must remember that I am always testing you, slave. Hold your tongue unless it's necessary."

"I'm sorry." The tears renewed their fervor, dropping silently and steadily.

He gave a frustrated sigh, then returned and crouched with the key, slipping it into the padlock. It clicked open and he removed it from her bands. She didn't move. He stood and circled her, showing her the padlock. Timmilina nodded in acknowledgement, but didn't move her arms.

"You may relax now," he said, sounding pleased. She pulled her hands around and crossed them over her chest, pressing her fingers into sore arm muscles. Manacles clunked against her shoulder. Blackthorn reached toward her. She recoiled.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he whispered. He assisted her to her feet. Her legs wobbled with the uncertainty borne of numbness, but he steadied her. "There now. I promised you food, didn't I?"

"If I did well with training," she added sadly. Her guts wrenched with hunger she knew she'd have to endure.

"You did fine for a first day."

Did fine? Was she dreaming? She must have hit her head when Jonpur yanked her down. "I did *fine*?"

"I am not allowed to reveal your scores, but you did well enough to eat." He ushered her to the table and into a chair.

Timmilina clenched her teeth to withstand the stinging needles of returning circulation. Blackthorn set a bowl of fruit down on the table, then returned attention to his notes. She grabbed a handful of berries and shoved them into her mouth.

"The duke is coming tomorrow. If you want to have any chance at catching his eye, I suggest that you use better manners than that. Or do you fancy Hannon Jonpur?"

"What does it matter?"

"I have to stay out of sales, but Duke Vahn has had a standing request

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for someone just like you for nearly a year now. I don't know if Jonpur would sell you, but if you're too stupid to see that you'd be better off with the duke, then you don't deserve to serve in his house."

"What do you mean, just like me?" she said around a mouth full of berries.

"A respectful Elva female who can lead his other house slaves with humility. The duke has the means to pay Jonpur double what he paid your father. Your father could have made much more if he had auctioned you."

Timmilina laughed so hard she nearly choked on berries. "Serves the bastard right," she muttered under her breath. Ruefully, she realized that she was the one cheated. She'd rather have her term reduced than have Gil make more gold.

"If the duke buys you, you'll have to learn third-person speech and strict protocols. His standards are very high and he pays us well to ensure we uphold them. But I've never known him not to give a slave a decent name—not majuscule or longer than two syllables, of course—but a name nevertheless. And he rarely hits his slaves."

"He doesn't punish?" she asked, tearing open an orange.

"Not all men are like your father and Jonpur. He wouldn't hit you for saying 'thank you'. His kind of punishment cleanses the soul."

That was just what she needed—someone who would justify beatings by passing it off as spirituality.

Blackthorn lowered his voice. "I shouldn't tell you this, but it's rumored that he doesn't exercise conjugal rights with his slaves. Perhaps he doesn't want to sully himself with Itzi. That's all he owns now. But you cannot refuse your owner, *whoever* he is."

Timmilina swallowed the pulp she had barely chewed. No doubt, Jonpur would spend plenty of lust on her. Surprising he hadn't done it in front of Gil before dragging her off. All she could think about was survival, but this trainer wanted her to hope she still had a chance at marriage? *Ridiculous!* No one would want her in three years, used or not. Still, she couldn't shake Blackthorn's words. If she had to be ravaged, better by anyone than Jonpur. She didn't look up as she replied, "Do you really think the duke would buy me?"

"I wouldn't have brought it up if I didn't think so. But I have to remain neutral. Right now, Jonpur is the paying customer."

She nodded and scraped her teeth across the orange peel, sucking

the last bit into her mouth. “Can you tell me how a slave should act in the presence of royalty?” she asked around the food.

He smiled. “Don’t say anything unless he asks you directly. Keep your head bowed and hold your back straight. Other than that, don’t *do* anything. Let him see you for a bargain, not a charity case.”

She coughed at “bargain”. Jonpur wouldn’t part with his new toy cheaply, especially if some rich nobleman showed interest. Did she dare have any hope? She pushed the fruit bowl away. “Thank you for the food.”

He didn’t acknowledge her thanks. “He’s due tomorrow near meridian toll. By that time, I’ll have all your tests finished so you have a complete score. Let’s get you down to the cells now. Training starts early.”

He reattached the leash and led her to the slave quarters. They didn’t reek of urine and excrement like she expected. Pungent citrus oil predominated instead. Stone halls echoed with weeping and moaning; none of the cells had doors. Each cell held four metal beds. Girls and women, the majority Itzi, were chained to the beds. Blackthorn stopped at an empty cell, locked her leash to a ring on the wall and her ankle to the bed frame.

She was so tired and the crude mattress so welcome that she didn’t have time to wallow in self-pity or concentrate on her pain. Slumber rescued her. Others’ cries and her own nightmares woke her several times, but sleep always came again.

Morning brought Blackthorn to unlock her from the bed and lead her on to more tests and lessons. Do this. Do that. Remember your place. Forget your will. Keep quiet. Kneel and grovel and answer questions. She did her best to comply, but she became more and more convinced she was failing. He didn’t even believe her and forced her to drink a truth apothecarium, then drilled her again.

Through it all, Blackthorn never struck her. He had to be holding back because of the anticipated sale—didn’t want to damage the goods any more than they already were.

He left her alone in the training room so that he could go meet Duke Vahn. She alternately paced the floor and sat on a wooden chair. Surely upholstered furniture wasn’t for her use. Her trainer was gone at least a half an hour by her uncertain reckoning.

Blackthorn opened the door and announced, “His Royal Highness,

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Prince Vahn Rebono, duke of Latoph.”

She knew she should kneel and bow, but she couldn't resist getting a look at him first.

A tall young man entered with a graceful and confident stride. He was dressed entirely in black—a silk poet's shirt, tailored jerkin, butter soft kidskin breeches, and polished boots. A silver and onyx tasseau fastened a velvet mantle that draped from his shoulders to the floor. He had a lean frame and an angular jaw line.

Timmilina caught herself before she ventured a look into his eyes. She slipped to her knees and bowed her head.

“This is the slave, your highness,” Blackthorn said.

Gleaming black boots crossed the room. Timmilina clamped her jaw shut to keep her teeth from chattering. The boots stopped a few feet away. She closed her eyes and held her breath. “Good afternoon,” said a honey smooth voice.

“Good afternoon, your highness,” she replied nervously.

“You may lift your head,” the duke said.

Timmilina lifted her head, but not enough to look up to his face. It wasn't Blackthorn's earlier warnings that halted her. Even if she had met him as a freewoman, she didn't think she'd be venturing a look.

The duke gasped. “Why in Byntar...?”

“Oh, I forgot to warn you,” Blackthorn explained hastily. “We didn't do that. Her father and owner did that yesterday—*before* she got here.”

“But what did she do to warrant it?”

“It would be a breach of confidentiality for me to tell you, your highness. I have questioned her about it under truth apothecarum and I do not believe her ‘violations’ would affect her service were she to belong to you.”

“I see,” he said thoughtfully. The duke extended his hand toward her face. She flinched. He withdrew. “What's your name?”

“Slave,” she answered.

“No, I mean your given name.”

“She is answering as her owner requires,” Blackthorn said.

“Do you know who I am?” the duke asked.

“You are the king's son, the duke of Latoph, and the master of Rebono Keep.”

“You are correct. And why should I purchase your contract?”

His choice of words touched her. Not ‘why should I buy *you*’ but the contract. She shook her head. “I do not know that you should, your highness. Master said you might be interested, but I do not presume to know why.”

“Your master knows of my interest?”

She furrowed her brows in frustration. “My trainer-master said that,” she said, gesturing to Blackthorn. “I do not know what my owner-master knows. I have not seen him since yesterday.”

“He does not know yet,” Blackthorn added.

The duke strode away and motioned Blackthorn to join him. They stopped ten feet from her and lowered their voices, but she could still hear.

“I want her,” the duke said.

“I thought you might,” Blackthorn replied. Timmilina detected a chuckle in his voice. “That’s why I sent for Hannon Jonpur.”

Timmilina felt a chill course her spine at the mention of that name.

“What did he pay for her?” the duke asked.

“Three hundred gold. And her father signed off three years.”

“That’s barely enough for one year! Does he plan to auction her after training?”

“He intends to keep her himself.”

“Then he may be resistant. Does he have any idea what she’s really worth?”

“I am ethically bound to tell him her score. However, I am not obligated to mention that she’s the highest scoring Elva we’ve had in ten years. And I never like to get into pricing.”

“I owe you one.”

“No, your highness. If you manage to buy this girl, I will be just as pleased as you.”

The duke chuckled. “Thank you for showing her to me. You were right. She is just what I want as head of my house.”

“Never let it be said that Galen Blackthorn can’t spot an optimess for a good customer. I need a minute with Jonpur then I’ll leave him for you. He’s next door.”

“Very pleasing.”

Blackthorn slipped out the door and the duke returned to Timmilina. “When he returns, I’m going to negotiate with your owner. Unless you object?”

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She shook her head. “No, your highness. If you would count me worthy to join your house, I would be honored. I swear that I will work hard for you.” She wanted to add a promise never to attempt escape, but if he did too much “cleansing the soul”, she didn’t trust herself.

“That’s about the best pledge a slave has ever made to me. If I manage to buy your contract, I’ll be hard-pressed to match it.”

Match it? What did that mean? Both waited in silence.

“He’s ready for you, your highness,” Blackthorn said as he reentered.

“Do me a favor while I’m gone, Lord Blackthorn?”

“Of course, your highness.”

“I want silver bands for her. High polish.”

“Those have to be made to order and she can’t wear them during training because there is no way to attach locks or chains. Ringed bands are required while she’s here.”

“Very well. At least procure some good steel ones then. That iron is hideous. Those come off the minute she’s mine.”

Blackthorn laughed. Timmilina wondered whether it was because the duke was so opinionated about the metal or because he was so sure he’d succeed. The duke left first, then Blackthorn spoke to her from the door, “Get off your knees a while. I’m going to hunt down some steel bands. Pray you get to wear them.” The door clicked shut.

She stood and gazed out the barred window. In the distance, past the limestone buildings of the city, she could see the ocean. Had it been less than a day ago that she’d been there, agonizing over whether she owed her father any more care?

The duke returned before Blackthorn. He waved a key and a piece of parchment. “Got it,” he said.

It had to be her contract. She smiled as widely as bruised cheeks allowed. “Thank you, your highness.”

He slipped the key into her neck band. The lock clicked and the seam opened. As he removed it from her neck, he spoke in soft tones. “I’d like you to address me as ‘Master Vahn’, please.”

“Thank you, *Master Vahn*,” she revised. When the iron was removed, she marveled at the weight lifted.

He dropped the rusted collar to the floor with a thud and frowned at the abrasions on her neck. “You’re welcome. Now for your name.”

He paused in his unlocking to scan the contract he'd set aside. "How about 'timna'?"

Society would call her foolish for being so pleased with a diminutive, but she was grateful to bear anything besides "slave". Beyond that, he'd taken the trouble to choose something close to her given name. "timna likes it very much, Master Vahn," she said. "Thank you."

"Blackthorn said you hadn't been trained in third person speech, the sly old fox." Manacles dropped to the floor next.

"I—I mean—timna hasn't yet. But he told m—timna that you favored it."

"I do indeed, and I'm pleased that you're trying already. That dreadful 'slave' moniker would never work. If I yelled, 'slave!' in my house, four or five girls might trample each other trying to answer."

timna tittered a small laugh.

He lifted her chin. "I'm glad to see they didn't break you." She averted her gaze quickly. "Please look me in the eyes," he said.

Hesitantly, she peered up into his face. Never had she met a man so soft-spoken and gentle. His face was handsome, but betrayed his youth. His eyes were black, the pupil indistinct from the iris. While she wanted to explore the fathoms of his gaze, she couldn't bear him looking at her bruised face. Her cheeks heated with embarrassment, reminding her how much they still hurt.

"I always allow that once, so there's no curiosity," he explained.

"timna will never look again."

"Very pleasing. Now let's get those infernal irons off your ankles." He crouched with the key, unlocked the bands, and discarded them into the pile with the rest. "Much better."

"Thank you, Master Vahn."

"You're welcome. That's not permanent, but the new ones will not be so heavy."

"You are very kind," she said sheepishly.

"I'm glad you brought that—"

Blackthorn bustled in through the door. He blinked at them, his gaze darting between timna unfettered and the pile of rusty irons. "That was fast."

"I made him an offer he couldn't refuse," Master Vahn said with a tone that suggested that he'd used persuasions beyond gold.

Fettered Soul

“I don’t doubt you did,” Blackthorn chuckled. “Looks like I’m just in time with these.” He offered the new hardware, pewter-colored and half the thickness of the iron.

Master Vahn shook his head. “Actually, if you could give me a room, I’d like to spend some time alone with her. I’ll put the bands on when I’m done.”

“Of course, your highness. Is this room acceptable?” Blackthorn’s gaze lingered on the couch.

“Quite acceptable, thank you. Do you have a basin I could use?”

“There’s one in the inhouse.”

“Meet me back here in an hour then?”

“As you wish.” Blackthorn set the bands on the table and slipped out.

“timna, would you please fill that basin and bring it to me?”

She was his slave, bands or not, and yet he still said please and asked rather than ordered. That earned him much in her estimation. “Yes, Master Vahn.” She used the handpump to fill a glazed terracotta basin. She returned to him, carrying the water carefully.

In her absence, he’d taken a seat on the couch. He pointed to an end table. “Please set it there.” She obeyed. He gestured to the floor at his feet; she caught his meaning and knelt where he’d indicated. Odd, but her backside didn’t hurt so much this time. He removed a handkerchief from his jerkin and soaked it in the water. He wrung it, then looked at her. “I’m going to touch your face now, all right?”

It wasn’t a perfunctory question, not that he had to ask to begin with. He waited for her approval. “You don’t have to do that,” she whispered.

“I know I don’t. I could have just as easily ordered you to do this yourself. But I elected to stay here with you for a reason. Can you guess why?”

It was rather obvious. He was seventeen and had just paid dearly for a virgin. She found it sweet how he wanted to wash her face and make her pretty first. However, with her bruises, it was an impractical goal. “Master wishes to deflower his virgin, yes?”

“De—deflower?”

“timna won’t resist.” Though still nervous, she meant it. He had rescued her from that abusive lout and she probably owed him her life. Besides, he was as gentle a man as she could ever hope to take

that which she'd so foolishly saved.

He laughed. "I didn't buy you for that, timna. Although you are beautiful and I appreciate your submission, I'm married. I bought your *contract*, your service for the next three years—that's what I want from you."

Beautiful? Didn't intend to take her? She could hardly believe her ears.

"I don't believe in hitting females in the face, but I can't stand to see you wince every time I extend my hand to you. Trust is something that must be earned, so I asked for this time to start earning yours. I want you to get used to the idea that when I reach for your face, it's not a threat."

"Never?"

"Never. When one of my slaves commits an offense, I ask for her side of the story first and I let her know what the sentence is before I start. Discipline is never a surprise and never in the face."

timna's mind waged war over his words. He was so impossibly kind that it was difficult not to believe. Yet, she'd never met a man that didn't prattle sweet trifles, only to prove otherwise when mead or anger took over. Heavens, how she *wanted* to believe him though. She nodded assent for him to touch her.

He pressed the kerchief to her face and wiped, taking care around the bruises. "When your training is over, you'll have a proper bath at home. This will have to suffice for now." Gently, he washed up to the hairline and down her neck, but stopped at the abrasions where the iron collar had been.

"Here," he said, offering the cloth. "You can finish now."

She accepted with a smile and resumed where he'd left off.

Before he leaned back, he tugged on her headcloth, then pulled the pins from her bun. Long hair fell over her shoulders. He slid his hand down the length of it. "There. This is how I want you to wear it. No headcloth and no pins."

Only two classes of women wore their hair unbound in public—harlots who had no shame, and royalty, who were above it. She swallowed her pride and nodded.

"This is not a reflection of your character, timna. Anyone who dares question your virtue because of how I ask you to wear your hair will answer to my blade. I've defended my Itzi slaves for even less."

Fettered Soul

“You fight for the honor of slaves?” She regretted her audacity as soon as the question left her lips.

He didn’t seem to mind. “Insults to my house are a direct affront to *me*. I do not tolerate slander.”

She nodded lightly, still pondering all the ramifications of his words. He smoothed her hair with his fingers and she marveled to find it comforting.

“Until Lord Blackthorn returns, I have but one request of you, *timna*.”

“Yes, Master Vahn?”

“Rest. Soon, you’ll be in the throes of demanding training. Then you’ll have to learn the rigors of Rebono Keep. It may be a long time before you have another chance like this.”

She was half-convinced she was asleep already and this was but a dream. If she woke belonging to Jonpur again, she’d surely die. “That’s all right. *timna* wasn’t jesting about working hard for you.”

She leaned against the side of the couch and rested as he’d ordained. He continued to stroke her hair, but neither spoke for a long interval.

He broke the silence. “The bands have to go back on now.”

“Yes, Master Vahn.” She hastened to the table where Blackthorn left the new bands. Picking them up, she gasped. “They are even lighter than they look!”

“The steel is specially made here. It is not what we use for swords or plowshares. The alloy is blended to be lightweight and rustproof.”

“*timna* will remember not to attempt plowing with them.”

He laughed. She knelt again and offered the bands first and then her wrists. He banded her with the new steel, first her wrists, then her neck, then her ankles. Compared to the bulky iron, she could hardly feel them.

He spoke as he locked them, using a formal tone. “These bands bind you to me, but they also bind me to you. In exchange for your obedience and service, I will provide shelter and sustenance. I promise to protect you as a member of my house and guard your honor.”

Was this what he meant by “matching her pledge”? His words reverberated through her mind. If true, this young slavemaster would do more than Gil ever did. Nagging talons of past experience clawed

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at her psyche. She thought hard for several moments, staring at the last band he'd locked about her ankle. She lifted her head and found his hand outstretched, palm up.

Something that she hadn't felt since Mama died stirred deep within.

She placed her hand in his.

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