

BY THE AUTHOR OF "JUDGMENT"

DENISE
HALL

MERCY

JUDGMENT II

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Judgment II: Mercy
by Denise Hall

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Chapter One

Preparing a tray of refreshments in the kitchen, Mary barely looked up when she heard the first scream. The Interlopers always screamed on Punishment Night; Richard made certain of that. He was in love with the sound, and with the sound of Mahogany's in particular—the long, high-pitched wail, slightly warbled, with an end that dissolved into a sobbed out groan. One would think, knowing Richard and his penchant for screams, that Mahogany would simply howl and be done with it, like China so often did right at the start of her ordeal. But she never did. She held onto her suffering like a miser held onto gold, agonizing in silence, forcing Richard to perform with ever increasing viciousness, until the pain became overwhelming and there simply was no biting back the cries, not one lash more.

When the second scream—even more desperate than the first—sounded, Mary's hands paused over the silver serving tray for the span of a heartbeat or two. She quickly swallowed a fleeting sense of sympathy. The last thing she wanted to feel was pity, not for the Interlopers, who had so thoroughly replaced her in her husband's affections.

And so Mary closed her ears to the wails, and the barely audible 'whoosh-crack' of the cane as it thrashed into bare flesh at the other end of the house. She finished pouring Richard's tea into the blue china teapot instead. And if her hands shook just a little bit ... well, it wasn't because she felt sorry for Mahogany.

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She spooned a dab of fresh strawberry jam into a small, silver jelly pot, then arranged an assortment of cookies and scones—all of Richard's favorites still warm from the oven—on a plate. With the creamer and sugar pot in place, she then lifted the tray and sedately carried it to her husband's study.

It was almost a ritual now, serving Richard his favorite refreshments on Punishment Night. There was even comfort to be had in the task, a small measure of solace gleaned from the loving, doting role she enacted. Maybe she was only second best. Maybe he no longer required her to sate the demon within him. But she was still his wife, and it felt good to know he still needed her for some things.

As she crossed the Grand Hall, her floral skirt swishing around her legs, the heels of her shoes clicking crisply against the white marble floor, she passed China. The little Asian woman sat on a wooden bench just outside Richard's study. As was required each Friday, she awaited Richard's attentions fully nude, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, her mouth compressed. She was not as hardy as Mahogany and she cringed at every sound that came from the study.

Again, a brittle thread of sympathy wound its way through Mary. She remembered what it was like having to sit on this bench, awaiting Richard's leisure on Punishment Nights, pain the inevitable tool through which she would find absolution for her weekly sins. That had been such a long time ago, before the Interlopers, when Richard still cultivated an interest in her.

Mary forced her eyes away from the slumped and forlorn visage of her replacement. But as she passed the bench, she

couldn't help but say, "You know you've nothing to worry about. When Mahogany goes first, he always wears himself out. You're perfectly safe until tomorrow."

China dropped her dark eyes to the floor. "Yes, mistress."

It wasn't fair to hate her, Mary told herself. They were Product. Product went to the purchaser. Product didn't have a choice. But they were also the reason Richard had become a husband in name alone.

Young and beautiful, while they pranced through the house in their skimpy black corsets and their impossibly high heeled shoes, Mary looked every bit the housewife—plain, simple, and common. While their bodies bore the marks of their master's affection, Mary's skin remained smooth, unwealed, and unblemished, the result of her husband's steady neglect. They arched and moaned and cried out every week from Richard's virile attentions; Mary slept by his side each night, untouched by him sexually now for almost two years. She had never felt so alone in all her life, as she had since the day her husband had purchased the Interlopers and deemed them far more worthy than her of both his money and his time. Mary was just ... Mary.

She had been thoroughly displaced, and she didn't even know why.

So as not to disturb, Mary opened the study door without knocking and quietly slipped inside. Though the room was well illuminated by the fireplace, Mary kept her eyes down so she wouldn't be tempted to look. She didn't want to see what she was missing, and she didn't want to pity the Interloper any more than she already did.

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Trying her best to ignore the high-pitched whimpers and ragged pants, she walked along the long shadow cast by the figures coupled in the flickering light to her husband's desk. It wasn't until she'd set down the serving tray that, through her envy and resentment, she realized that all the sounds within that room came from Mahogany alone. There was no heavy panting or masculine grunting, or the wet, slick slapping noises that accompanied rough, animalistic sex.

Despite knowing better, at any moment expecting her husband's terse command to get out, Mary turned from the desk and raised her head to look at them.

Mahogany was tied bent over a low-backed easy chair, her feet splayed far apart. The cane that had been used to impart her suffering and to ignite her screams lay where Richard had dropped it on the floor. He, himself, was drooped over Mahogany with his trousers around his ankles. He remained perfectly motionless, his heavier weight pressing her belly and hips down into the well-stuffed cushions.

The first thing Mary thought was that it should have been her pinned under his heavier weight, her body locked around his deeply imbedded cock, with her round buttocks blazing and marred and throbbing from the ministrations of that cane. The wave of jealousy that swept her left Mary shaking from its intensity.

"M-mistress?" Mahogany gasped raggedly. "He—he's not moving. I c-can't b-breathe—"

If he was just resting ... If she dared to disturb him...

Mary's breath caught nervously in her throat. She looked back once towards the door, but in the end, her fingers

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fidgeting in her skirt, Mary crept timidly across the Polynesian carpet. She stretched out a timid hand to touch her husband's back and gently shook him. "Richard, are you all right?"

He slid backwards off Mahogany, popping free of her body as he fell lifeless to the floor, his phallus still mostly erect and glistening in the flickering firelight, wet from the sexual moisture of his perfect and preferred Judgment Product. There were froths of spittle at the corners of his blue lips and his eyes stared strangely and without blinking at nothing at all.

Mahogany screamed again, wriggling frantically in her bonds, barely able to move so much as an inch in any direction. Richard always had been good with knots.

"Be quiet," Mary told her, and the girl stifled herself to whimpers.

Kneeling beside him, Mary touched two fingers to his throat, but felt no pulse. She bent and slowly lay her head upon his chest. There was silence. He was dead, and she sat up again.

Her jealousy abandoned her, leaving her feeling wooden and completely bereft of whatever emotions loving wives were supposed to feel for their dead husbands. Except, perhaps, for a small measure of vindication. He was, after all, dead because of the toy he loved the most.

Knowing she should be ashamed for such a thought, Mary stood up. She gazed down at him for long moment, then went back to his desk. Fishing her keys from her pocket, she unlocked the bottom right-hand drawer and swung it open to reveal the concealed safe. She knew the combination, though

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she'd never before used it. Just in case something should happen, Richard had once told her.

She opened the safe. The envelope with her name written upon it wasn't difficult to spot. Light weight with probably no more than a sheet of paper inside, she slit the top and withdrew a list of instructions. Her mouth compressed as she read. Even in death, he thought of them first.

She untied Mahogany and took both her and China upstairs to their rooms, locking them inside. Then she dialed the number Richard had left in the instructions.

It was long distance—overseas to Italy. And to the man who answered the phone, she said, "My husband is dead."

There was only the briefest of pauses on the other end, then a voice with a heavy Italian accent replied, "What was his name?"

"Richard Blackwell."

"Hold."

Mary sat in the dark at Richard's desk, the phone held to her ear, staring at her husband in the flickering light of the fire. His penis had grown flaccid and now lay over his left thigh like a fat worm. Unappealing. She looked away.

A deeper, smoother voice came back on the line. "Mrs. Blackwell? Your husband purchased two of my Product. Where are they?"

"I locked them in their room."

"Good. I will be there in twelve hours." He hung up the phone.

At least she wouldn't be forced to continue living with them.

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Mary called the police next. She picked up the cane and ropes. She took the tea tray back to the kitchen and ate one of the scones so the jam wouldn't be wasted. Then she sat on the stairs in the Grand Hall, staring at the front door, feeling wooden and surreal until the police, paramedics and coroner arrived.

"We were having sex," she told the two officers.

They looked at the body, lying partially unclothed on the floor, at the study, and at her.

"What happened?" one asked her.

"We were having sex," she said again. If she hadn't been so wooden, she might have been able to think of something different.

"Looks like a heart attack," she overheard the coroner say just before the paramedics took her husband's body away.

One of the policemen came to sit beside her on the stairs. "Are you going to be all right? Sometimes it's a good idea to have a family member or a friend stay with you. Is there anyone you can call?"

"I've already called someone."

The officer patted her hand. They were the last ones to go, leaving her alone on the stairs, wooden, emotionless, wondering what had made her second best to the two women locked securely in their room.

She was still sitting there many hours later when she heard a car pull up in front of the house. The sun had long since set. The fire in the study had died, and the house was dark, but for the front porch light. It was also three am, but none of that swayed her visitors. Three men strolled up the

walk, one separating himself from the group. He climbed the porch steps alone and stood upon the welcome mat. But that was all he did. Mary watched the shadow of him, which darkened the lace window curtains beside the door. He didn't knock; he just waited.

After a moment, she stood up slowly. Her hours-long vigil on the stairs had left her body sore, although she hadn't felt it until she tried to move. Now, feeling suddenly older than her thirty-two years, she crossed the Grand Hall, cracking open the front door and peering out at him.

"I am Daymon Tane." He was tall, dark of hair, impeccably dressed in a three piece suit and grey overcoat to guard against the night's chill. When he spoke, she recognized his voice as the man she'd spoken to on the phone. "Where are they?"

Her eyes flicked from him to the two men who waited a respectful distance behind him, then back again. "Upstairs."

"Lead the way."

They stared at one another for a moment in silence before Mary finally stepped back and let them in the house.

One man stayed at the Grand Hall, the other two followed her slow ascent up the stairs and down the second story hallway. They passed the room she'd shared with her husband, the guest rooms, and the library. At the end of the hall in a small alcove, she opened a second door to reveal a narrow flight of wooden steps that led up to the Elite's secluded attic space.

"After you," he said, the barest ghost of a smile gracing his lips when she glanced back at him over her shoulder.

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Once more, Mary preceded him. She unlocked the door at the top of the stairs, opening it ahead of herself as she walked into the Elite's Spartan bedroom. She flicked the light on, the sudden illumination waking both girls where they slept, each to her own narrow cot of a bed.

They sat up, blinking blearily, but as Tane stepped into the room, they came awake with a notable shock. As one, they scrambled nude from their beds, hitting the floor on their knees, heads down, hands clasped behind their backs in utter abasement. Mary stared. Neither had ever moved that fast for Richard.

"Sloppy," Tane commented, his face mirroring the disapproval that weighted his tone.

The women quaked at his feet, not daring to look at him or speak.

"Present," he commanded, and they both sat up. Their knees snapped apart and they grabbed their ankles, bending over backwards even as they lifted their hips and offered their loins for his perusal.

Tane half-turned and held out his hand to his companion, who withdrew a coiled length of leather from his pocket and handed it over. Unraveling the strap, he stepped into the room and with a quick duck and slash of his arm, he cracked the length of it across the front of China's thighs.

China, the screamer, barely made a sound. But she snapped her knees wider apart, and though Mary didn't think it possible, bent backwards even farther than before. Mahogany lifted her hips higher, as well, but the belated

obedience didn't save her from receiving an equally sharp lash across her own legs.

"Damned sloppy," he said with disgust, and Mary stared at the Elites in shock. The muscles of their bellies and thighs began to quiver from the strain of holding such a pose, and Mary felt an answering quivering in her own belly. A fine sheen of sweat appeared over their skin, making their bodies glisten under the lights, and Mary stopped breathing. She looked at Tane in wide-eyed wonderment, though he had already turned from her and didn't notice.

"Tether them," he told his companion, lightly slapping the length of that leather strap against his own leg in a show of heightened irritation.

The companion slipped choke-collars around each Elite's throat, then fastened a leash to the metal clips. Clicking his tongue against his teeth, he gave a sharp tug and both women rose gracefully to their feet. He led them from the room, and this time it was Mary's turn to be the follower. She stared at the strap that dangled from Tane's hand, her heart palpitating in her chest, for the first time in a long time completely unsure of herself.

Halfway down the stairs to the first floor, Mary finally found her voice and the courage to call out a shaky, "Please wait."

The companion men had already crossed the threshold, escorting the Elites on their leashes to the car. But Tane paused, his hand on the golden door latch. He deigned to look back at her, unsmiling, a dark man half-blanketed by shadow

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while the rest of him basked in the yellow glow of the front porch light.

"Why them?" Mary asked. Why not me, a trembling voice inside her begged to shout.

As if he heard that trembling voice anyway, a corner of his mouth drifted slightly upwards. Without a word to her, he walked out and shut the door.

Mary sank down on the steps, sitting with her hands in her lap, for the first time in her life, utterly alone.

* * * *

Two Weeks Later...

Mary Blackwell stood shivering outside the mammoth gate, staring through the iron portcullis into the empty courtyard, half buried in newly fallen snow. Judgment. It had to be. How many mountain fortresses could Italy have?

There was a mechanical whir and hum above her head and she looked up to see a black camera hidden under the stone arch of the gate, panning down to fix on her. She closed her eyes as a sudden gust of icy wind shoved her closer to the portcullis, whipping her blonde hair around her face. She grabbed the iron teeth to keep her balance. Squinting up at the camera, she then blinked rapidly, waving her hand in front of her eyes to dislodge blinding snowflakes from her lashes.

"I-I want to see Daymon Tane," she stammered. This had not been one of her best ideas. What if the Mountain Lord didn't want her? She would likely freeze to death before she

ever got back to the village at the base of the mountain. God, it was cold! "Please may I see Daymon Tane?"

After a moment, an intercom set into the stone by the iron portcullis crackled and a man's voice said in heavily accented English, "One moment."

She waited, pulling her coat tight around her and hunching her shoulders as she stomped her feet to get the circulation moving again.

It seemed forever before she heard the box crackle again. "Yes?"

She struggled to still her now chattering teeth, "I w-w-want t-to speak to Daymon T-Tane."

"Then speak to me. I am Daymon Tane."

That she felt suddenly cold inside had absolutely nothing to do with the freezing temperatures, ice and snow swirling all around her. She turned her head, lifting her face to the camera. "I'm M-Mary Blackwell. I—"

"I remember you. Wife to Richard Blackwell, owner of Mahogany and China, dead of a heart attack two weeks ago yesterday. You've come a long way. Whose loose lips allowed you to find me?"

"I promised not to say." She hugged herself, stomping her feet, the cold almost doubling her over. "I w-want ... I-I w-want..."

"I am not going to sell either girl back to you, if that's what you came for." And though she looked up at the camera, shaking her head, he continued, "My girls have been trained to companion the strongest of dominants anywhere. And since I have yet to meet a female capable of becoming

an adequate, much less, competent master, you by grace of your gender do not suit. Go back down the mountain before you freeze to death."

"I don't w-want to own them!" Mary protested. She flapped her arms, a gesture of hopelessness. "I w-want to be them!"

The intercom crackled again. "I beg your pardon. I don't think I heard you over the wind. Could you repeat that?"

But Mary had opened her coat and was frantically searching the inside pockets. She whipped out a fold of papers, hastily straightened them, batting the snowflakes from her face as she held the sheets up to the camera. The wind snapped the paper back and forth in her hands though she did her best to hold them straight.

"I know what Richard paid for your Product!" she cried over the wind howling through the courtyard. "Look at this! I have eighteen times that! I'll give it to you, all of it! Just—please just—" her voice began to trail away as she realized the futility of her position. She wouldn't cry. She refused to cry. "I-I w-want to be one of them!"

The intercom box stayed quiet.

She flapped her arms again, her open coat snapping around her body as the wind tugged and pulled at it. Despite her determination not to, she felt the burn of tears. "Can you at least tell me why not? What's wrong with me? Am I too tall? Too short? Too skinny? Not skinny enough? What makes me second best?"

Across the courtyard, the door to Judgment opened. She'd forgotten how imposing Tane was. Tall. Dark in his long

winter coat, his mammoth shoulders stretching so impossibly broad as to make him seem almost as immense as his fortress. He crunched his way through the snow to her, his dark eyes assessing and his mouth betraying only the slightest hint of amusement as he leaned one shoulder against the iron grate that separated them.

Burgeoning hope flowered within her. As Mary stepped up to grasp the metal grid with both hands, her face mere inches from him, he breathed a heavy sigh and steamed the air like a dragon.

"You are too old," he said, "Mary, wife of the now deceased supreme court justice, Judge Richard Blackwell. By a good ten years, you are too old. I don't like to sink money and time into training even so lovely a beast as yourself, when said beast will bring me nothing in return. You are, in short, a lost cause."

"I will be obedient," she begged. "Whatever you ask of me, I'll do it."

"No one will buy you. You will bring me nothing at Auction."

"Then give me away." But she could tell by the look on his face that she shouldn't get her hopes up.

"Why should I bother?" he asked, giving her another slight smile, another assessing look through the cold iron bars of the portcullis.

"B-because..." her words caught in her throat. "Because I want so much to be as they are. To be desired like that."

"What makes you think I care what you want?"

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Mary looked up at the camera, then back at him. Softly, she countered, "Why would you come out here, if you didn't care?"

His smile vanished abruptly and he turned as cold as the weather. "Don't second guess me, woman. I don't like it."

He turned to go.

"I'm sorry!" Mary said quickly. She slid along the grate to grasp the bars where he'd been standing only a moment before. "I'm sorry, Master Tane. Please!" Her voice broke. When he paused, half-turning to look back at her through the falling snow, she fell to her knees on the ice and rocks. "I'm sorry."

He studied her, hard, expressionless.

She clasped her hands in supplication. "I'm sorry."

He slowly came back to her, grasping the grate in one powerful hand. "There is nothing as melodious as the sound of a woman's begging. I find it most pleasing to the ear."

"I c-could p-please you in many ways," she offered, her desperation making her bold.

He was unimpressed. "I have a mountain full of females who would do the same, or I would take a layer of skin off their backsides to teach them better obedience."

The snow beneath her knees was cold, melting into her pant legs, near freezing on her skin.

He leaned down to her, his voice the softest of caresses, his words steaming the air as they fell from his mouth and seeming like the devil's own. "All right, Mary Blackwell. I will school you in begging. No doubt you will excel at it before I grow weary of you."

She shivered and shook. "Th-thank you, M-Master Tane."

His barest hint of a smile returned. "Take off your clothes. Leave them in the snow. I would see the beauty to be had in my newest beast."

Mary looked up at the falling snow, but her trembling hands, after only the briefest of pauses, hastened to obey. Her fingers already felt numb as it was, but she unbuttoned her shirt and dropped both it and her coat into the drifts of snow. Her bra followed, exposing her breasts to the frigid wind that pebbled her nipples in an instant. She gave in to the urge to rub her arms once before gritting her teeth and bending down, her smooth back a slender arch as she pulled off both shoes and socks and dropped them on the ground.

Her gasp was involuntary, a sound sucked from her as she shifted from foot to foot on the icy rocks. Her hands shook violently and she struggled with the fastenings of her pants, pushing both them and her underwear down her legs and stepping free of them. Teeth chattering, crossing her arms between her breasts, she hugged herself as she faced Tane without a shred of clothing to protect her from the freezing temperatures.

"Hands at your sides," he admonished, but he turned and walked off to the right of the portcullis. She heard the sound of a lock turning, then a previously unnoticed door creaked open to her. When Mary bent to gather her clothes, he said, "I told you to leave them in the snow."

"It's freezing," she shivered.

"Have I given you leave to speak to me?"

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Mary lowered her eyes and shook her head jerkily from side to side.

"Mouth closed," he told her, "eyes down, and follow me."

She trailed behind him, crossing the empty courtyard on feet so cold that it felt as though she were walking on needles. Just as he was pulling open the fortress door, a gust of wind knocked her into his back. She latched onto his coat to keep from falling to her knees, only to gasp through gritted teeth an instant later when Tane hauled her onto her tiptoes by a fistful of her own blonde hair.

He pushed her inside ahead of him. Barely had she cleared the threshold than did the wind slam the door shut.

Her breath steamed the air; it wasn't much warmer inside than out, and the only light came from the adjacent room straight ahead. That was all Mary had a chance to see, before he spun her around to face the wall.

"Bend over!" he barked, as cold as the air around them. "Hands on the wall. Spread your legs." His broad hand cracked solidly across the very center of her buttocks. "I said bend over. And get those legs apart; don't make me repeat myself again!"

Being cold made Mary feel clumsy, slow and stiff. She spread her feet so wide, she could feel the strain along the insides of her thighs, and she adjusted her hands on the icy stones so that she bent straight over at the hips.

His warm hand settled between her shoulders, the heat of his touch emphasizing just how cold she really was. It slid slowly down her back along her spine to caress her bottom, his fingers stroking lightly over each summit before delving

between them. He skimmed the rim of her anus before moving further down, parting the clenched lips of her sex with his middle finger. He stroked her slowly up and down, the tip of his finger circled her hooded clit, around and around endlessly until she began to shake from more than just the cold. Without speaking a word, he then slipped it inside her, sinking that single digit in all the way up to his palm.

"Is this what you wanted when you came here?" he asked. "Or did you have something more like this—" His hand abandoned her body, only to come crashing down on her right bottom cheek with brutal intensity. "—in mind?"

He swatted the other side just as hard, and Mary almost jerked upright.

"Oh!" She caught herself before her hands left the wall and quickly resumed her bent position.

"I asked you a question," he said.

Her teeth chattered. "B-both."

"You must think this a game."

"N-no..."

"Did I give you permission to contradict?" He swatted her again, this time his hand catching the tops of her thighs, right, left, right, left, four to each in rapid succession.

Her skin was so cold, the pain of it instantly flooded her eyes with tears. It made her back arch, and she wiggled her hips, fighting to keep from kicking or twisting away.

"I am not your friend," he said, and punctuated each statement with a slap so hard that it made her cry out. "I am not your buddy, your chum, or your pal. When you speak to me—" he delivered another teeth-jarring blow that had her

arching up on tiptoes with a ragged gasp as her fingernails scraped the wall. "—you will do so with respect."

"Yes, sir!" she panted, then cringed, squealed and finally cried out in frantic desperation as he lay a vicious barrage all over her smarting flanks.

"Master!" he snapped.

And she cried out an immediate echo of, "Master! Yes, Master!"

The blows ceased and the heat of his palm returned to rest between her shoulders. He didn't say anything. As Mary stood panting and gasping, marveling at the fury of his bare hand and praying for it to be over, from behind them she heard a voice very similar to Tane's:

"Here's the leash. Who's the stray?"

"A little kitten," Tane rumbled, "I found mewling at the gates."

"And you brought her inside?" The owner of that sonorous voice chuckled. "Quite the Samaritan you've become."

"Hardly." Tane fastened the choke collar around her neck, then attached the leash. "On your knees, female."

Mary sagged down the wall to kneel upon the floor, so cold everywhere except where he'd spanked her. There her skin burned and stung, the heat throbbing deep into her muscles.

Tane pulled the length of leash through the palm of his hand, tightening the collar and forcing her head up. "You left your name with your clothes out in the snow. Until I give you a new one, you will be called Blonde. You belong to me, and to any master with the whim to make of you his plaything. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master," she rasped, her eyes watering as she tried not to choke.

"You are nothing here. You have no worth or status. You are not even Product."

The other man came into view, looking down at her. There was a tight smile on his mouth, though his eyes, like Tane's, were cool and assessing. There was a strong family resemblance there; they could very well have been brothers.

"What are you going to do with her?"

"I admit, I haven't thought that far."

"You can't put her in with the Personals."

"Heavens, no."

"Can't put her in with the rest of the Lessers, either. Where does that leave? Solitary confinement? We'll have a gibbering animal on our hands within the year."

Mary closed her eyes and concentrated just on breathing. Her hands itched to grab the collar and leash and pull, giving herself just enough slack to draw air into her struggling lungs. She clutched her thighs to keep from doing it.

"I suppose I shall have to give her a job," Tane said.

The other man laughed, but when Tane glanced at him without joining in, he promptly sobered again. "You can't be serious."

Tane sighed and his eyes returned to her. "In all likelihood, this won't work anyway, but my interest has been piqued."

"We haven't recovered from the last time that happened."

"Come now, Master Deaton. Where's your sense of adventure?"

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"In California," Deaton said caustically. "Where we still can't go because the Los Angeles police won't leave us alone."

"She's paid a lot of money to lay her submission before us."

Hands on hips, Master Deaton, brother to Daymon Tane, studied her again. "How much?"

"Eighteen times the price of a good Elite."

Deaton blinked twice, then began to laugh. Still laughing, he turned and headed back into the fortress. "Welcome to Judgment, Blonde."

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Chapter Two

Mary clung to the white tile wall with both hands, gasping as the pressurized spray of cold water hit her back like thousands of sharp glass shards. The cold wrung involuntary cries from her and her teeth chattered violently as the focus of that icy spray ran up and down the length of her body no matter how she twisted and squirmed.

A dark-haired, black-uniformed master held the hose. His harsh, guttural voice barked out a command in a language she couldn't understand, but the guard to her right, standing just out of splatter range, interpreted it for her. "Turn around."

Slowly, Mary turned to expose her naked front and the master gave it an equally chilly and impersonal dose of the cold water. She bowed her head, turning her face away so the hard spray wouldn't strike it directly, but the master spared her very little, the hard cutting fury of the hose punishing her breasts, stomach and thighs for what felt like forever. When he aimed for her labia, her hands clenched into fists, and Mary rose up on her tiptoes, throwing back her head with a high, keening wail that her chattering teeth warbled and mangled.

Then the hose was shut off.

Mary shook violently; she didn't think she'd ever be anything but cold again.

The guard at her right side, handed her a bar of soap and said, "Wash yourself."

Bowing her head, Mary dutifully lathered her skin. Her breasts, her underarms, her belly, her body was rippled with goose bumps. She kept her eyes firmly downcast, her face flushing as she bent to soap between her thighs and tried to pretend there weren't two strangers watching her do this. Her hands slipped over her buttocks and between, then ran down each leg in turn, washing quickly and blushing furiously as she did it.

The guard then picked up a razor and stepped in front of her. She held as still as she could while he shaved her, beneath her arms, her legs, then her pubis, until she was as bare there like a prepubescent woman-child. He then took his place once more out of splatter range.

Holding the hose before him, the master spoke, and the guard said, "Wash yourself again."

Mary repeated the process, rubbing her hands and the soap over every inch of herself, shivering and barely muffling a moan when the master turned the hose back on. The white tiled shower room echoed with her shrill gasps and cries as the icy spray stroked up and down her body again.

"Turn around," the guard told her once more.

And Mary turned, bracing her hands up on the wall as the hose punished her back, bottom and legs. She was so grateful when the master finally shut it off. Her knees knocked together. She hugged the wall and shivered.

The master handed the hose to the guard, who re-coiled the length, and picked up a worn gray towel. He brought it to her, draping the scratchy fabric over her shoulder until her trembling fingers could uncurl themselves to pick it up.

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He watched her fumble to dry herself, his dark eyes veiled and unsympathetic. Then he spoke.

"My name is Master Boyden," the guard interpreted. "I am in charge of all New-comers from the moment they arrive until they are released into the Pit. For the next month, you and I are going to be inseparable. I will teach you our language, I will teach you our rules, and if, for whatever reason, you decide you do not want to cooperate, I will also make you very sorry for your incorrect choice. Do you understand?"

Shivering in her damp towel, her wet hair dripping down her back, Mary looked from the guard to Master Boyden and nodded.

Master Boyden spoke again, four short words in his hard, guttural language.

"That means, 'Yes, Master Boyden'," the guard told her. "Repeat it now, and I would recommend you commit that phrase to memory and use it often while you're here."

Mary had to repeat the strange phrase four times before she said it adequately enough and loudly enough to satisfy the frowning Master Boyden. Wrapped in only the harsh towel, she then followed him out of the shower room and down the long, dark corridor, deeper into the mountain fortress, until they arrived at what looked to be a doctor's examining room. She balked in the doorway when she saw the table with its cold metal stirrups, but the guard behind her simply flicked her flanks with the end of the switch he carried and Mary meekly crept into the room.

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Waiting for the doctor to arrive, shifting nervously from foot to foot, her gaze flitted from the upright scale to the exam table and the nearby tray with all its gynecology tools, then to the blood test equipment set up across the room.

Mary swallowed hard. She tried to keep her breathing slow and even, but she'd never liked doctors' offices. She could have cheerfully missed every one of her annual exams, except that Richard always made her go. He would drive her there in fact, and accompany her into the office so he could watch. She remembered how he used to say he was going to order one of those tables for their home, so he could perform those exams on Mary himself. She couldn't help but shudder, almost grateful then that his attention had turned to Mahogany and China.

When the doctor finally arrived, he did not come alone. Tane came with him, followed by what was probably every master within Judgment. There were more than twenty, all dressed much like Master Boyden, the stark black of their uniforms broken only by a silver insignia where a right breast pocket might otherwise have been. All were somber and unsmiling, and most stared directly at her with dark stares that made her very nervous.

This was what she'd wanted, Mary reminded herself. But she clutched the towel tightly around herself and shivered nonetheless.

"This is the last time you are going to hear English while you are here," Tane told her. "But the time we spend waiting for our words to be translated to you is time spent out of the

Pit and away from our duties. Product, by their very nature, are not as quick to obey the guards as the masters."

"Should we wait for Shipe?" the Master Doctor asked, donning a long white lab coat over his black uniform and reaching for a pair of plastic gloves.

"No," Tane said. "He is supervising the Personals."

"All right then." The Master Doctor handed a clipboard and paper to Master Boyden. "Would you keep the log?"

"Of course." And to her, Boyden then said, "Drop the towel."

Reluctantly, Mary let her damp wrap slide down her body and she stepped free from the folds. Up until tonight, Richard had been the only man to ever see her unclothed. Now she had the eyes of over twenty men watching her every movement. She kept her own downcast and tried not to think about it.

"We'll begin over here." The Master Doctor led her to the scale. He checked her height first. "Five-foot-five-and-a-half inches. One-hundred-twenty-seven pounds."

And Boyden documented both.

Then she was moved to the lab station, where the Master Doctor prepared to draw her blood. Mary offered up her arm willingly, but turned her head aside and closed her eyes when she felt the tip of the needle prick her skin.

Across the room, one of the masters asked, "Is someone going to tell us why we're all here? She seems rather well-behaved to me. And surely one troublesome little female doesn't require all of us?"

"Blonde isn't troublesome at all," Tane said. "I asked you here because she is not Product. I don't want her mistakenly taken to the Pit or fraternizing freely with the rest of the Lessers. There will be confusion enough as it is until I work out how she should be treated."

"She's not Product?" asked a golden-haired master. Leaning back against a counter, he ran a hand over his mustache and neatly-trimmed goatee as he studied her. "Where are we going to bed her?"

"Smith doesn't have anyone in his barracks right now," another suggested.

But hand on his lean hips, Master Smith raised his slightly gray head and said, "True, but if we get a New-Comer with a decent singing voice in the next batch, then we'll only have to move Blonde somewhere else. In my experience, it's not good for females to be shuffled back and forth from master to master."

"Agreed," Tane said. "Masters Shipe and Cobb have no assigned barracks, so one of them can be prevailed upon to take her when her time with Boyden is up."

Beside him, another master said, "If she's not a Lesser, and I'm assuming that she's not a Personal—" The man tipped his head slightly to one side, as though asking for clarification. "—then what is she?"

Tane looked to his brother. "What do you think: an experiment?" he asked. "A volunteer, maybe?"

Master Deaton shrugged with his eyebrows. "She sounds like a volunteer to me."

"Blonde has paid us for the privilege of being trained," Tane said.

There was a moment of dead silence among the gathered masters, then someone started to laugh and the others quickly followed suit.

Cheeks burning, the object of their amusement kept her eyes firmly on the ground.

"How much did she pay?" asked one of the younger masters.

"A hell of a lot," Tane told him.

"Maybe we should alter our profession."

Master Deaton nudged his brother's elbow. "Told you."

"If we didn't run the risk of contaminating the rest of the Product, I might consider it," Tane said. "In the meantime, I am going to create a position just for Blonde. Something below both Personals and Product. I was thinking we could put her to work maintaining and organizing the Common Library."

"She would be in direct contact with the Product then," Master Deaton commented.

But Tane shook his head. "For the brief breaks during the day, she can face the wall. The Lessers will be curious at first, but if we are vigilant and pass out enough Demerits, they'll soon get the message. For the few hours after dinner when the Lessers have full access to that room, then Blonde can take her daily exercise, or spend some free time in one of the hobby rooms. I really don't think we'll need to worry about it for too long. Chances are," his black eyes settled on Mary's bowed head, "one or two trips to the Demerit room will likely

satisfy her curiosity. She'll all but run back to civilization to get away from us."

The very thought of having to return home, to wander the halls of that great empty house with only herself for company, made Mary shudder. But then she remembered, she'd given all her money Tane. So truly, it wouldn't be long before she didn't have even that house anymore.

"Hold still," the Master Doctor told her, switching a full vial for the last empty one.

"I'm sure we can find enough ways to occupy her time," Tane smiled, "if we use our imaginations."

His comment won a smatter of dark chuckles from the others.

"We could send her to tidy the Master's gym," Deaton suggested.

"She could oil straps and maintain the Demerit Hall," Smith added. "The Lessers don't do that near often or well enough." One corner of his mouth lifted upward as he said, "For some reason, they seem strangely reluctant to go in there."

Even the Master Doctor chuckled at that, and he removed the needle from her arm, pressed a tuft of cotton to the wound, and stretched a band-aid over it. "All right, you." He gestured for her to precede him to the exam table. "Let's go."

This was the part that she dreaded the most. Mary tried not to look at them as she reluctantly stepped up onto the retractable ledge and sat down on the edge of the table.

"Get your hips right up on the very end here," the Master Doctor told her. "Nobody likes this part, but everyone goes through it. You may as well lay back and be quiet."

Lying down, Mary reached out to grab onto the padded sides of the table. She held on tightly, staring up at the ceiling. Blinking rapidly, she struggled to keep her breathing easy and slow as the doctor helped her feet into the stirrups.

"Look at that pretty little cunny," he said, his hands against the insides of her thighs to part her legs wider. "Relax your legs, now. That a girl. Open right up for me."

Blushing hotly, she forced her tense muscles to ease as she gave him full access to her most intimate places. She closed her eyes when she heard him pick up one of the metal tools on the table beside him.

He touched her with his fingers first. He ran his thumb along her slit, moistening it before parting the folds in search of her clit. She caught her breath, almost lifting her hips from the table when he stroked her, but his hand on her pelvis kept her in place. "Given some encouragement, she moistens up nicely." Abandoning her clit, he gently sank a finger inside her. "Very snug. Almost virginal, in fact."

Mary stifled a moan, staring fixedly up at the ceiling lights as he tested the tightness of her anus with his other hand. He gave her a sharp swat. "Relax your bottom!" he ordered.

She clutched the table even tighter, her legs beginning to tremble. But she took several deep breaths and made the lower half of herself go slack.

The Master Doctor parted the fleshy lips of her labia, opening her wide enough to sink two fingers into her tight

sheath, and another from his other hand into her bottom's passage. He shook his head. "The Product didn't come back like this. How long has it been, Blonde?"

"Two ... mm—" she cleared her throat. "Two years."

"That feels about right." His hand withdrew and the Master Doctor replaced his fingers with a very cold speculum.

Mary nearly came up off the table when the lubricated device slipped into her vaginally. Her hands fisted at her sides, and her back arched as she sucked a deep breath into her lungs, the sound like an inverted scream.

"Get your legs apart, Blonde," the doctor said mildly.

Mary grabbed both her thighs, panting hard as she tried to keep her legs from snapping shut or kicking out to get both him and that icy speculum away from her.

"No," he said as he examined her. "She definitely has not had a man inside her for quite a long time."

"Between our collective imaginations," Tane said with another smile, "I think we can take care of that, too."

"And I get her first," Boyden said, making notes in the log. He chuckled. "Damn, I love my job."

The Master Doctor took two cultures and finished his exam. He removed the metal tool from her body and Mary promptly scrambled down off the table. She covered herself with one hand, her skin icy cold where the speculum had touched her. She didn't care how it looked; she rubbed until her cold flesh began to warm.

The doctor handed her two, small plastic cups. "Give me a urine sample in one and fecal in the other."

Still rubbing between her legs, warily she asked, "Why do you need that?"

Behind her, Master Boyden dropped his clipboard on the table, took two sudden steps forward, and lay a fearsome swat to the center of her naked buttocks.

Mary sucked a startled breath. Her hands darted behind her, but before she could even touch her stinging cheeks, he barked, "Hands on your head!"

The plastic cups *'tok-ed'* as they hit her skull, so startled was she that she didn't even drop them first before obeying him.

"There is no rubbing when I discipline you," he told her.

Mary glanced over at Tane, but Boyden swatted her sharply again, causing her hips to jerk outward with the force of the impact.

"Don't look at him; look at me." His eyes flashed. "You are in my barracks. For the next four weeks you belong to me. Not him. And if I ever hear you question a master again, I will put you to the block and whip you myself!"

Mary swallowed hard, her eyes filling tearfully as she stammered, "I-I-I'm sorry, Master Boyden."

His dark eyes remained locked with hers for a long time. "On your knees," he ordered, and she hit the ground instantly, bowing her head and trying hard to keep from crying in front of him.

"Get your head all the way down," he told her. Without waiting for her, he grasped her nape and firmly pushed until her forehead nearly touched the floor. "Hands behind your back."

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She let go of the cups, sending them rolling across the floor in opposite directions as she clasped her hands behind her. It was the position Mahogany and China had thrown themselves down into when Tane had entered their room back in the States. Every muscle in Mary's body clenched and tightened. Was it her turn now to be beaten? Wavering between a little anticipation and a lot of fear, her breath catching in her throat, but she didn't dare move.

Releasing the back of her neck, Boyden stood up. He walked around her, studying her from all sides. "There isn't a mark upon you," he said. "Has it been two years since your husband disciplined you, too?"

Mary hesitated. Her eyes began to sting, and then she felt the mutinous trickle as a tear slipped past her lashes and fell from her cheek to the floor. "He did. Twice, sir, after the In—the Product came."

"What was that?"

"Sometimes, Master Boyden, sir."

"You censored yourself. What were you were going to say originally?"

"Interlopers," she softly admitted.

Eyes narrowing, Boyden squatted down beside. "How long has it been, Blonde, since the last time you were disciplined?"

Her bottom lip began to wobble. Another tear spilled halfway down her cheek, then fell to the floor. "Six months, three weeks, five days."

"Look at me."

Mary tucked in her chin. She didn't want to raise her head; she didn't want him to see she was crying. She felt pitiful

enough as it was. But left with few options, she sniffed, wished she had something to wipe her eyes with, and looked up.

"Don't waste your tears here," he told her. With his body blocking her view of the other masters, it was easy to feel as though they were the only two people in the room. "We are not your husband; we are not neglectful. Your counting the days will end tonight in my barracks. Save your tears for that."

For a moment, Mary couldn't breathe. Her stomach clenched so hard, she was afraid she might be sick.

"I still need my specimens," the Master Doctor reminded them.

"Get up," Boyden told her. "Do as you are told. With the night you have ahead of you, you don't want me aggravated anymore than I already am."

Dismissing the other men, as Tane turned to go, he said, "Master Boyden, I leave her in your capable hands."

His dark eyes boring into hers, Boyden said, "By morning, she'll be responding to the whip like a second year Elite."

And that look he gave her reminded Mary so much of the ones her husband used to wear, before the Interlopers had come, back when he'd still needed her to sate his demons, before he'd lost all interest in her. At last, Mary was needed again. She was wanted and desired.

Though he'd told her to stand, she bowed back down, pressing her forehead to the floor at Boyden's feet. She anointed his boots with her tears, then kissed them.

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"Well, what do you know," he said, a slight smile tugging the corners of his mouth as he watched her. "There is such a thing as a natural submissive. Fascinating."

* * * *

"The first bunk will be yours," Boyden told her, holding open the barracks door for her to proceed him. "When I return, you are to be kneeling on the floor, forehead on the tiles, hands behind your back. We have seven months of neglect to make up for. Never fear, I'll make sure you're broken in properly."

As naked as the day she was born, her hair still damp but at least no long dripping icy water down her back, Mary crossed the threshold and he closed the door behind her. She found herself standing at the top of a narrow flight of metal stairs. Twin rows of twelve single beds ran down the length of the room and, except for a wooden A-frame and a display of implements towards the front, there was little else in the way of furniture.

The only person there, Mary went slowly down the stairs. She glanced once at the A-frame, then the display of canes, paddles and straps, before slowly turning to the closest bed. Not sure how long he would be absent and not wanting to be caught out of position when he did return, she lowered herself to wait the way he'd commanded.

The hard white tiles were not kind to her knees nor her shins, and as the time dragged slowly on, she began to ache where her weight caused the most pressure. But Mary remained in position. She remembered in that long ago time

when it was Richard she waited for. She used to distract herself from the physical discomforts by wishing herself into more pleasant surroundings.

Then of course things had changed and it was the Interlopers who'd had to face his temper.

Mary rested her forehead on the tiles, not sure what to want for now to take her mind off her aching knees. But she had come a long way to be put in this position again; she certainly didn't want to wish herself back into neglect. She winced, shifting her weight slightly off-center. Maybe she could wish for Master Boyden to hurry up and get here so she could get up off the floor.

What if he made her kneel here all night?

Mary bit back a groan. She shifted again, but there was no position more comfortable in which to spare her legs.

No sooner had she shifted back, then did the barracks door swing open, and she heard the heavier tromping of a man coming down the stairs. Mary didn't raise her head, but it didn't matter. Every nerve ending in her body seemed to come instantly awake, as though a charge of static electricity had coursed in through her skin as Boyden's familiar black boots strode by her. She felt the breeze of his passing ruffle through her hair, followed by the faint scent of his cologne. There was a dry rattle of bamboo clattering against wood as he set several items on a neighboring bed.

"Close your eyes," he told her.

This was it. Mary stared down at the tile just beyond the tip of her nose, her breaths quickening as her body came to tingling awareness. This was what she'd wanted. It was silly

to be afraid now. What could he possibly do to her that Richard had not?

The thought did not ease her nervousness, but Mary closed her eyes anyway.

"Sit up," Master Boyden said.

Slowly, her knees and shins screaming out in agony, she rose to a kneeling position on the floor. The brush of cloth touched her cheek as, without a word, Boyden managed to do the one thing her husband never had: he tied a blindfold over her eyes.

Mary stiffened. Only by sheer force of will did she keep from reaching up to pull it off again. Richard had always wanted her to see what was coming; he'd liked to watch the fear on her face and to breathe the scent of it off her skin. Mary was familiar with that method. It felt comfortable to be able to see what was coming. As though she could almost handle it better then. But this ... How could she brace herself against something she couldn't see?

She stifled a frightened gasp as Boyden tipped her head back all the way. She swallowed hard, flinching just a little when she felt a gentle touch at her temple. It wasn't until the bristles sank into her hair and slowly began to stroke through the thick mass that she recognized the thing that touched her as a hairbrush.

Master Boyden quietly and patiently combed her hair until it was free of tangles and very nearly dry. "Gives me something to hang onto," he said as he wove the long blonde tresses into a single, fat braid that dangled midway down her back.

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The ache in her sore legs was almost forgotten when he took that hairbrush and gently stroked her bare back with the bristled side. He rasped it softly across her shoulders, caressing down over her breasts and winning another sharp gasp from her lips as the brush pricked across the rapidly stiffening peaks of her nipples.

She hunched her shoulders, but that was as much as she dared to draw away.

"New-Comers," he said, trailing the bristles down over the flat of her belly, "are generally given gentle spankings. Canes, birches and prolonged thrashings are deemed much too severe for young girls who have never had their bare bottoms smacked before. But you're not really a New-Comer to this, now are you?"

The hairbrush pricked down over her thighs, rasping in soft strokes from her hips to her knees, Mary shivered, something that had—this time—absolutely nothing to do with the cold.

"Are you?" he murmured against her sensitive ear.

Mary shook her head once. "No, Master."

"Master is a title given to Tane alone, and then to whomever takes you as his own," Boyden told her. "You will address me as sir."

"Yes, sir."

"Good girl." He kissed the shell of her ear, drawing it into his mouth and suckling it even as the prickly brush moved down between her legs and pressed against her newly shaven mons. The wooden head of it was so wide that she could feel the edges pressing against her thighs and the size of it was large enough to cover her trembling sex.

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"Six months," he said, as he kissed the sensitive hollow of her ear. "Three weeks and five days; far too long for any female to be so neglected and misused. We'll have to fix that."

He wrapped one arm around her waist, pulling her back against him, lifting her up off her knees and bringing her back to sit on his. He lightly slapped the acutely tender flesh of her pussy with the prickling bristles, and she felt that smack throughout her entire body. Her hips bucked, brushing upon the large and very solid bulge of his manhood, uncomfortably contained within his pants and pressing up between her naked buttocks.

"I'm going to give you one stroke for every day you were ignored." He turned the brush over and slapped her pussy again, this time with the flat, wooden head. Mary stiffened, blindly throwing back her head against his shoulder. She mewled a soft sound of protest as he said, "We'll round up. Two hundred and fifty is a good number, don't you think? But not with this." Wood clattered on tile as he set the implement down. "Hairbrushes are for beloved Personals and tender little New-Comers. Experienced, naturally submissive women like you, mm," Boyden chuckled, a dark aphrodisiac of sound, in her ear. "You can take a proper thrashing."

Mary trembled as he began to lift her. Unable to see, she didn't fight as he brought her up onto her feet and turned her around. His hands left her briefly, returning seconds later as he gave her a thick strap to hold.

"You've never been whipped until you've suffered the kiss of Judgment leather," Master Boyden said.

The strap was heavy, at least four inches wide, and her hands could not close all the way around it. She barely breathed as her fingers explored the length of it from the end of the triangular tongue to the wooden handle with its wrapped, slip-resistant grip.

It had been so long and the count was so high...

When Master Boyden again touched her, his hands settling about her waist as he tried to move her, a shock of belated reluctance had Mary digging in her feet. "W-wait, please..."

"Come on," he tsked. "None of that. You don't really want to fight me, and it won't help you anyway. Now, bend."

Breathing hard, very near to tears, Mary blurted, "But I can't see!"

"I don't require you to."

"Please, sir, may the blindfold come off? I could bear it if I could see it coming!"

"Then you had best learn how to bear it blind, since I intend to light a fire in you that will take days to extinguish. And I promise, you'll feel every stroke far more intensely this way."

She shook. "Please, sir—"

"No." He placed his hand between her shoulders, applying gentle pressure until she bent down.

Hugging the strap to her chest, she found herself laid over the foot rail of her bed, the thickness of a pillow propping her hips up and softening the pressure of the metal against her pelvis. He wrapped a length of strap through the foot rail's bars, then looped it around her waist, buckling it at the small of her back and pulling the strap firmly taut. The thick edges

of the punishment strap bit into Mary's fingers and palms as she clutched it, bowing her head to bury her face in the neatly made mattress. There would be no escaping now until he let her go, and she felt a little relieved to have the option of that disobedience taken from her.

His hand patted the soft inner slope of thighs. "Legs apart."

He dropped to one knee behind her, taking hold of her left ankle and bringing it out to the corresponding leg of the bed where he secured it with a leather restraint. He did the same to her right, then adjusted the strap at her waist and tightened it down until Mary could not move her lower body at all.

Boyden patted her hip, his hand never leaving her skin as he walked around the side of the bed. From her back to her shoulders, his hand then caressed down her arm to take hold of her wrists. She groaned her trepidation into the bedding as he stretched her out, securing her hands together to the head rail via a second set of restraints.

He caressed her body back down to her thighs, feeling the tension in her limbs and tightening the straps wherever needed. Until Mary could feel the strain in her arms, shoulders and the backs of her thighs. Until she could not move so much as an inch to relieve it.

She had paid for this. She had come halfway around the world for it.

Master Boyden had to pry the strap from her tightly clenched fingers.

"Don't worry." He bent to press a kiss to her hip, just above the target he then caressed with his warm palm, stroking the entire surface of her bottom, down the backs of her thighs, up between to cup her intimately. "Every fifty strokes, we'll pause to give this a bit of attention. After all, we don't want your bottom to become desensitized to the strap. Where would be the fun in that?"

He kissed her again, giving her quivering sex a final pat before stepping back from the bed.

Every mean thought Mary had ever entertained about China and how quickly she had capitulated her screams to Richard's enjoyment, she took back with that first crack of leather upon the skin of her bare buttocks. It wrapped her in its loving embrace, branding her with a fiery pain that consumed the entire lower portion of her bottom without mercy. The sound of it was sharp and crisp, like a gun shot that echoed impossibly loud in the near empty barracks room.

She had forgotten how much it could hurt to be so needed. All those nights, when she'd lain awake wishing it was her bottom that burned and ached, she had forgotten all about the many levels of hell that had to be suffered first before she could be consumed by torment's almost pleasurable afterglow. Boyden's strap provided her with a very thorough reminder, and Mary didn't even try to bear it bravely.

The first two strokes covered her bottom entirely, the broad width causing them to overlap, with the pointed leather tongue licking around her hip to sink its bite into her tender side. The loud snaps would have left her hopping were she not secured so completely over the foot rail. Every

subsequent stroke after that only heightened the fire, deepened the agony, and stole her voice with ragged screams that felt torn from her throat. Though she tried to keep count, the pain had her overwhelmed by the time the tenth stroke seared across the base of the buttocks. How was she ever going to survive two-hundred-and-fifty? Mary began to cry, and the blankets beneath her became soaked with her tears and her sweat.

"You may scream and cry all you want," Boyden told her as he swung that wicked strap low enough to partially catch the tops of her splayed thighs. "It's not going to spare you a lick." He paused to caress her scalded nether cheeks. "My, you are marking up nicely. Twenty more to go with this first set."

There was another vicious crack of leather, this time catching her thighs fully, and Mary howled as the agony of it chewed into her.

"That's it," Master Boyden cheered. "Wail like that some more. You've got me hard as a rock just listening to you."

It felt so much more than fifty before he dropped the strap onto the bed beside her and unfastened the front of his pants. He wasn't any less punishing as he shoved himself inside her, grinding his hips into her wealed and wounded flesh, winding his hand in her braid and pulling back her head so he could more clearly hear her cries.

"Cry all you want," he grunted, battering her womb with the force of his thrusts. "You are as wet as a fountain. Your body remembers the hurt. It likes it."

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And he must have been right, because Mary's orgasm was so powerful that it left her weeping, and he had only just begun to pump in and out when it overwhelmed her. The leather restraints squeaked as she strained in their hold, her entire body devoured by a pleasure that seemed to come from out of nowhere.

"God damn, you are tight!" Boyden growled. He swatted her hips twice as he rode her, and made her come again before he was through, pushing hard and deep before withdrawing from her body to spill his seed on her battered flanks.

He took his time rubbing the milky fluid into her burning skin before picking up the strap again. When he touched the length of it to Mary's lips, she kissed it, and he took her back to Hell all over again.

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Chapter Three

The air was brisk, but not unbearably cold as Mary took her third lap around the exercise tracks. Though snow blanketed the rocks of the mountain walls that surrounded the field, the track itself had been shoveled bare and salted to reduce the danger of slipping, turned ankles, or broken legs.

She was naked but for her running shoes and a light jacket to protect her from the chilling bite of the intermittent wind. Despite the cold, she loved this part of the day. She loved to run. The exercise was almost relaxing and it was one of the rare few times when she actually got to be alone. The wide scattering of footprints beyond the track, however, betrayed the illusion. The other mountain inhabitants, the Product, had been brought up to the bowl at the top of Judgment for their daily exercise much earlier that morning. In the five weeks since her arrival, Mary had yet to see one of them in person. Sometimes she could hear the muted echoes of their voices ricocheting off the dark stones of the cavern-like halls, their cries of pain accompanying the whucks of distant rods. But face-to-face, Mary saw only the guards and masters, and Master Boyden in particular.

From the door across the field, a sharp whistle split the quiet. Mary glanced over her shoulder to see Boyden at the shower's entrance waving her in. Her time was up.

She turned immediately, jogging to the edge of the track before slowing to a walk. She knew better than to run in the snow. Not long ago, a turned ankle had laid her up for almost

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a week, and four blistering welts from Boyden's cane had taught her the benefits of caution where her physical well-being was concerned. She might not be Product, but her body still belonged to Tane until he decided otherwise. Damaging a master's property was a major offense, and not one that was easily forgiven.

Mary walked but quickly back to the shower's entrance, only once daring a quick glance to the right when she heard whispers from the privately fenced garden and aviary nook a good distance away. If there was one thing to be said of Judgment, the stone walls carried sound exceedingly well.

Figures in hooded, fur-lined parkas ducked behind snow-covered bushes too late to avoid being seen. The Personals, the favorites of the masters, cloistered in their private rooms, a harem of willing submissives whose only purpose for existence was to please.

Mary paused at the shower's threshold, her breath steaming the air. Sometimes she envied them.

Holding the door for her, Master Boyden said as she drew closer, "Come on, Blonde. It's cold out here."

Ducking her head, not wanting to be caught staring where she shouldn't, she hurried on inside.

"Don't think I didn't notice what direction your eyes were wandering," Boyden said as he let the door close behind her. "You know better."

"I'm sorry, M-master Boyden." While outside, after the first half lap, Mary had stopped feeling the cold. But now, as the warmth of the shower room enfolded her, she found herself struggling to get her suddenly uncooperative fingers

coordinated enough to unzip the windbreaker and hang it back on the peg. She stomped her feet up and down. Her toes she could feel just fine, but there was an unnerving lack of sensation between her hips and her ankles.

"You know better than that, too," he growled. He slapped the switch he always seemed to carry these days against his leg. "You're not sorry until I make you so. Get in the shower and this time I want to see steam!"

This was the worst part about coming in from the cold. The track's shower was set three steps down in a square bowl large enough to entertain an entire barracks of Product, or Lessers as they were called by the masters. The shower heads grew up from the tile floor like a forest of stark pipes, each having only a small basket for soap, shampoo and conditioner.

Her partially numb hands fumbled with the faucets to turn on the water. She knew by experience now how far to turn the knobs of hot and cold, and though she knew the temperature wasn't anywhere near as scalding as it felt, she still had to brace herself to step under the hard spray. As the water hit the icy skin of her chest, Mary shrieked as though she were being boiled by it and grabbed onto the pipe to keep from twisting away.

"I don't see steam!" Boyden shouted over her cries. Standing in the sunken shower's open doorway, he slapped the switch against his leg again.

Clenching her teeth, Mary turned up the flow of the hot water until she saw wisps of vapor beginning to rise from the shower head. By now, her chest was warming and the water

didn't hurt near as much as it first had. But her back and buttocks still felt very cold, and the occasional rivulet of hot water that spilled back over her shoulders, felt like burning knife points slicing down her skin.

"Turn around," Boyden drawled. "I want to see pink skin when you come out of there."

Knowing how much this would hurt, Mary clenched her teeth. She took a deep breath and made herself turn. Her cry of pain was more a guttural growl as the heat of the water washed mercilessly over her. Though she knew it only lasted a moment, the sensation of being scalded went on forever before her body heated enough to register the heat as the comfortable temperature that it was.

Panting, Mary closed her eyes. She tipped her head back under the spray and ran her fingers through her hair in relief.

Boyden checked his watch. "Two more minutes, Blonde. Move it now. Let's go."

She washed herself quickly, careful not to miss any part, especially while pinned so under Boyden's hawk-sharp eyes.

"Ten..." he called out. "Nine ... eight..."

Mary shut off the water.

"Seven..."

She grabbed her long hair and squeezed a hand down the length before wringing the excess water from the wet tresses.

"Six ... five..."

She grabbed a towel and hastily scrubbed at her skin, wrapping it tight around her as she hurried to the door.

"Four ... three ... two..."

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Her feet slipped on the wet tiles and she cracked her toes against the steps as she scampered up them.

"One!" Boyden announced and, as she flew past him, the switch hissed through the air and snapped a line of fire across the tops of her thighs just below the hem of the towel.

"AH!" Mary grabbed the back of her leg with one hand, but dared not stop to rub either her throbbing legs or her aching toes.

The normal procedure was for her to stand at attention at the shower's exit, ready for him to lead her back to the barracks, but when she ducked past him to do this, he froze her in her tracks with a sharply called out, "Hold it! You know better."

Clutching her towel closed in front with one hand and the back of one leg with the other, feeling the welt rising into being between her fingers, Mary came to a reluctant stop. She should have been at the door before he counted to one. Perhaps had that been her only mistake, he might have let it slide. But when she turned around, the look on his face said clearly that Boyden was in a mood to forgive her of anything.

"Assume the position," he said, using the switch to indicate the Lessers' changing bench against one wall.

Bare feet padding softly over the tile, Mary approached the bench reluctantly. She let the towel fall to the floor as she bent at the waist, took hold of the unadorned wooden plank, and pushed back her hips to offer herself to him. As hard as it was, she made herself relax.

"Repent your sins," Boyden said as he came up behind her.

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Lately, that had become his favorite thing to say, especially when he was preparing to be severe. After five weeks alone under his tutelage, she had grown very good at judging his moods.

Staring straight down at the floor, Mary swallowed hard. "This one looked upon the Personals, sir."

"Is that ever permitted for one such as you?"

Her thighs tightened as she felt the light touch of the switch settle across the center of her bottom, but she forced herself not to clench. Experience had long since taught her that clenching would not only earn more licks from Boyden, but it would make each cut of the switch hurt more. On a bottom as tender as hers constantly seemed to be these days, the last thing she wanted was for a whipping to hurt more.

"No, sir."

Despite her effort to hold still, the first hard snap against her backside made her jump.

"Oh!" Her cry echoed through the empty shower room, reverberating off the cold tile walls. She bit down on her lip in an effort to stay silent as she heard the hiss and felt the sting of the second, then third, then fourth strokes cutting into her soft flesh.

Since her arrival, she had suffered not one day of neglect. Boyden took her across his knee every morning and warmed her thoroughly with the palm of his hand. The rest of the time, she provided him with no shortage of reasons to punish, either because of language lessons, for which she had very little aptitude, or her ineptitude in the skill room, where she

showed a lamentable lack of any kind of marketable ability. The only thing she had ever been any good at was keeping Richard's house, and there wasn't much need for that here.

Mary jumped beneath each fiery slice of the switch. Though she tried her best to hold still, the cuts pushed her further and further up over the bench, and the squealed-out cries she tried so valiantly to hold back grew higher and higher pitched as the strokes fell hard across the bruises and welts of a good many previous whippings.

Boyden gave her eight fearsome swipes, then stopped. He waited for her to catch her breath and, trailing the switch lovingly through his fingers, said, "And?"

Panting even harder, Mary slowly propped herself back into position. She shifted her legs apart to better her balance and pushed back her hips to offer herself to him for more. "This one is laggardly and dawdled too long in the shower when she should have hurried. This one apologizes for keeping the master waiting."

There was another hiss, and there was no keeping back her shout as the whippy length burrowed into the tender seam between her bottom and thighs. She shrieked, the lash sinking in with such vehemence that it felt as though it were flaying her skin away. She collapsed on bench, her fingers clawing at the wood as she fought to keep her hips up and her bottom offered back for him to whip.

Her flesh burned. Her whole bottom felt as though it were on fire before he stopped at—eight again? Or was it more? She'd lost count.

Mary blinked back tears. Stifling a groan, she forced herself to stand once more. Forcing her legs farther apart, she fixed her eyes on a spot of the floor and gripped the bench tightly.

"And?" Boyden drawled.

And? Mary felt a flicker of panic. She already hurt so much; she had to swallow hard to bite back her pleas for mercy. What else had she done? As much as she didn't want to bear another cut from that switch, she knew it would be much, much worse if she couldn't recount her wrongdoing. He would assume she hadn't been paying attention. Or worse, that she was attempting deception.

"Blonde," he warned, and measured the narrow switch menacingly across the lower swell of her bottom. She could already feel a number of welts there already, all pulsing and burning, the skin feeling swollen and stiff.

"Th-this o-one," she panted and shifted her legs a little further apart, struggling to brace herself to take what he would no doubt give her without moving. "This—" As her weight hit her damaged toes, a jolt of pain shot back through her foot. She gasped, then stammered out, "This one's carelessness damaged the Master's Product."

The switch lashed a rain of absolute agony all across her buttocks. From the clenching base to the juddering summits, it flicked and slapped every inch until the end of it began to fray and bits of the length broke away.

Mary howled, dancing on her tip toes, shrieking into the bench for all she was worth. All the years of her marriage had not prepared her to take the fury of a Judgment master.

Compared to Boyden, Richard had been naught but a novice. And as the experienced master took her right to the brink of breaking control, as her hands began to claw the wood, barely able to keep from snapping back, palms up to protect her blazing hinds from the fiery wrath of the switch, an errant thought dashed through her mind. For an instant, two years of neglect didn't seem quite so bad.

The damn of Mary's determination broke, and she fell sobbing to her knees. The edge of the bench jabbed into her hips as she heaved herself up over it. Her feet kicked out, her toes scraped the floor behind her.

"I don't mean it!" she shouted to the floor as the fire of the switch lashed down the backs of her legs. She threw back her head, screaming at the top of her lungs, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Ooowww!"

The switch broke, but Mary still scrambled against the tiles, fighting herself to hold still while her body struggled to get away from the pain. The respite brought a wave of heat flaring all over her buttocks and her thighs. For a long time, her sobs mingled with his ragged pants of exertion in the otherwise quiet of the shower room.

"Kneel," he ordered.

Mary more fell off the bench. Gasping for breath, not bothering to wipe the tears from her flushed cheeks, she rolled onto her knees and crawled to his feet. She pressed her forehead to her hands upon the tile floor.

With uncharacteristic gentleness, Boyden asked, "What didn't you mean?"

Sniffing, her breathing ragged and uneven, Mary felt her face flush as hot as the fire emanating from the pulsing welts along her flanks. "The time before here," she faltered and her voice softened miserably as she admitted, "it wasn't better than this. I'm sorry I thought it. I didn't mean to."

"No?" He studied her quietly. "How many switches will it take, do you think, before you do mean it?"

Mary stared at the floor in front of her nose as he walked away from her. Then a soft cloth fell over her neck and back.

"Put that on. You'd be a Primary if you were a Lesser. But since you're not even Product, who knows what we'll end up calling you."

Mary sat up slowly, looking down at the tunic that fell to the floor beside her hands. It was green. The color of split pea soup, sleeveless and ugly.

"You've got two seconds to get dressed," Boyden told her. "Tane wants to see you."

* * * *

The floor of Tane's personal quarters was covered by a pale, cream-colored carpet. It was soft beneath her knees. Almost comforting, in a way. As she knelt before him, her eyes down, her hands clasped nervously behind her back, Mary couldn't help but wonder if maybe all the other barracks, except hers of course, had floor coverings as nice as this.

Tane's black shoes made another pass around her, then he reached down and lifted the skirt of her tunic, flicking it up to the small of her back. "Nice," he said.

"She marks very well," Boyden replied. "She hardly makes a peep of trouble; I'm not getting near enough exercise. It'll be good to get the new batch in. For a while there, I was afraid I might grow too soft to handle them."

Mary hissed a quick breath and winced as Tane cupped her right buttock, squeezing the line of weals, his fingers seeming to find all the tenderest areas to pinch.

He squatted down beside her, following the ladder line of welts from her bottom to her thighs. "Well, Blonde, you're through the first part. Pay attention, because I'm going to give you a very rare opportunity. Look at me." He waited until she'd raised her head and, as her eyes found his, almost gently asked, "Would you like to go home?"

"N-no," she hastily ducked her head. "No, Master."

He didn't move. "Do you think I'll make this offer again?" His eyebrows rose as he shook his head once. "I won't. This has been naught but a gentle introduction for you. If you stay, your training will begin in earnest and all these little mistakes you've been allowed to coast by with, you'll now find catch up to you very quickly."

His words made Mary shiver, but she still shook her head. Staring at the carpet, she whispered, "I want to stay."

Behind her, Boyden chuckled. She felt his hand lightly touch her back as he lowered himself to her level. He kissed the nape of her neck and his hot breath whispered against her ear, "Bye bye, Blonde."

She felt a trickle of panic when he walked out of the room without her. Though she'd known it wasn't going to last

forever, it still felt for a moment as though she'd been cut loose from a firm anchor.

"Rise," Tane told her.

Mary unclasped her hands and laid them on the floor. She fidgeted with the pale carpet fibers before pushing herself up. Having only had to assume the position once before, she was hesitant as she spread her knees apart. She could feel the strain pulling along the inner slope of her thighs, but remembering the reprimanding snap Tane had laid into China and Mahogany with that wicked Judgment strap, Mary worked to get her knees further apart.

Tane caught her chin in his fingers. "Head straight. Eyes to the floor." A soft caress of his fingers over her hair was her reward for obeying.

Her breath hitched in her throat as his hand smoothed down the front of her tunic to cup her left breast. He squeezed and she felt a warmth flare within the pit of her belly. It trickled down, as his wandering hand did, to caress her loins. He cupped her there as well, and Mary almost closed her eyes.

"Your name is Mercy," Tane rumbled, as intimate as any lover. "Know that's as close to the real thing as you'll receive from us here."

He gave her two gentle spansks that nevertheless made her entire body jump. Darkly, ever so slightly, Tane smiled at her, then stood up and leisurely walked away. "You haven't met Master Shipe yet, have you?"

Hearing the door, Mercy turned her head as a burly, scowling dark-haired man propelled himself into the room on

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one crutch. Though older than Tane by a good ten years, his upper body was a mass of muscle and sinew. His arms as well as his right leg were thick from constant exercise and looked to her as solid as stone. His left, however, was a stump just above where the knee should have been, as burly as its twin, but ending in a round knob that the adjusted hem of his dark pants hugged. The grey-streaked growth of hair upon his jaw was more the result of avoiding a razor for roughly half a week than any conscious desire to grow a beard. And when he set his hard eyes on Mercy, they narrowed sharply and his frown deepened the lines in his chiseled face.

She had the most insane urge to jerk her legs shut.

"This her?" he growled.

"Mm." Seating himself at his desk, Tane didn't so much as glance at her. "Give her six of the best for breaking position."

Someone in better control might have snapped automatically back into position, head straight, eyes to the floor. But instead Mercy found her eyes lowering, not to the floor, but to Master Shipe's stump of a left leg.

He noticed, and his eyes narrowed even more. "Well," he barked. "What the hell are you sitting there for? Get your skinny ass behind me and try not to get lost."

She scrambled to her feet and hurried after him, barely catching the door before it slammed shut behind him. She glanced back at Tane once, but like a king upon his throne, the Mountain Lord sat at his desk and hoarded his attention for vastly more important things. She had already been dismissed.

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Mercy had to run to catch up with Shipe, who swung himself down the hall faster than most people walked, leading her through a maze of staircases and corridors. The walls were all stark stone and unadorned; each new corner came to resemble one which they'd previously turned.

"Mercy," the one-legged master uttered under his breath. "He's developing a sense of humor in his old age."

As he took her deeper into the bowels of the mountain, the sounds of distant feminine voices became more obvious. They were at ease, at play, conversing and not crying out in pain as Mercy had grown accustomed to hearing in Boyden's empty barracks.

At the end of a long hall, Shipe turned a corner and opened a door. He swung out onto the top of a flight of metal steps that overlooked a mammoth stone corridor of sleeping barracks. His command: "Doors closed!" boomed out over the join of the rooms and every door in the stone hallway slammed shut before they were even halfway down the stairs. The voices hushed, dropping to little more than an occasional whisper. It made the echo of their passing seem obscenely loud to Mercy's ears.

"This is the Pit," Shipe told her. "You've got no reason to be here. Ever. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

They had almost reached the end of the hall at the end of the Pit when a sharp crack rang out behind them. Mercy jumped at the sound and spun around, but as a second crack and the shrill cry that followed it suggested, the discipline taking place was happening behind one of the closed doors.

Shipe took hold of her ear lobe. "Nothing that happens here is any concern of yours. I thought we were clear on that."

Mercy muffled a cry of her own as he pinched the tender lobe, dragging her along behind him.

"Had you any sense, you'd be more concerned right now with what I'm going to do to you." He swung himself down the hall on his crutch, pulling her with him and she still had to hurry to keep pace, even when they came to another set of stairs, this one leading up.

He let go of her sore ear to grab hold of the banister on each side. Hooking his crutch over one brawny shoulder, he scaled up the steps on his arms as easily as though he were walking. The ripple of his biceps and the rolls of muscles playing down the plain of his hard back made her catch her breath. He was solid everywhere.

Shipe stopped at the top of the stairs and once more standing with the aid of his crutch, turned to look back at her slower progress behind him. Still scowling, he held out his hand.

Mercy made a face, but obediently came closer and turned her ear to his hand. He took hold of her lobe again, once more twisting it sharply as he pulled her along behind him. They passed three doors before he stopped.

"Welcome to your new barrack," he said almost bitterly. He opened the door and pushed her inside.

It was obviously Shipe's personal quarters. There was a warm fire in the fireplace, a brown bear skin on the floor, and the most ancient assortment of framed maps hanging around

the room. He had a neatly made sleigh-style bed, dark walnut-wood bookcases that lined every free inch of wall space, and the occasional dead thing thrown in for decoration: a ram's head, an elk's, two stuffed pheasants and a monster of a fish mounted on a plaque above the oak mantle.

"Get in," he told her flatly. "This is where you'll stay when you're not working."

The door swung shut behind them and he swung across the room, past the fireplace and the bathroom, to a narrow door in the far wall.

"This is where you'll sleep," he said as he flung open the door.

The size of a spacious walk-in closet, it still made for a very small room. There was no window and the light from the ceiling could have in no way been mistaken for anything other than artificial fluorescence. Especially when it flickered, as it was doing now. The only article of furniture was the bed itself, a thin twin mattress that lay on the floor. No worse really than the room Richard had given Mahogany and China.

"Well," he said when she hesitated at the edge of the door. "You want an engraved invitation?"

Fidgeting with the front of her pea green tunic, Mercy squeezed between him and the threshold and crept into the closet. She looked down at her bed on the floor. There was one pillow and a set of pressed sheets and a blanket folded neatly on the foot of the mattress.

"You've got six cuts coming to you," Shipe said. "You'll get them first thing after supper. Plus an extra two for your

misplaced curiosity in the Pit. Depending on how irritated I am with you by then, I may or may not round the count to twelve. Questions, comments, complaints?"

She blinked back at him and gave a small shake of her head. "No, sir."

He grunted, then started to close the door. He almost had it latched before abruptly he swung it open again to glare at her again. "Lights out is at ten. I hear so much as a peep from in here and I'll take a layer of skin off your backside. Got it?"

Mercy attempted a small nod. "Y-yes, sir."

"You claustrophobic?" he asked.

"No, sir."

He turned his head, looking around him, then reached up to pluck a book from a nearby shelf. Tossing it in the closet onto the foot of her bed, he said, "Here. Try not to be too much of a pain in the ass until supper."

Then he shut the door.

Mercy sat down on the middle of her mattress on the floor and folded her hands in her lap. Her bare legs stretched out before her, she glanced around at the bare walls, then at the book on the folded up blanket. She reached sideways to pick it up. It was written in German. A brief flip through the pages revealed no illustrations.

She bit her bottom lip, looked at the door, and wondered how long it was until supper. By this time, some of the welts Boyden had given her had disappeared. Others, the thick plum-colored lines where he's struck her harder and more than once, still stung as she rolled onto her hip and crawled

to the end of the mattress. Very hesitantly, she knocked at the bottom of the door.

There was an explosion of curses from the other side. A second or two later, the door swung open. Shipe glared at her.

Very meekly, Mercy held up the book. "I-I can't read this. Do you have anything in English?"

His eyes narrowed and he growled. Then he took a quick glance at the bookshelves around the door of her closet. He swung a few steps away, then returned with a thick volume, which he dropped on the mattress next to her. The English title read, *'Basic German'*. Shipe shut the door again.

Mercy chewed at her bottom lip for several long minutes. Even more hesitantly than before, she again rapped two knuckles on the bottom of the door, and cringed when she heard the second volley of curses, longer and louder than before.

Shipe yanked the door open and, leaning one broad hand against the threshold, leaned in at her. "What?" he growled.

Mercy rubbed her hands together. "May I please use the bathroom?"

He studied her with hard eyes. "Yeah," he seethed, exhaling the word as though it were a sigh of sheer annoyance. "I can see right now you're going to get the full twelve."

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Chapter Four

Shipe kicked open the dining room doors and swung into the hall, his customary gait, that of an avenging fury. Mercy's bare feet softly slapped the floor as she hurried along behind him, sometimes walking, sometimes jogging just to keep up. His stamina was amazing. As they walked down the center aisle between the rows of tables, benches, and the Lessers standing at silent attention while they awaited the command to sit, Mercy couldn't help but admire the bunching, flexing muscles playing along his shoulders, arms and back. He was a powerful man, despite his partial limb. But also humorless and very quick to temper.

It was also plain to see that the other women were afraid of him. Now and then, she thought she caught a sly sideways glance from a Lesser here or there, but not one of them—not one—turned her head to look at them directly.

Far to the front of the room was the dais upon which the masters sat to eat their meals. The food at the high table was of considerably better quality than that served to the Lessers, and made Mercy's poor fare all the more unpalatable. And worse, she was segregated from the rest as though she were diseased. Being alone had been easier to ignore in Boyden's barracks, when she hadn't seen the others, but in public it was much harder. When Shipe led her around the dais to the small table, set up in the corner with only a single place setting, she could feel the eyes of the Lessers on her back. She felt very conspicuous.

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"You've been whipped once today," he said. "And you've got another one coming later tonight, so don't think you're entitled to the privilege of sitting down during supper."

Mercy wasn't about to complain. She was still very, very tender along the tops of her thighs, and the wooden stool had no cushion. Just the thought of having to settle her weight upon its flat, unyielding surface stirred up echoes of pain.

They were the last to arrive in the dining hall. As Shipe hopped up onto the dais to take his seat, Tane's command, "Be seated," echoed throughout the cavernous room.

Very little in the way of conversation took place, and what talking did occur was mostly done in respectful whispers.

"Face the wall!" Shipe barked at her, the one time she dared to glance behind her at the others.

And Deaton's harshly called out, "A Demerit to Comfort for looking at the Drone," must have kept the others from making the same mistake, because that particular sentence was only passed out once.

Drone? Was that what they'd chosen to call her? It was a name as unappealing as her tunic. As unappealing as her food: plain mashed potatoes, boiled chicken ground into a paste-like substance, and a leafy green salad without dressing. But having already received from Boyden one lesson on the sin of wastefulness, she ate all of it anyway.

The task of cleaning one's plate while standing up was significantly more difficult than Mercy would otherwise have thought. She ate slowly, although more to keep from spilling food sloppily about her plate, as she negotiated the fork to and from her mouth, than from any desire to savor the

unappetizing fare. Of course, knowing that she faced another beating as soon as she was done gave her plenty of motivation to chew her food as thoroughly as possible.

Mercy took so long that she was just consuming the final bite of potato when a loud bell rang the completion of the dinner hour. Knowing better than to turn around, she listened as the Lessers noisily stood up. She heard them file from the dining hall, some laughing and talking, until the shuffling of their many feet was muffled by the closing of the doors and the only sound to remain was the quiet conversation of the masters on the dais. Then came the heavy tromp as Shipe hopped down the dais' steps.

"Nice try," he told her. "You can delay all you want, but it's not going to change the fact that you've still got a whipping coming."

He caught her by the lobe of her ear and Mercy came right up onto her tiptoes, wincing expressively as he dragged her from her corner table.

"So," Tane asked, coming off the dais himself. "How do you like having your own Lesser to command?"

"I don't!" Shipe snapped, and pushed Mercy ahead of him. "Back to your room!" He let go of her ear and his broad hand swung down to sharply smack her bottom. The blow was hard enough to cause her hips to jerk and sent her skipping forward several steps. "Don't drag your damn feet, girl. Move!"

Behind her, well accustomed to Shipe's mood, the other masters only laughed as he swung past Tane, grumbling under his breath.

It was only sheer reflex that caused her, when she reached the exit ahead of him, to stop just across the threshold and hold the door for him. It was not a gesture he appreciated, however, and the look on his face went from cross to seething in the space of a heartbeat.

"Did I ask you to do that?" he growled. "You think I need you to hold the damn door for me?" His voice lowered and his expression grew increasingly blacker. "I don't need you to do a goddamn thing for me! You get your skinny ass back to the room!"

She let go of the door, turning to flee even as it swung shut on him. Behind her, she heard the reverberating crash as he kicked it open and bellowed after her, "You do what you're told when I goddamn well tell you to!"

Lessers parted out of her way as she ran. She even heard some snickering as she passed them. Her face burned, and she ran faster.

By the time she reached his room, her hands were shaking and her heart hammered at her chest as though it would break straight through her ribcage. She was so rattled, she forgot even to turn on the closet light. Her room was as dark as a tomb when she slammed the door behind her.

A dry sob choked from her throat as she crawled onto her bed. Grabbing her pillow, she hugged it to her chest and that's where she stayed, curled against the wall in the pitch blackness until she heard an outside door open and shut, and the unmistakable sound of Shipe crossed the floor.

The closet door swung open. She tensed, clutching the pillow so tightly that her knuckles whitened. Even her toes

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curled. But he didn't yell at her again. After a moment, the light flicked on and he leaned in the doorway to look at her.

Mercy cringed, waiting, but he still didn't yell. Instead, coldly, calmly, he said, "Get out here."

Mercy couldn't remember a time when she had ever feared the wrath of a man more. Not her father when she'd been young. Not Richard in his foulest mood. Not even Boyden when, in her second week at Judgment, for the sin of talking back, he'd taken her to the Demerit Hall and given her two vicious swipes of the heaviest cane he could find.

Struggling for obedience, she uncurled herself from around the pillow. Her legs refused to support her weight. They felt like rubber under her as she crept out of the closet to stand quaking before him.

"I may not have two legs," he told her. "But I am not a cripple, and you'll not treat me that way again."

Anger still trembled in his voice, but at least he wasn't yelling at her. Mercy jerked her head into a shaky nod. She bit her bottom lip, but it was too late. She could no more hide its betraying wobble than she could hide the tears that stung her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean to offend you—"

"You offend a friend," Shipe snapped. "I'm not that to you. Get on your knees."

It hurt her shins, she hit the floor so hard and so fast. The tears poured down her cheeks as she clasped her hands behind her back and bent to press her forehead to the cool stone beside his boot.

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"Less than a day out of Boyden's care, and you already need to be reminded of your proper place."

She clasped and unclasped her fingers, sniffing loudly and choking back her tears. But it wasn't the inevitable punishment she feared, that ominous black threat which she could feel growing and swelling all around her. Instead, she wept out, "Please don't send me away. I'll do better, I will! I promise!"

Shipe swung away from her and crossed the room, as though heading for the door. Certain that she was about to be cast out, Mercy covered her head with her arms and began to cry.

"Take off your clothes," Shipe ordered.

She wouldn't even be allowed to keep her tunic.

Mercy was so ashamed, she didn't bother to get up off the floor. She striped the ugly fabric from her body, lifting her forehead off the floor only far enough to slip the uniform over her head. Leaving it in a crumpled heap, knowing she didn't deserve even to touch it, much less to wear it, she took her hands away.

He passed her again and she heard him lay something heavy on the table. "You think me so incompetent that I can't train you?"

Mercy covered her face, crying harder as she shook her head.

"You answer when I talk to you!"

"No, master!" she cried out.

"That's what you said!" he barked. "I am so incompetent as a master that I must send you away because I can't train you. I am ineffective! I am weak, in your opinion!"

She shook her head no.

"Now I'm a liar?!"

She shook her head even harder. "No, master, I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"Get up."

She scrambled to her feet and stood shaking before him, her face flushed and wet with tears, her nose red and running.

"Hands behind your head."

She placed them there immediately and her chest heaved as she gasped to control her sobs.

Shipe stood at the table, a suitcase-sized box before him. He watched her with his angry eyes, considering her a moment before opening it. Quietly, he lay the lid upon the table. Inside was an assortment of paddles and straps. "Come here."

She bowed her head, her knees all but knocking together as she crept to his side.

He selected a small hand paddle. Only ten inches in length, it had a wide, round head that was large enough to cover half her bottom with a single smack. A light oak color in shade and possibly a half an inch thick, Mercy caught her breath when she saw it.

Taking hold of a dining chair, he pulled it back from the table and turned it around to give himself plenty of room to swing. He sat down, sliding his crutch on the floor underneath

the seat. With one hand braced upon his thigh and the other holding that paddle, he gave her his coldest look.

"Well," he said, then pointed to a spot on the floor beside him. "Get over here."

Oh, how those few small steps seemed like a mile. Her knuckles went white as she clutched her hands behind her head. Her knees trembled; her breaths were ragged pant. Her stomach, as she edge into place at the right of him, tightened so hard for an instant she was afraid she might vomit.

His gaze never leaving her own, he reached up to take hold of her left wrist. He had no trouble whatsoever pulling her down across his thigh. His left one. His other leg came down across the backs of both of hers, effortlessly pinning her over the stump. The arm he had, he kept hold of.

"Give me your other hand," he ordered, and Mercy quickly offered him her other wrist. He held them both between the fingers of his left hand and pinned against the small of her back. It hurt to be held like that, the press of her wrist bones one against the other making her wince. But that pain was quickly made secondary to the one that exploded through her bottom at the very first crack of the paddle.

Master Shipe was not a scolder. There was no lecture, no reprimand. He simply spanked her, the paddle flattening first one buttock and then the other, the blows falling rapidly and hard, the sound in the close room deafening her even as the hurt overwhelmed.

She howled into his leg, first throwing back her head, then instantly tucking her chin to her chest as she curled into his lap. Her whole body stiffened. Her feet snapped back as far as

Judgment II: Mercy
by Denise Hall

his blocking leg would allow. She fought so hard not to struggle against his hold—she wanted so much to submit in a way that might please, or at the very least appease, him—but the pain wouldn't let her. Despite all of her best efforts, before the first twenty strokes had fallen, Mercy was screaming at the top of her lungs and writhing over his thigh without the slightest bit of control.

Judgment sang with the sounds of her suffering. The halls echoed the crack of the paddle. The bearskin rug drank up her tears.

Unable to help it, Mercy bucked frantically, her crimson bottom humping upon his leg, fighting to twist in any way it could to avoid the next punishing blow. The summits were already turning blister-white and a hint of deep burgundy had suffused along the outer edges of her plump nether cheeks and beneath the chubby base above her tightly clenched thighs.

"Thaaaanggk yeeeeooooowww!" she screamed until her throat was raw, and then she just cried.

Her strength to fight was literally paddled out of her, leaving her bottom swollen, blistered, and raw, and Mercy too exhausted to move. Not even when Shipe lay the paddle on the table and began the same punishing rhythm with the flat of his broad hand, spanking down the backs of her thighs. He spanked all the way to her knees and, as tired as she was, she somehow found the strength for a few feeble kicks as that alabaster skin was slapped to a hot cherry red.

The fire ignited by the paddle swallowed the hurt of his hand. It blazed down the backs of her legs, consuming her

Judgment II: Mercy
by Denise Hall

skin until all she felt was only the muted impacts of each hard slap. Her skin shone with sweat. Her voice left her entirely. She couldn't even say for sure just when the spanking stopped, or when Shipe sat back in the chair, resting his hand upon the surface of one aching thigh to wait.

"What do you say?" Master Shipe asked, his tone the calmest she had yet heard.

It was a long time before she could catch her breath. "Thank you," she rasped, her voice almost gone.

Her eyes closed. She lay panting and aching, her body felt so on fire and yet sated at the same time, both pleasantly and painfully wrung out. Only belatedly did she realize he might have been expecting her to apologize for her behavior, rather than thank him for his correction.

He said nothing, however. His hand merely soothed all the places he had so savagely punished. It felt as warm upon her skin as the heat flaring beneath his palm.

He removed his leg from the backs of hers. "Up," he said. She couldn't. She just couldn't. Her legs wouldn't support the attempt, and she sank to her knees instead. Groaning, she could only cup her sizzling backside in the cradle of her gentle hands.

There was the lightest touch against her hair, and when she looked up, Mercy caught her breath. For the first time since she'd met him, Shipe didn't seem quite so angry. The demon within him had been assuaged. He looked almost ... pleased with her. It had been a long time since she had last pleased anyone.

Judgment II: Mercy
by Denise Hall

Letting go of her hair, he leaned back in his chair. "Go to bed. You'll get your twelve with the cane tomorrow."

Her every muscle protested having to get up. Walking was sheer agony, but Mercy felt the pain almost as though it were someone else's. He needed her. He needed her the same way Richard had, to exorcize the fury inside. For the first time in a long time, she—not China, not Mahogany—was actually useful to somebody. She almost burst into tears all over again.

"Don't forget your tunic," he told her. "I'm not your damn maid. I'm not picking up after you."

Mercy picked up her uniform. She hugged the coarse, pea-green fabric to her chest as she limped back to her tiny closet and her bed on the floor. He shut the light out and closed the door immediately behind her. She had to feel her way along the edge of her bed with her toes and fit the sheets to the mattress in the dark.

Lying down was impossible in any position but flat on her stomach. She couldn't even bare the slight weight of the blanket upon her incredibly raw backside. But Mercy went to sleep for the first time in two years feeling needed. Wanted.

Loved.

* * * *

One moment it was dark, and in the next the light was on, the door flew open and Master Shipe snapped out, "Get your skinny ass out of bed!"

Mercy jolted into wakefulness. Judgment days started at six every morning, though her burning eyes told her it had to be much earlier. She rolled onto her side, sliding the inch or

so off the narrow mattress and onto the floor. The first shock was the cold of the stones against her flesh, which made her gasp out loud. The second was the sharp stab of pain the instant her horribly bruised bottom touched the cool, grey rock. The cry was past her lips before she could bite it back and she scrambled to get back on her stomach.

"Oh!" She reached back with gentle hands to touch and soothe her battered flanks. That one slight brush against the floor reignited the full burn and ache from the night before. Her bottom throbbed, and beneath her hands, her flesh felt very strange. Stiff, almost as hard as wood.

"If I have to drag you out of bed," Shipe called from beyond the door, "you'll be reacquainted with the paddle before breakfast."

She pushed herself up on her knees, muffling the groans that were wrung from her at each aching movement by gasping them into her bedding. She crawled into her tunic, quickly making her bed as was proper, and shuffled to the door.

"Stiff?" he asked, when she limped out of the closet. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, pulling on his boot. He'd donned pants, but hadn't fastened them and his shirt was still lying on the mattress next to him. A smattering of dark hair decorated his hard chest, trickling down his abdomen in a black line that disappeared into the 'v' of his open fly.

From his glaring expression to the terseness in his tone, he was every bit the angry man that Tane had introduced her to the day before. Mercy lowered her eyes respectfully. "Yes, sir."

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by Denise Hall

"Exercise is good for that." He stood up without his crutch to fasten his pants. "Give me fifty jerks and twenty push-ups. You can do them balanced on your knees if you have to. But by the end of the month, I want at least half that count done off your toes the proper way."

Ignoring his shirt, he went into the bathroom. "And you can take your tunic off. You don't get dressed in the mornings until I say you can."

Mercy couldn't remember the last time she'd done jumping jacks. High school, maybe, more than a decade ago. But she obligingly took her tunic off and lay it over the back of a chair by the table. As her bottom clenched and her thighs stretched into the first half of the jump, she squeezed her eyes shut and grit her teeth. Her wounded buttocks flared with heat as her battered muscles fell into the rhythm of the exercise.

"I don't hear counting," he called from the bathroom. "Start over."

"One," she mewed, and her hands clapped out the count as she obediently jumped all fifty times. She felt silly doing it. Her breasts bounced and flopped uncomfortably, and it was a little embarrassing—about half way through—to feel trickles of sweat winding down her back and hear the moist slapping as her thighs came together.

Master Shipe came to stand at the open bathroom door around forty, wiping his newly shaven face on a hunter-green towel. In a moment of uncharacteristic kindness, as she reached the end of her count, he asked, "How are you feeling now?"

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by Denise Hall

Her bottom still hurt, but strangely enough some of the stiffness had retreated from her limbs. "Better," she admitted, half expecting him to order her into another count of fifty.

"Good." He turned his back. "Drop your skinny ass to the ground and start doing push-ups." He disappeared beyond the doorway again, and Mercy slowly lowered herself to the floor.

"One." She began in the up position, starting her count on her toes rather than her knees. Her arms shook as she pushed herself back up, a testament to how out-of-shape she really was. "Tw-wo."

At three she had to switch to her knees. It was easier that way, but not by much. She'd never been good at push-ups. By fifteen, she was red-faced and panting quite hard. He came back out of the bathroom and leaned in the doorway to watch her do the last five.

"Twenty," she groaned out and collapsed on the floor.

She lay there panting for almost a minute before he drawled, "You've rested enough. Get up."

He remained in the bathroom to brush his teeth while she made her morning use of the toilet.

"Get in the tub," he said, when she flushed, and he bent his head over the sink to rinse his mouth.

She reached a hand back, idly brushing her fingers over the lower swell of her bottom, the sorest place on her left buttock. It felt as though the skin had broken there. She wished she had a mirror so she could see for sure. She wouldn't have minded seeing the bruises, the blues and purples marking her skin like darkly colored jewels.

Judgment II: Mercy
by Denise Hall

"Hands on your knees," Shipe said and he walked up to the edge of the tub to take down the removable shower head. "I want you squatting down, heels together, in the middle so I can get at you."

"I don't mind washing myself," she said as he turned the water on.

"Did I tell you you could speak?" he asked, glaring at her.

"No, sir." Mercy put her hands on her knees and eased herself into a squat. Keeping her balance was difficult, and she wobbled unsteadily as he adjusted the water temperature before setting his crutch aside and sitting down at the edge of the tub.

"Keep your head up," he said, then doused her under the warm spray. "Too hot?"

"No, sir."

He soaked her hair first, spraying her down with no more care really than a man might bath his pet. He didn't spray her face deliberately, although she closed her eyes to keep the occasional splatter out of them. When she was thoroughly wet, he half-turned around to shut off the water. He shampooed her hair twice, his hands feeling almost gentle as he worked the suds through the entire length. He used conditioner to remove the tangles and a finishing rinse, which he massaged into her scalp.

Despite herself, she almost lost her balance she relaxed so under his touch. She jerked and her eyes flew open when he caught her elbow.

"Don't do that again," he warned.

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by Denise Hall

"No, sir," she said, and did her best to keep her balance while he turned the water on again.

"Tip your head back."

She wobbled on the pads of her toes as he stroked his hand over her head, washing both the conditioner and snarls out of her hair, yet careful to keep the water out of her eyes. He shut the water off again, this time to soap a washcloth. He started with her face and ears, and worked his way down her body with an almost impersonal hand. Was it her imagination, or did he perhaps linger overlong upon her breasts? There was no expression on his face, which made it hard to tell.

He soaped her torso to her waist, then rinsed her again. "Hands on your head. Stand up and spread your legs apart."

Mercy's legs protested being made to hold that uncomfortable position as she slowly heaved herself upright. She winced a little as she flexed her knees, then shifted her legs apart and laced her fingers on top of her head.

Her nipples tightened into peaks when he touched his bare hand to the flat of her belly. He didn't even seem to notice, but instead soaped her body with the washcloth from her waist to her toes. He shaved her legs, and the copse of blonde stubble that had begun to grow upon her mons he again made bare.

"Turn around."

Mercy put her back to him, closing her eyes again as the warm water washed over her skin, carrying the soap and shavings away.

His hand touched the small of her back. "Bend over."

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The command quivered in her belly, chasing all remnants of ease out of her. She bent slowly, dread crawling along the skin of her bottom. Had she done something? Was he going to punish her again; surely not so soon! She lay her hands flat on the wall as she pushed her hips back toward him, holding her breath, completely vulnerable to whatever whim he decided to appease.

Her sex clenched just a bare instant before his washcloth-covered hand pressed up against it. Mercy lay her cheek to the shower's tile wall and bit her bottom lip.

"Spread your bottom cheeks."

She stopped breathing all over again and her eyes flew open. She hadn't heard that right. She squeaked, "Sir?"

"Perhaps a dose of the strap will improve your hearing."

Leaning her forehead against the wall, Mercy reached back. She gingerly cupped her swollen buttocks and, wincing and mewling, pried them gently apart. He soaped her and she froze when she felt the scrape of the razor moving carefully around her labia, baring her sex all the way back to her anus. A flow of warm water tickled over her bottom, the heat of it stinging the battered flesh as he rinsed her clean.

"Turn around. Hands on your head."

Mercy's legs trembled, but she turned to faced him. When he adjusted the head of the shower to change the water from a fine spray to a gentle, massaging pulse, her lips parted and she licked them nervously. Her eyes found his as his fingers combed through her labia, parting them. He found the sensitive nub hidden within and, circling it with the tips of two fingers, spread the folds to reveal it.

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by Denise Hall

Her stomach tightened as the pulsing water struck her belly before he moved the head downward. Her legs trembled; she closed her eyes.

"Look at me," he said, and her eyes flew open again. They locked on him almost desperately, then the water touched her and the sudden intensity of pleasure was very nearly beyond her bearing. Every muscle in her clenched, including her bottom and the shock of pain that caused made her cry out. She grabbed fistfuls of her own hair, yanking as she fought to hold herself together.

"Aah!" she shouted, and her whole body shook. "Oh no! No!"

He watched without pity, holding the water in place, letting the steady pulse batter her clit until her hips began to thrust and Mercy threw back her head and screamed her need, guttural and raw, to the ceiling.

He took her right to the brink of coming, before he pulled the shower head away. Every nerve inside her was aching and alive. Her body sang, thrumming as though it could still feel the pulse of the water beating between her legs. She sagged against the cold tiles, almost crying the pleasure humming inside her was still so intense.

"Look at me," he told her again.

She forced her eyes open, fixing on him, desperately needing an anchor to keep from falling apart. He adjusted the head on the shower again. Now the water was a single thick, solid stream, a jettison with a force that was ruthlessly hard.

Her whole body convulsed when he touched it to her belly. He punished her breasts, circling each nipple with the brutal

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spray, drawing from her cry after cry, and more than once he admonished her, "Hold still."

"Stand up straight," he said. She hadn't realized she'd wilted against the shower wall, shoulders hunching in a vain effort to protect her naked breasts.

The spray hit her belly again.

"No!" she begged, shaking her head wildly and grabbing her hair again to keep from slapping his hand away as he again caressed between her thighs, parting the narrow folds of her sex.

He kept the spray of the water hard, and she sucked a pain-filled breath when it moved down into position. The hard massage caressed down the inner slope of one thigh, then up the inside of her other. While Mercy pulled at her hair, gasping and sucking at the air, struggling to brace herself for what she knew was coming, he circled her vulva. Each time he came close to her throbbing clit, her hips bucked in response and she cried out anew.

He moved the shower head back between her thighs, letting the pulse beat up along the crease of her buttocks, and with every bruise the spray struck, it felt as though he were spanking her all over again. When it passed over her anus, she let go of her hair and grabbed onto her thighs. They almost snapped shut anyway.

"Haoow!" she wailed, but he didn't linger there. The punishing blow of the water moved back around to her front. "Oh God," she whimpered, watching his hand through half-closed eyes. She grabbed onto the smooth tile wall, just

needing something—anything at this point—to hold onto. "Oh please oh please oh please...!"

It struck her clit full on and her body sang.

She screamed. She knew she did, not because she wanted to or because she heard her own voice, but because when her knees gave out and she collapsed into the water pooled in the bottom of the tub, her already scratchy throat felt as though it had been scrubbed raw with sandpaper.

Mercy couldn't breathe. Her hips convulsed wildly, even though the spray now beat its fury down upon her battered buttocks, pummeling the bruises without mercy. She grabbed between her legs with both hands, and like a dying flower, wilted into the bottom of the tub.

Pooled around her, the water caught at the wet strands of her hair, pulling them as it raced towards the drain. For the longest time, all she could hear was the pounding of her heart in her ears. The warm liquid heat that surrounded her mingled with the warm liquid heat within; she couldn't tell anymore what she felt upon her fingers—rivulets of water from the shower as it rolled down between her buttocks and spilled across her hands, or the liquid of her arousal, priming her cunt to welcome Shipe into her.

Very briefly, his hand settled on her back between her shoulder blades. Then he shut the water off for the last time. "We'll do this again tomorrow. Dry yourself and get dressed. I want to be in the dining hall having breakfast in twenty minutes." He pulled himself up and, leaning on his crutch, left the bathroom.

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Chapter Five

"The majority of your days will be spent here," Shipe said as he led her into the common library.

The room was positively huge. There were two fireplaces in one wall, both so large that a pair of grown men could have walked into them upright and, standing side-by-side, stretched their arms far apart and still not have touched the opposing walls or each other. Sofas and chairs made that area a cozy place for sitting and chatting, while in the center of the room, a study area had been erected with six rows of tables and benches and extra lamps for reading.

Literally dozens upon dozens of bookcases stretched from floor to ceiling in neat rows throughout the room as well as along the walls. There wasn't an empty shelf anywhere that Mercy could see. The quantity of books had to number in the tens of thousands.

"The Lessers are allowed in here three times a day: for a half hour each mid-morning and afternoon break, and for two hours after the dinner bell." Shipe motioned her to the huge, archaic catalog-card filing system and the small desk that had been set up for her beside it. "The instant a Lesser enters this room you are to drop what you're doing and I want you there," he swung an arm around to indicate the corner behind her desk, where a tall stool waited. "From the time the first one enters and until the last one leaves, you will face the wall. You don't so much as glance sideways and at no time

will it ever be acceptable for you to converse with the Product. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir." Mercy nodded her head for good measure. She could still feel the effects of the shower. Her body still hummed and throbbed, and when he gave her that stern look—his dark eyes narrowed, his frowning mouth firm with stern authority—it made her stomach quiver, her nipples peak, and her sex pulse with an arousal she wanted so badly for his touch to assuage.

"Your job will involve keeping the library neat and in order," Shipe told her. "Pick up any stray books and put them away. The rest," he waved one hand to indicate the whole of the library, "hasn't been catalogued since the initial purchase some twenty years ago. We've added a few since then, so you'll need to go shelf by shelf making a list of what we have. It'll likely take months and it's hardly exciting, but at the end of each day I'll check your progress to make sure there is some and to motivate you if there isn't."

Mercy turned in a slow circle, counting the bookcase. The job was immense. She would need a ladder just to reach the books on the top shelves, and she wasn't that fond of heights.

"Books are not allowed to leave this room," Shipe continued. "Which is probably the biggest reason for why I find them all over the damn mountain. If a volume catches your interest, you may keep it on your desk—so long as your desk is kept neat—and read it on your breaks while you're facing the corner."

Judgment II: Mercy
by Denise Hall

As Mercy gingerly lowered herself to sit on the wooden seat at her desk, she asked, "If I see someone leaving the library with a book, what should I do?"

"I assume you mean a Lesser," he said, his tone even but his eyes growing glacially cold, "since I know you would not dare presume to tell a guard or master what he may or may not do within these halls."

She flushed. "Y-yes, sir. I-I mean n-no ... I—"

"If you see a Lesser thieving a book, then you report it to the nearest guard," Shipe snapped. "And then you ready yourself for the thrashing of your life. I've already told you, if Lessers are here then you are ... where?"

"In the corner." She flushed even hotter. "Facing the wall."

"Do you need help remembering that?"

She shook her head. "No, sir."

His grunt held a note of disbelief. "An hour before lunch, you may excuse yourself to the Crater. Do your running and be ready to meet me in the dining hall for lunch at twelve o'clock noon. I expect you to be standing at your table by twelve sharp. At twelve and one second, if you're not there, I will hunt you down and blister your ass. Got it?"

She nodded hastily. "Yes, sir."

"Good." He swung around to leave, waving his arm back at the library. "Then get cataloging."

* * * *

"Who is she?" Mercy heard one girl whispering.

"I don't know. She must be important, though."

"Maybe a Personal," a third girl softly added.

"No, Personals wear white. Their tunics are as soft as silk. Look at that ugly green thing she's got on. It's longer than even a Primary's!"

Mercy sat on her stool, facing the corner and listened to the curious whispers. There was only ten minutes more to the mid-morning break, and she could hardly wait for the bell to ring and the Lessers to all just go away.

"Maybe she's a guard's Personal," yet another girl whispered.

Mercy didn't know how many Lessers were sitting at the table nearest her, but so far she had counted five distinct voices.

"Even the guard's Personals wear white. Besides, I've seen her with Master Shipe."

Six.

"Maybe she's a pet," the first girl whispered with a giggle. "She certainly followed Shipe around like a dog. Yesterday, he made her crawl through the halls on a leash."

Mercy felt her cheeks grow hot with anger. That wasn't true! Oh, she would have loved to turn around and tell them a thing or two. But she bit her lip and kept her hands tightly locked together in her lap. She glared at the wall so hard that it made her eyes hurt and her ears buzz.

"Shipe!" another scoffed. "That settles it! She's definitely not a Personal, then. He's too mean and hateful to want a woman."

Mercy almost fell off her stool she jerked around so hard. "He isn't either hateful!" she hissed at them, her eyes crackling angrily. "Shut up over things you know nothing

about!" Then she jerked back around and faced the wall again, seething in quiet.

There was a stunned silence behind her, then the table erupted in giggles.

"Psst!" one of the girls whispered at her back. "Hey, green!"

"What's your name?"

There was an abrupt shushing and the whispers suddenly ceased. A few seconds later, the slow tramp of booted feet on the stone floor approached Mercy's corner. Making his round, a switch-toting guard passed between her desk and her stool. He stopped just behind her and her heart flip-flopped as she heard the rustle of paper. Without a word, he began to write. There was a soft tear, then a white slip appeared before her face. It said:

RECOMMENDATION FOR DEMERIT

NAME:.... Mercy....

OFFENSE ... Talking to Lessers....

SIGNED.... Halloe....

APPROVED....

Mercy took the slip with trembling fingers. "Thank you, sir."

There was a note of amusement in the guard's voice as he replied, "Not a problem. Your barracks' master will need to sign it."

Then he went to the table. There was a chorus of groans and pleading as he began to pass slips out to each of them.

"But we weren't talking to her!"

"She talked to us!"

"Oh no, please! I've already got a demerit! Please, sir!"

"Now you'll have two," was all the guard said, and he calmly walked away.

That put an end to the whispers. In fact, as Mercy sat frozen on her stool, she heard the stiff scrape of chair legs on the stone floor and the group moved off to another table.

She shook all over, holding the slip in her fingers, staring at it until the words blurred. She barely even heard the bell ring, calling the Lessers back to their skill rooms. Though she didn't turn around until after they all were gone, she knew they stared at her as they left. She could feel their eyes burning vengeful holes into her back.

She slid slowly off the stool. She barely felt the battered muscles of her buttocks protesting at the slightest involuntary touch of the seat against her tender flesh. By the end of the day, she knew it would be a whole lot worse. She still had the twelve strokes she'd earned yesterday, a Demerit caning and—if Shipe signed the slip as she knew he would, she swallowed hard—the worst thrashing of her life to bear before Lights Out.

Mercy picked up the pad of paper and pencil from where she'd left it on her desk and went back to the shelf she'd been in the process of cataloging before the mid-morning break had sent her to the corner. Tears blurred her eyes making it difficult to read each title and the names of the authors. For the rest of the time until eleven, when she straightened her desk and left for the exercise track, she barely got anything done.

Judgment II: Mercy
by Denise Hall

Because she didn't know what else to do, she took the disciplinary slip with her. In the shower room, she left the white note lying on the bench, shamefully tucked underneath her neatly folded tunic, before donning her windbreaker and shoes and jogging outside into the cold. She did fifty jumping jacks and twenty push-ups, and since she had no way of telling what time it was out here, only took three of her regular laps.

Afraid that she might be late to lunch, she rushed through her shower and only partially dried her hair before running a hasty comb through the tangles. With the slip in hand, as she made her way to the dining hall she tried to think of what she could tell Shipe about the incident that might soften his hand toward her. Every excuse, including the stark truth, she ended up discarding. Shipe wasn't a man to be softened, and the realization that nothing she said was likely to make a difference was a bitter one to have to swallow.

Mercy arrived for lunch ten minutes early. The hall was empty but for two masters quietly conversing on the dais. Neither said a word to her as she crept down the aisle to stand silently by her chair. Head bowed, she stared down at the sandwich on her plate, holding the slip in nervous hands as she waited.

Lessers began arriving in groups by the skill class. The masters followed one or two at a time, and some came through the door with sniffing, red-eyed Lessers, who ruefully rubbed their bottoms before slinking away to their assigned tables.

"I'll be damned," she heard the Master Doctor Moulton say as he climbed the dais steps. "Would you look at that. He's early for a change!"

Mercy bowed her head even more as she heard the familiar limping gait of Shipe coming down the aisle towards her.

"You made it," he said to her, as he rounded the side of the dais.

With her eyes locked on her plate, she didn't answer, but held up the disciplinary slip. At first, as his heavy tromp climbed the dais' steps, she was afraid he hadn't seen it. She swallowed hard, not sure if she should call out to him or not. Was it permissible to speak at all in the presence of the Lessers, or should she remain silent at her table of public exile, pretending not to exist?

But then Shipe said, "Put it down. I'll take a look after lunch."

It was an odd feeling, to be so relieved and yet scared at the same time. She quietly lay the slip beside her plate and clasped her hands before her again, her palms beginning to sweat as she pressed them nervously together.

Tane did not preside over the lunch hour, and it was Master Deaton who gave the command to sit. The Lessers probably got something better, but her meal was a ham sandwich without cheese and no mayonnaise to moisten the bread. Even with the glass of room temperature water that she'd been given to drink, Mercy could barely choke it down. She sat there for the rest of the hour, waiting for the bell to ring and for Shipe to pronounce her punishment.

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She wished she'd held her tongue. Tears welled in her eyes and coursed unhindered down her cheeks. This was probably why Richard had bought the Interlopers in the first place; because she couldn't be depended upon to obey even the simplest commands. She was a horrible submissive, a nuisance. She swiped at her cheek with one hand and sniffed as quietly as she could.

The lunch bell sounded, and still Mercy remained at her seat until all the Lessers had filed from the room. The masters came down off the dais last, laughing and talking amongst themselves. Master Deaton stretched his back and said to Boyden, "This is a complacent bunch. It's been months since we called an assembly. A thorough whipping all around would shape some of these girls up nicely."

"I'll do you one better," Boyden laughed. "You bring Desire, I'll bring Harvest, and we'll trade Personals. I'll bet my new, studded harness for a ruby comb that I can make your Personal cry out long before you get so much as a squeak out of mine."

Deaton snorted. "Deal."

Then she heard the stilted 'thump-step' of Shipe coming off the dais and all of Mercy's senses zeroed in on his approach. She clasped her hands in her lap and held tightly to her own fingers. Her breaths grew hurried and she began to tremble as he picked up the note. He read it silently, then lay it flat on the table beside her plate. She bowed her head, feeling his hot stare burning down on her as he took a pen from his uniform pocket and signed the bottom.

"Let's go," he said, and turned around to leave.

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Without a word, she followed him from the dining hall back to the library. Halfway there, Shipe left her to wait in the hall while he stepped into one of the skill rooms.

"Anytime," she heard the reigning master say, and a moment later, Shipe reemerged with a long and whippy cane in his hand. Her eyes fell to it, and then to the floor.

"Well?" He indicated with a wave of that cane that she should proceed him down the hall. "No point dawdling now. You've got this coming and you know it. Let's go."

As she walked, her hands couldn't help but ease back to cup the base of her bottom cheeks, so sore already and bound in a moment or two to be even sorer. But he was right, she did deserve it. And at least he wasn't going to send her away.

Unless he was going to beat her first, then send her away. Mercy swallow the sudden panic that nearly blinded her. She walked straight past the library, her head down, the frightening prospect of being asked to leave consuming her mind. She was making too many mistakes, and she knew it. Tane wouldn't tolerate it. Certainly Shipe wouldn't. She had to do better! She *had* to be good!

"Hey," Shipe called after her, and Mercy glanced sadly back at him. He gestured to the library door with the cane. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

One more mistake to add to the list. Her cheeks burned. "Sorry," she whispered, and ducked through the door that he held open for her.

The cane whistled through the air as he indicated her desk. "Over there."

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She wrung her hands the whole way. Her chest hurt it felt so tight, and she couldn't breathe right.

"Clothes off," he directed.

Her fingers fumbled to pull the tunic up over her head. Standing naked before him, she paused long enough to fold the pea-green dress and laid it neatly to one side of her desk.

"I'm sorry," she quavered. "I'll try to do better."

"Am I supposed to let you off the hook because you're sorry?" he asked.

Mercy shook her head. "No, sir." She took a deep breath before laying herself over the top of the desk. The surface was cold against her belly. It squashed her breasts uncomfortably and the sharp edge bit into the cradle of her pelvis as she stepped her feet apart and reached for the opposite side. Struggling to relax her bottom for the bite of the cane, she lay her forehead on the wood between her arms. "I promise, Master Shipe, I will do better. I will be obedient." She took another deep breath. "I-I am ready for my correction."

Shipe studied her, the end of the cane bobbing in the air as he alternately tightened and loosened his grip on the wrapped handle. "You think so, huh?"

Her breath steamed the table with each shaky exhale, and she closed her eyes in an attempt to hold back her tears.

He came around the desk to sit down in her chair. Laying the cane over his lap, he rapped on the top of her head with two knuckles until she looked up at him. His eyes were cold and hard as he stared at her. "Do you like being whipped? Is that why you came here?"

Mercy slowly shook her head. "No, sir."

"Why did you come here?" He waited, not moving while she struggled to come up with an answer.

"I-I don't—"

"If you say you don't know, I'll have you put to the assembly block. I'm half tempted to do that anyway." He tipped his head to one side, the only display of curiosity that he allowed himself to show. "What made you give up your wealth and your house, come halfway around the world, walk up the mountain side in a snowstorm, and stand at our front gate on the off-chance that we might let you in as opposed to simply watching you to freeze to death? You don't like having your ass smacked? Bullshit! I think you must love it."

It was no use looking to him for understanding, but Mercy couldn't help it. She whispered, "I wanted to be what they were."

"Who?"

"Mahogany and China. He needed them," she said. She shook her head, as much bewildered with herself as with her need for him to understand. "He didn't need me like that, not after they came anyway. I wanted to know why."

Master Shipe leaned forward to rest his powerful forearms on the table. Some of the coldness left his face as he considered her. "Have you figured it out yet?"

Slowly, she shook her head again. "No. They are better somehow, but I don't know why."

He sat so close, his warm breath caressed her face. "Why did you do you disobey me by talking to the Lessers?"

Mercy bowed her head as she thickly admitted, "They made me angry."

"Quite a feat, especially since you weren't supposed to be talking to them long enough for them to make you angry."

"They said terrible things about you."

"Did I ask you to defend me?" he snapped, his eyes narrowing sharply.

"They said you were mean and hateful!"

"I am!"

"You're not either!" Mercy argued. "You're just angry because you lost your leg!"

His face darkened. He lifted the cane out of his lap and held it up to her. "Kiss the rod of your correction and hang on tight to that desk. You're damn well going to need to hang onto something!"

No sooner had Mercy pressed her lips to the thin bamboo, than did he stand up. He grabbed his crutch and swung around behind her again.

"Get your legs farther apart."

It stung when he slapped the cane between her knees and she hastened to obey, spreading her feet wide enough apart that she hooked them around the legs of the desk to help hold them there. Being splayed that way made it much harder to clench, as she discovered when he touched the length of that bamboo to the fleshiest part of her rounded bottom.

"I am going to give you the twelve you accrued last night," he said stiffly. "You deserve a hell of a lot more, but I'm sure the Demerit caning you've got coming after supper will more than make up for it."

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Her knuckles whitened as she gripped the edge of the desk. In a barely audible voice, Mercy said "Yes, sir."

"When the Black Master's done with you, I want your skinny ass back in your closet, in bed with the lights out. I'm still going to blister your backside for disobeying me," he seethed, "but you'll be healed up before I begin. You'll lose your voice screaming under my whip and wear the marks for a month. Now tell me how kind I am."

She swallowed hard. "Thank you, sir."

"Damn if you're not a piece of work," he snarled as he moved into position.

Mercy didn't notice his shadow on the library wall until Ship raised that cane high over his shoulder. He gave her ample time to dread its descent, before his arm swung down in a sharp, quick arc and the cane cut through the air with a sound like paper tearing. The rod was so thin and wiry that it wrapped across her buttocks, the tip curling around her right hip, leaving an instant crimson welt.

The sound of that first awful crack reached Mercy's ears a fraction of a second before her bottom exploded in agony. She screeched, her legs snapping sharply together, buckling at the knees as she raised her feet to cover the hurt. Pain swept through her consciousness, making coherent thought impossible. It took everything she had just to keep her hands from flying back to grab and cover her throbbing buttocks.

Dimly, she saw his shadow move as he raised the cane again. She scrambled to hook her feet around the legs of the desk again, pushing her bottom out and back for the

correction she deserved. Then she grit her teeth and cringed from the pain, mewling her fear.

The cane whipped down and across the wide base of her hips, landing just below the first mark across the lower slopes where her bare bottom joined her thighs. The new pain, coming so close to the first, took her breath away and she lay there gasping, filling her lungs with inverted shrieks. She was never going to make it to twelve! She just couldn't bear this!

Mercy barely saw the cane's shadow rising on the wall, and she snapped a hand back to clutch her right buttock where the fiery lines were rising into painful weals.

He flicked the cane across her knuckles. "Get that back where it belongs!"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry, please! Ow!" Though he hadn't struck her hand anywhere near as hard as her bottom, when she grabbed onto the edge of the desk again, there was a long red line swelling over her fingers. She bit her bottom lip and buried her head in her arms, not wanting to see the next stroke coming.

Stepping back a bit, he measured the cane across the cringing crease where her well-thrashed bottom met the tops of her black-and-blue thighs. His next cut licked into her vulnerable flesh there, the flexible tip wrapping full around her hip to sink into soft, tender, unmarred skin.

"HAOW!" With an involuntary jerk, Mercy heaved herself up over the desk, her feet flying up again, toes curled, to protect her bottom. Her legs scissored, and she burst into lusty sobs when the cane smacked the soles of her feet.

"Get back in position!" he barked.

The fire in her bottom made the air swelter all around her. She began to sweat, and her belly squeaked as she slid backwards off the desk. Her legs kept trying to snap together again as she spread her feet apart.

"If you twist your ass away from me again," Shipe warned, "I'll add another five cuts to your sentence and I'll lay them all the way down to your knees. You keep your skinny ass still."

"Y-yessss, s-sir! Oh!" She grabbed hold of the edge of the desk and braced herself to hold as still as possible. Tears overflowed her eyes. They ran down her cheeks and splashed from her chin to the warm surface of the desk, heated and moist from her panting.

The awful cane rose and fell five times as rapid as the flicking of a serpent's tongue, each blow slightly overlapping the previous one, making one thick and throbbing welt that extended down over the crease to a good inch over the tops of her shaking thighs. The last stroke sent her scrambling against the desk again, arching her back and kicking her feet wildly, her shrieks like the loud, wounded cries of a tortured animal. She wept hysterically, barely able to draw a breath.

Her sobs were punctuated by hoarse shouts as Shipe landed two more full-armed blows directly to the center of her backside, burrowing the cane into the worst of her bruises. He whipped into her pitilessly, making her entire body jolt with the force of the impacts, before pausing to adjust his balance.

"So I'm not mean and hateful, huh?" He cocked his head as he examined his target. He lay his palm against the hot surface of one cheek, feeling the heat and the trembling of

her body. A trickle of blood where the edge of the cane had cut her was winding its way down the back of her thigh, but he ignored that, preferring instead to run his fingers over the blisters the bamboo knots had raised in seven distinct places. He allowed her to rest for a moment as she once again found her breath and her crying became a little less hysterical.

"Two more."

Mercy's frantic, "Oh no, please, master! Oh please please, master!" was cut short by the eleventh stroke of the cane, which cut diagonally across her naked bottom, full across each of previous strokes, with the tip flicking full across her wobbly thigh. It immediately sent her back into screams of agony as her hips twisted and her feet drummed the stone floor.

He limped around her to deliver the final blow, the cross of the 'x', raising a livid blood welt down the back of her left thigh as well. Even though somewhere in her pain-clouded mind Mercy knew her ordeal was over, it was almost ten minutes before she could bring her cries under control.

"What do you say?" Shipe asked, his low voice washing through the waves of pain, enveloping her and bringing her back from agony's abyss.

Mercy raised her head, shivering she hurt so much. Crawling off the desk, her limbs so weak and rubbery that she could barely stand, she lowered herself to the floor. She clasped her hands behind her back, locking the fingers to keep them from rubbing where they shouldn't, and bowed low before him. Her tears dropped onto his black boot. Gasping

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and hiccuping, her sobs distorting her words, she wept, "Thank y-y-you."

Shipe glared at her. "You have work to do."

She snuffled out a "Y-y-yes, sir," and he turned on his crutch and swung from the room.

Still lying on the floor, she touched her blazing bottom gingerly. The welts ran beneath her fingers like the rungs of a ladder. Even the gentlest brush of her own hands over the scorched surface hurt beyond belief. Finally, she struggled to her feet, dry sobs shaking her slight frame as her battered muscles were forced to move and the pain flared hotly back to life all over her hinds.

To take a Demerit caning on top of this...

She wept all over again.

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Chapter Six

"Lord Almighty," Master Hutch said with a rueful laugh. He shook his blonde head. "Half the Pit must be on the roster tonight."

It was after the supper hour and the Lessers had all moved on to the library. Most of them were joking and talking, but a good many—like Mercy—with white demerit buttons affixed to the fronts of their tunics, waited in frightened silence for the Black Master to call them to justice. Hutch, as the black band around his right arm declared, had drawn Demerit Duty this week. He ran a finger down the list detailing the night's work ahead of him and, to Mercy at least, he didn't seem all that distressed. Not even when, with another shake of his head, he good-naturedly complained, "I'm going to need someone to spell my arm."

Far behind him, Mercy hovered in the shadows, waiting for him to move on so she might look for her name on the list. She knew it was there. It was silly to hope otherwise, and to be honest she wasn't quite sure if she did hope that at all. She had done the misdeed, she needed to pay the price. That was all there was to it. But, oh, she hurt so much already. This had been her second night in a row eating standing up, a blessing rather than an inconvenience, and she touched her bottom gingerly.

Her own gentle fingertips made her wince. The thought of having to face that dark and foreboding Demerit Hall, of

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feeling again the measure and whuck of the dreadful cane therein, frankly, it left her a little sick to her stomach.

Master Hutch turned around, a twinkle in his blue eyes as he winked at Mercy. "I'm looking forward to making your acquaintance, little one. Master Shipe," he said, his laughing gaze sliding to the scowling master, leaning on his crutch just beside her. "It's been a long time since you worked Demerit Duty. We could string her up together and work her low; she'll be singing in notes she never thought her voice could manage. What do you say?"

Mercy fidgeted with her fingers as she glanced sideways at Shipe. He glared at Hutch, and then at her. "Let someone else beat her ass for a while," he snapped and swung off down the hall on his crutch.

"I'll do it."

Mercy turned around as the brothers, Deaton and Tane, came out of the dining hall. As she dropped respectfully to the floor, Deaton's dark eyes flicked over her, judged her insignificant, and he moved on to the posted list. "How many are there?"

"Twenty at least. We also need to figure out how to do the Drone. Does she go first? Do we line her up with the rest of the Lessers?"

"Have a chair set up in the hall," Tane said. "Let her sit and listen to the others paying their due. An overactive mind can be a wonderful punishment aid. I'm willing to bet she faces the cane with the utmost penitence after watching the other's limp off to bed."

"Who's assisting tonight?" Deaton asked.

"Sub-Master Tettel," Hutch replied. "He's setting up the room as we speak."

"All right." Deaton caught the scruff of her pea-green uniform and hauled Mercy up off her knees. "Come on, you. Time to clear that shameful mark from your person."

He let go of her tunic, and Mercy reluctantly fell into step behind him. For most of the way, they walked without talking. It wasn't until they were winding down the steps into the bowl-shaped alcove just outside the massive double doors of the most highly feared chamber in the mountain that Deaton commented: "Sooner or later, every female in Judgment comes to this room. The floor has been anointed by thousands of tears, and the canes have all been washed in blood. It was only a matter of time for you."

Mercy chewed on her lower lip. "Yes, sir."

If his was a comment meant to comfort, it fell a far distance short of accomplishing its task.

It was fairly dark at the bottom of the alcove. The only source of light came from twin sconces on each side of the doors, which cast a yellow glow down upon the conglomerate of carvings, depictions that detailed all levels of punishment and suffering, cut into the wood. Those carvings did terrible things to the imagination. Mercy had already been here once before, but she didn't know what was worse: standing outside these doors as a New-comer, not knowing what lay in store; or having already suffered a light punishment under the Demerit rod, and knowing that today she would experience the real thing.

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Even with an unmarred bottom, smooth and soft and as pale as alabaster, a full Demerit caning—as Boyden had once explained—required that the recipient first be restrained. Mercy was far from unmarked. Wealed and wounded, she was so tender and sore that walking was a torment and the slightest touch against her nether cheeks had her sucking at air and gritting her teeth to keep from shouting.

She stared at the carvings on the door, and at one in particular of a woman bent over a bench, her arms pulled straight out in front of her while the length of a cane burrowed into her flanks from behind. The scream that distorted the wooden girl's mouth, turned her otherwise lovely face into a grimace of absolute torment. In a moment, Mercy knew without a shadow of doubt, that would be her.

"Was it everything you hoped for?" Deaton asked, startling her from her thoughts.

"Sir?" she asked.

"Judgment," he said. "Do we meet your expectations?" The slightest ghost of a smile graced his dark features. "You're paying dearly for the experience, after all. I'd hate for you to be disappointed."

"I had no expectations," she said honestly. "Although I am sorry to have disappointed everyone else."

He quirked an eyebrow. "And how is that?"

Slowly, she admitted, "I-I have been troublesome. Master Shipe is not happy with me."

There went that ghost of a smile again. "We've all had our share of experiences in dealing with troublesome women. I'm almost certain that we'll manage you well enough. And as for

Shipe," Master Deaton drawled. "Berry, were she allowed to speak with you, would probably thank you for your assistance."

Confused, Mercy asked, "What did I do?"

"A little dirt under her fingernails caused her to fail Shipe's morning inspection. To the surprise of us all, he left her bottom with a little skin still attached. So, however it is that you sweetened his mood this morning, I'm sure she is most grateful."

The echo of footsteps came down the hall, and Hutch boomed out a cheerful, "Here we are!" as he led a long line of woebegone Lessers down into the bowl of the alcove. The one directly behind him carried a straight-backed chair, which, with a wave of his hand, he directed her to set against the wall by the doors.

"Have a seat," he told Mercy as he and Deaton opened up the massive doors. "Tunic up, bare bottom squarely on the seat." He winked at her. "We'll be with you in just a moment."

Lessers of all shapes and sizes, their ranks color coordinated by the yellow, pink, or blue-grey tunics they wore, filed past her into the Demerit Hall. Mercy knew which seven were the whisperers from the library by the dark glares she got when they passed her. The doors closed behind the last woman, and then she was alone.

Rubbing her suddenly sweaty palms against her tunic skirt, she approached the chair. She turned her back to it, slowly baring herself to the waist before easing down to sit on the hard seat.

"Oh!" she whispered and closed her eyes briefly, hissing a quick breath between her teeth. If she didn't move, it almost didn't hurt so much.

For a long time Mercy heard nothing but silence from within the closed chamber, and then the muted 'whup', as cane met bare flesh, seeped through the doors. She jumped a little and held her breath, listening. Whoever had felt that blow, she didn't cry out. She either had a bottom of steel, or much greater tolerance for pain than Mercy did.

A second meaty crack and then a third landed, with a good ten seconds of silence between each one to draw out the ordeal and allow the pain of each stroke to fully crest before the next one landed. The fourth 'whup' was echoed by a low, growled-out groan, and the fifth and last by an all-out shout. Then silence reigned once more.

Her lungs began to hurt, and Mercy realized she'd quit breathing. She drew a shaky breath and one of the double doors opened. It was a yellow-tuniced Lesser, an Elite, who slipped between them. She quietly closed the door behind her. Limping two short steps, she clutched her bottom in both hands and burst into tears. Shoulders shaking, she bowed over and just sobbed, loud and hard, the alcove echoing her misery back up the stairs and down the mountain corridors.

It was the sharp crack as cane again met bare flesh within the Demerit hall that drew the Elite upright. Straightening her shoulders, struggling to pull herself back under control, she avoided Mercy's eyes as she walked stiffly to the stairs. One hand upon the wall to steady herself, she disappeared up the

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steps, but not before Mercy saw the long, dark lines the Demerit Cane had left purpling on her crimson skin.

There were twenty-three girls ahead of Mercy that paid their dues within that room. Some bore it more bravely than others, maintaining their silence throughout most of the ordeal. Only one never cried out at all, but she was made to endure four strokes of the Demerit Cane. The girl sentenced to eighteen began screaming at six, and by the end of her count she had no voice left at all. Two guards were summoned to help her back to her barracks. Because of the quantity of her count, she had been saved for last. As she was carried from the room, Master Hutch opened up the double doors for Mercy.

He smiled at her. "All right, darling." He wiggled a finger, beckoning her playfully to him. "Bring that sassy little bottom to papa."

Mercy took a deep breath, gathering up the shreds of her courage, and stood up. Ducking beneath his arm, she edged between his chest and the door and crept inside.

The Demerit Hall wasn't particularly large and it had only a bare, few articles of furniture: four straight-backed chairs tucked up against one wall, a rack that displayed dozens of canes of varying lengths and thicknesses, a roman-styled pedestal at the front of the room that supported a huge black ledger for logging the names and offenses of those sent for discipline, and, of course, there was the Rack.

The Rack looked nothing like its namesake, but was rather an upside down 'L' shaped structure built of wood and black leather. It was painfully simple in design, and utterly

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inescapable to anyone caught in its indifferent hold. Crowning the head of the cavernous chamber, it not only drew the eye of the soon-to-be chastised, but it left plenty of room for the Black Master on duty to dispense his correction from behind.

Unlike the alcove, this room was well lit and heated by the crackling fireplace beyond the pedestal. Though the temperature was comfortable for her, both Hutch and Deaton had removed their uniform shirts and a thin sheen of sweat glistened over their muscular chests as they each selected a cane from the varying widths displayed upon the walls.

Sub-Master Tettel stood at the dreadful Rack, rubbing his shoulder with one hand and flexing his arm. He stifled a groan as he looked at her. "Okay, last one."

He went to the pedestal, turning the page on the huge black ledger. He picked up a pen. "Name; Mercy. Drone. Today's date. First Demerit offense—"

"Second," she corrected, her voice barely above a whisper.

Tettel glanced up at her over the top of the book. "What was that?"

"It's my second," she said. "I've been here before."

"When?" Hutch asked.

"My second week here."

Tettel went back to writing. "New-Comers don't get Demerits. What you had was a warning session. Warning sessions aren't logged in the book, and if it's not in the book, then this is your first time."

"Oh," she said softly.

Making a practice slice through the air with his chosen cane, Deaton said, "She ought to get one or two extra for arguing."

"Nah." Hutch waved it off. "She wasn't arguing. She was being honest. She probably doesn't know that first time Demerit recipients get a lighter sentence than repeat offenders."

"Until they argue," Deaton said.

"What was it she did again?" Hutch called to Sub-Master Tettel.

"Interacted with Lessers."

"That's right." With three canes in his hand, Hutch finally made his selection and put the other two back. The one he chose was slightly thicker than the one Shipe had used earlier, and it made a heavier whir as he swung it twice through the air. He turned and looked at Mercy. "Out of curiosity, who broke the rules first?"

Her fingers fidgeting nervously in the folds of her tunic, Mercy cleared her throat. "Me, sir. They were talking to each other. I spoke to them."

He shook his head and almost sympathetically said, "That's going to cost you."

"Turn around," Deaton told her. "Lift your skirt up."

Her hands were already trembling as she obeyed and she stood there wavering slightly on her feet while they came up behind her. She felt a hand lightly touch the small of her back, turning her into the light.

Master Hutch swore. "It's like having to paint on a ruined canvas! We can't cane her. She hasn't any bottom left!"

"What do you want to do?" Deaton suggested. "We could always postpone her punishment. Give her a few days to heal."

Hutch considered her a moment, then asked the other master, "Over the knee?"

Now it was Deaton's turn to be quiet. "All right," he said slowly. "I'll do over the knee."

"Thirty a piece," Hutch said, and Mercy felt her heart falter. "Ten to bottom, twenty to thighs. After all, we don't want to be too merciful."

"Deal. Who goes first?"

The hand left the small of her back, and Mercy fought the urge to turn around so she could see what they were doing. Her bottom tingled with dread, she wanted to tuck it in and cover it with her hands.

"Call it," Hutch said, and she heard a thin flicking sound.

"Heads."

There was a brisk slap, then Deaton grunted. "Damn it. All right, go ahead."

Master Hutch took hold of her arm. Her stomach sank as she was dragged back to the display of canes.

Behind her Sub-Master Tettel dutifully recorded, "Sixty. By hand. Twenty to bottom, forty to thighs." He put the pen down and closed the heavy book with a 'whump'. "Do you need me to hold her?"

"Oh, I shouldn't think so." While Deaton put both their chosen rods away, Hutch took hold of one of the chairs and pulled it out from the wall. "All right, you misbehaving minx." He drew her down across his lap, chuckling when she cried

out because the position forced her battered muscles to stretch as she toppled into place. "I haven't even started yet!"

Master Deaton pulled a second chair out from the wall and sat down a short distance away. Unsmiling, he stretched out his long legs and folded his arms across his chest to wait. "No doubt the anticipation has her anxious to get this all over with."

"Nonsense! She ought to be grateful," Hutch said as he heaved her bottom until it was fully centered across his lap. "There's not a Lesser in this mountain who wouldn't rather have sixty by my hand rather than the smallest count of three with the Demerit Cane."

"Not that she won't feel it just as intensely," Deaton added when Hutch raised her tunic to the small of her back. "She's so well and truly marked, she's going to suffer no matter what we do."

"What a sweet little bottom." Hutch tsked and shook his head. "Too bad it's been so soundly spanked."

She stifled a moan as he settled his warm palm over the summits of both cheeks. He had a large hand, square and, against her raw skin, it felt very, very capable.

"I love my job." He gave his target a gentle pat. "There's no other profession in the world that can claim carpotunnel from spanking naughty women as a health risk."

That won a snort of laughter from Deaton, and Mercy grabbed the legs of the chair to keep from reaching back to protect herself.

"Keep your toes on the floor," Hutch said. "Any excessive kicking and I'll start over, do you understand?"

Mercy jerked her head in a rapid nod. "Yes, sir."

The shock of the first swat jolted her up on his lap, and she let go of the chair's legs to grab a hold of his pant instead. Shipe had spanked her much, much harder, but there was no part of her bottom that Hutch could strike that wasn't already mottled with bruises and welts. For Mercy, the ordeal was sheer hell. There was no swallowing her involuntary sounds or holding back the tears. She cried out from the very first, and then she just plain cried, loud and lusty sobs that wracked her shoulders and filled the room.

Master Hutch ended up scissoring her legs between his while she wept garbled apologies between her shrieks because she couldn't seem to make herself hold still. He spanked all the way down to her knees. But while the final volley of ten were particularly hard, he never did start the count over.

Deaton wasn't anywhere near as merciful. The minute Hutch finally released her from his lap, Deaton had hold of her arm and she toppled down across his knees.

"Ah! OW! OWIEOWIEOWIE!" she shrieked, dissolving into fresh sobs as it started all over again. Deaton's hand was significantly harder and his swats a good deal more forceful than Hutch's. Her cries escalated into wordless sobs as he spanked her beyond coherency.

"If left up to me, I'd have caned you," he said over her cries. He made her bottom dance over his knee, and when her feet snapped up in sad defense of her thighs, he spanked

the soles and the backs of her shins until she put them down again. "You were warned. Tettel, record that she took the second half of her spanking badly and the count was restarted."

"NOOO!" she wailed, then her screams took over her voice as the rapid rise and fall of his hand attacked the summits of her aching buttocks all over again. "PLEEEEEAAASSSSSSE! OW!"

The ten to her bottom felt as though administered by a hot iron. The twenty down the backs of her thighs felt as though he were skinning her flesh away.

Hutch caught her legs when she desperately tried again to cover her bottom.

"Let her go," Deaton said. "She can take her whipping properly, or she can take the consequences."

"She's not even hearing you anymore," Hutch argued. "You may as well beat a dumb animal."

Deaton snorted. "You're going soft, Hutch."

The dark master finished his count just above her knees, and Mercy finally fell limp across his lap, too exhausted by the hurt to even notice that the spanking had stopped. Not bothering to hold her while she cried, he dumped her unceremoniously onto the floor. Grabbing her bottom in both hands, she curled into a ball on her side. She turned her face into the floor, and sobbed until she felt wrung out and dry of all tears.

"You're a hard man," Hutch said, but there was little censor in his tone.

"It's not mercy she wants," Deaton replied, his dark eyes glittering down on her crumpled form. Leaving her where she'd fallen, he picked up his tunic.

"Thanks for the help."

"Anytime," Deaton said, and walked out of the room.

Hutch reached down, gently laying a hand on her back. While she sniffed and gasped for breath, he softly rubbed her shoulders. "If I know Shipe, he's going to be waiting for you back in his quarters. You'd better pull yourself together, little one, and head on home before he comes looking for you."

* * * *

Mercy hadn't been asleep for very long when she became aware of a light disrupting the closet's comfortable darkness.

She lifted her head from the pillow, still lying on her stomach, nude, covered by the blankets only to her knees since even the lightest touch of fabric against her bottom and thighs was unendurable. She rubbed her eyes and blearily looked back over her shoulder at the open door. The light was blinding, and she blinked several times to clear her sight as she rolled onto her side.

Haloed by light, Shipe stared back at her, his face an emotionless mask. His eyes moved once over her body, and her nipples instantly responded by tightening into peaks.

"Get up," he said, and limped back out of the doorway.

Still blinking, at first Mercy didn't move. Then, panting through the pain of pushing to her feet, she shuffled gingerly after him, her hands clasped just under her chin, both to hide the stiffening of her nipples and to muffle her yawns.

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Leaning on his crutch, moving slowly as if he hadn't yet made up his mind, he crossed the room to his bed. He never looked back in her direction. He just took both his pillows and lay them one on top of the other on the edge of the bed. He sat down next to them and lay his crutch on the floor.

"Come here." Still without looking at her, he pulled his tunic up over his head. Hard muscle played across his chest as he tossed it aside.

A twitch of awareness tickled down through her womb. Her hands clasped and unclasped; her feet moved as though they were someone else's, carrying her to the sleigh-styled king-sized bed. When he reached for his belt, her breath caught and her feet hesitated. But he merely took it off and dropped it, too, on the floor. Swallowing a soft, giddy sound, she stepped in front of him.

"Put your hands down," he said, still without looking up.

Her eyes fell to his lap as he began to unfasten his pants. She gradually lowered her hands, folding her fingers into nervous little fists as the buttons of his pants came apart and the thin line of hair leading down his chiseled abdomen widened into a thatch of springy black curls.

Between the hair and the equally dark pants, Mercy could only glimpse a sliver of pink flesh, but as she looked, it burgeoned and thickened under her gaze. A languid heat flared between her thighs and her eyes snapped up to find Shipe watching her, the intensity of his stare sending the warmth surging up to her belly, tangling her stomach into nervous knots and igniting every fiber of her being into sparks of anticipation.

He reached for her breast and her eyes closed. She whimpered when his fingers closed over one taut peak, firmly, the pressure just shy of being painful, and pulled her to stand between his thighs.

"Down on your knees," he said huskily. He let go of her tender nipple and her back tried to arch as if wanting to push her breast back into his palm.

Mercy looked down into the open 'v' of his pants. There was a definite mound there, his arousal swelling the front until she could see the stiff outline of his manhood pushing against the dark cloth. She went down on her knees, her tongue darting out to moisten her lips.

Leaning back on one arm, he lifted his hips and shucked his pants down his legs. He bent to pull them all the way off, and the cock that sprang stiffly free of its confinement was as hard and as solid as the rest of him, and very thick. Her sex quivered deliciously. She drew a heady breath as he lay his hand on top of her head, weaving his fingers through her hair to get a good grip.

"Richard," she squeaked, "h-he didn't like it when I—"

"I could give a goddamn what he liked," Shipe growled. "Don't mention his name to me again."

Mercy licked her lips again. She couldn't make herself look away from the mushroom head of him. It was so swollen, it seemed to throb before her eyes. Sheepishly, she admitted, "I'm not very good at this."

"Then you'll learn." Shipe pushed her head into his lap.

She saw his eyes drift shut when the heat of her mouth closed around him and a tiny thrill of delight raced through

her. His hand in her hair set the rhythm, showing her what he liked. It didn't take long for her jaw to start hurting, but when he moaned, she happily redoubled her efforts. His hips began to thrust, and to steady herself, she caught hold of his knees. Or at least one of them. The stump of his leg within her palm felt smooth and hard, rippled at the end from the scars of amputation.

Shipe released her hair instantly and grabbed her hand, yanking it from the end of his stump. His cock left her mouth with a wet sucking pop, and she sat up, breathing raggedly, unsure if he was angry or if she should stop. They stared at one another, neither moving until he took her offending hand and shifted it between his legs instead.

"Gently," he said, as she caressed the smooth pouch of his balls. He reached for her head again, and she willingly took him back into her mouth. Her whole body rocked as she bobbed upon the length of him, his gasps, grunts, and moans encouraging her to go faster, slower, to fondle with her hand, and even to squeeze just a little, which caused the barest salty taste of him to spill across her tongue.

Her jaw hurt as much as her bottom before he finally panted, "Enough. Enough, goddamn it!"

And Mercy reluctantly raised her head. She stroked him one a final time, the thick length like satin over steel in her hand. She licked her lips, savoring the taste that lingered in her mouth.

Eyes closed, head tipped back on his shoulders, Shipe struggled for control. The cords in his neck were straining and

his groan was more of a growl when he eventually raised his head and said, "Get your ass over the pillows."

Mercy scrambled to obey, throwing herself face down on the bed and spreading her legs wide. That languid sensual heat was rolling inside her. Already her clit was throbbing, as though he were caressing her there. An involuntary cry of eagerness spilled past her lips when he stood up, and she wiggled as he leaned over her, tilting her hips back into the cradle of his and stifling a moan when she felt that thick shaft nudge up against her sex.

He lifted her left knee all the way onto the bed, pushing it up until it was parallel to her chest. The warmth of his thigh settled behind hers as he leaned his weight on the edge, forcing her to remain so vulnerably laid open.

"Hands," he ordered, his voice husky and low, as rough as his touch when he took her wrists and pinned them together in one hand behind her back. The fingers of his other hand slid down between the folds of labia, parting them.

There was no need for any extra lubrication; she was already wet for him. And whether or not he would have paused to ease his entry into her was highly unlikely. The blankets swallowed her cries as, with a single hard thrust, he shoved himself deep inside her.

He held onto her as though she fought against him, wrenching her arms back up between her shoulder blades until she cried out. It ached where her wrists pressed together in his grip. He grabbed a fistful of her hair, hurting as he yanked her back upon him, thrusting and pounding furiously against her wealed buttocks. A spanking would have

been easier to bear. Yet her body sang, and her cries held more ecstasy than agony.

His vigor and his force felt good. She loved his guttural roar of pleasure as he came, his hips jerking as jettisons of creamy-white seed splashed up against her womb. Even his weight felt good when he fell down on top of her, crushing her into the soft mattress, his forehead sweating against her shoulder, his hot breath panting behind her ear. The only thing she didn't like, was the feel of him slipping out of her when he rolled over, flopping onto his back beside her.

"I'm not going to call you out of the closet each time I want to fuck," he growled. "You'll sleep out here tonight."

Her scalp ached where he'd pulled her hair. Her arms and her bottom burned, her womb felt positively battered, and her heart sang.

She rolled sideways to face him, admiring his strength, thrilling within because he could have had anyone and yet it was her body that he took for his enjoyment. That she hadn't found her own completion didn't matter at all. She had pleased him. He really did need her.

"Thank you," she said.

Shipe sat up and looked at her incredulously. "Christ, woman, would you stop with the thank you's!" Pulling the pillows out from under her hips, he threw them against the headboard. "Get your ass up there!" He landed a stinging swat to her bottom as she scrambled to get all the way onto his bed. "Christ," he said again, and lay down, turning his back to her. "Shut up and go to sleep already, or I'll gag you with your own goddamn hair."

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She cuddled up as close as she could get without touching him. Smiling happily, she closed her eyes.

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Chapter Seven

Mercy awoke to a sharp pain in her wrists. She reared her head with a start, just as Shipe finished tightening the knot that bound her hands to the bars of the headboard. She drew a sharp breath, at first confused and not at all sure where she was. It all came back to her when he pulled his pillow out from under her head.

"Get your ass up," he said.

In the semi-darkened room, the only light being the glowing embers in the fireplace, Mercy gripped the bars she was tied to with both hands. She twisted her head from side to side, searching the bed for signs of an implement. Then, slowly, wincing as her bottom protested having to move, she crawled up onto her knees. "M-Master Shipe?"

His arm encircled her hips and she gave a sharp cry as he lifted her completely off her knees. He stuffed both pillows under her hips and dropped her back down with her bottom well propped up in the air. Heading for the massive trunk at the foot of the bed, he returned a moment later with a ball gag, which he forced between her teeth. "When I want you to talk, I'll ask you a question."

He tied it tightly at the back of her head, then he bound her long hair into a pony tail at her nape so that he could see her face. Her ankles he fastened to opposite posts of the footboard, pulling her legs very wide apart.

Mercy twisted her head back, giving him a very uncertain look. She had never been tied like this before, with her

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bottom so raised as though offered for punishment. She again searched nervously for a waiting cane or strap or paddle, but there was nothing ... yet. She drew a shaky breath as she raised her eyes to watch his powerful body moving through the shadows, and he went back to the foot of the bed.

"It obviously hasn't occurred to you yet," he said as he delved back into the open trunk, "it may not be your thanks that I want to hear coming from your beautiful mouth."

She had a beautiful mouth? Mercy felt both a trill of pleasure that he would so compliment her, and a shock of apprehension for what he intended. She blinked, her eyebrows coming together as he took out a piece of plastic and a small clay jar, which he brought back to set on the night-side table. The piece of plastic became a condom, which he unwrapped as he sat down beside her. He stretched it over the top of his cock and unrolled the length down his thick shaft, already fully erect, bathed orange in the dying of the fire's light, and pulsing to be buried inside her. She heard the soft 'tink' of pottery as he removed the jar's lid and dipped two fingers into the pale lotion within. There was a faint medicinal smell, and she couldn't help but clench her bottom cheeks as he reached back between her legs and thoroughly moistened the rim of her anal entrance.

The gag muffled her whimper as he pushed his fingers past her reluctant anus. She closed her eyes, bowing her head onto her arms as he stroked the lubricant as deep into her bottom as he could reach. Anal sex was not unfamiliar to her. And to be honest, she didn't remember it unfondly, at least not when her husband had cared to enter her gently. But it

had been a while. A very long while, and she couldn't help but wonder if it would hurt as much now as it had the very first time.

Once, twice, he slowly pumped his fingers in and out, then withdrew them to re-coat her anus with a fresh layer of the medicinal ointment. It wasn't until he again invaded the dusky rim of her bottom that she began to feel an odd warmth. He'd spread it on her labia, up and down the crack of her buttocks, and everywhere that he'd touched her, her skin was heating.

Mercy mewed her distress, the heat becoming painful as her bottom burned both inside and out. She grabbed tightly to the bars of the headboard, grunting into her gag, her fingernails scraping the wood. But tied as securely as she was, that was all the struggling that she could manage, and the mattress shifted under his weight as Shipe settled between her splayed thighs.

"No," he growled, biting and sucking at the lobe of her ear. "It's not your thanks I want."

She gave him her suffering instead, screaming and crying into the mattress between her outstretched arms as he entered her with brutality and claimed her body with furious savagery. The friction as he pumped inside her increased the heat, scalding her from the inside out with a fiery agony that lasted for a long time even after he'd exhausted himself.

Mercy was still groaning a good hour later, when Shipe finally roused himself to take the gag from her mouth.

"Well," he said. "What have you got to say now?"

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Weary, Mercy licked her dry lips and hoarsely whispered, "Thank you."

He laughed, but it wasn't a happy sound. "You're saying that just to piss me off. You think I'm hurting you now? This is pure gentleness compared to what I could be doing."

Her eyes burning from crying, sticky with sweat, her body aching as though he'd already fulfilled that promise, she whispered, "It's better than being ignored."

Shipe stared at her for a long moment in silence. Then he stuffed the gag back into her mouth and left her tied to his bed the rest of the night.

* * * *

Mercy was still tied hand and foot to the corner posts when she awoke the next morning. Although Master Shipe had spent most of the night sleeping beside her, one leg thrown over the top of hers, his arm around her waist with a hand possessively cupping her mons, he wasn't touching her now. The mattress gave a slight shake and Mercy lifted her head, glancing back over her other shoulder to find him perched along the edge of the bed, hunched over as though struggling to pull on his boot—although it was unlikely since he wasn't yet wearing his pants.

He sat, clapping his hands to his thighs with a stifled sigh, and looked down at his lap. Drawing a resigned breath, he stood up evenly on two legs. The muscles of his back and buttocks bunched as he took a single step, and Mercy cried out in shock as she sat up. Or would have had she not been so tightly tied down.

Shipe turned around to look at her; she peered through the dark at his false leg. "It's not a goddamn miracle. It's a prosthetic."

For once, he didn't sound angry when he spoke to her. Perhaps that made her bolder than she should have been, because the second he took off her gag, the first thing she said was, "You don't like to wear it?"

Shipe glared at her, then moved down the bed to untie her ankle. "No, I don't like to wear it."

"Why not?"

He stopped working on the knot and braced his hands on the mattress, a gesture that was rife with aggravation. He glared at her even harder, his look turning familiarly cross.

"If it pinches," she hastily continued, "I could sew a pad inside it to make it more comfortable." With wide and hopeful eyes, she bit her bottom lip and waited for him to answer.

"What did I tell you last night?" he growled.

"Less talking, more screaming?" she hesitantly paraphrased, her uncertainty making it sound more like a question.

His dark eyes glittered. It might have been amusement; it might just as well have been annoyance. It was hard to tell with Shipe and the darkness of the room wasn't helping.

"Then what should you be doing right now?"

She raised an eyebrow suggestively. "Screaming?"

The smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth was the most reluctant that she had ever seen. His was an almost cross amusement as he growled, and she shrieked with

laughter as he climbed on the bed after her and flattened her bottom with a not-so-gentle swat.

Her cries became more laughter as he bit it, first one buttock and then the other. Then more gently, and her laughter began to die away as he lay down between her splayed thighs and his mouth moved lower still. He made them both very late to breakfast.

* * * *

It took two months to list the books that lined the back wall of the common library. And that was just the back wall. She may not have made a lot of progress in the cataloging department, but Shipe had certainly made a lot of progress in the last two months on her.

The most notable change was in her uniform. Although still an ugly split-pea-soup green in color, the neckline had dropped nearly to her nipples and the tunic had lost its shapeless form. A stiff black corset hugged it to her body, lifting her breasts as though offering them for the approval of the masters. Sometimes late at night, as he buried himself within her willing body, biting and suckling at the tips of each creamy globe, he would threaten to have her nipples pierced.

"I'll cut off the top of your tunic," he was fond of saying. "You'll go through the mountain with your breasts bared, so I can admire my handiwork throughout the day."

But he hadn't done that yet.

He had, however, cut away the extra length of her skirt and removed the sides, leaving Mercy with soft bib-like swaths to dangle below her corset in front and back, and

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making modesty for her nothing more than an illusion. When she bent over, she didn't even have that. To show her marks better, Shipe had said.

And he was very, very fond of marking her, both with his passion as well as his vengeance. In fact, he had dedicated one evening a week—a night she'd come to call 'Hell Night'—solely to art of painting her body with the evidence of his pleasure. For no other reason than perhaps because he wanted to hear her screams, he would lay into her with paddle, strap, birch or cane, or any combination thereof, until she had barely breath left to wail her gratitude. Sometimes afterward, he would love her with some measure of tenderness, but more often than not it was with the ferocity she had come to recognize as him.

As hard as it was sometimes to bear, Mercy was grateful every time he beckoned her to him. She near cried with joy each night that he allowed her to sleep with him in his bed, rather than banishing her to her closet, as he only did now if she was disobedient enough to earn a Demerit Caning. Most Lessers in Judgment earned a session with the Black Master only once or twice an annual quarter. Mercy, on the other hand, seemed to require a punishing dose once or twice each month.

It was a funny thing to fear the bite of the rod and yet to seek it out, but that's exactly what Mercy found herself doing. Already her name appeared in the Black Book more times than half of the Product in Judgment, the majority of her punishments being for little things. Taking too long in the shower and running to lunch a little bit late, was the most

common. It became a very convenient misbehavior. Anytime she began to feel the tendrils of panic welling inside her, the ones that whisperingly suggested that she was once again being ignored while Lessers gained in favor, all she had to do was run a little late and the calming reassurance of discipline would once more enfold her in its pain-filled embrace.

"Must be making up for lost time," Shipe commented, as he'd signed her latest Demerit slip just the night before. "Your naughty bottom must not think it's getting enough attention."

Standing in front of the fireplace in the common library, an armload of books hugged to her chest, Mercy stared into the flames and relived Shipe's solution to that particular problem. If she clenched the muscles of her buttocks, she could feel again the mass of tender bruises that cris-crossed behind her, first from the ten-stroke Demerit Caning that had reduced her voice to a hoarse rasp by the end, and then from the strapping Shipe had given right over the top of it, just to make sure the job was done right.

Her battered bottom still burned when she touched it, or sat down, or even walked. But it made her smile; she was so well cared for.

"Mistress."

As soft as a sigh, the word made Mercy jump. She turned her head to find Mahogany standing less than ten feet away, surrounded by the rows of study tables, watching her with cold, hard eyes.

"That's what we called you," Mahogany said. "Or we were beaten for disrespect. Now we call you Drone, and are beaten

for allowing the acknowledgment of you, like a thing of shame, to pass upon our lips."

Had she missed the mid-morning break's bell? For one horrified second, Mercy stood in total shock, staring at the Judgment Elite, halfway expecting Shipe to melt out of the shadows and descend upon her with a fury born of disapproval. Whether it was the eminent punishment or the thought of truly disappointing Shipe, she dropped her armload of books there on the floor before the fireplace and fled all the way to her stool in the corner.

"He loved me, you know," Mahogany called out as she followed Mercy angrily. "I used to feel sorry for you. I would lie awake nights and pity you because I was everything to him and you were nothing but the burden he called 'wife'."

Mercy lay her hands flat against the wall and pressed her forehead to them, feeling the cold, jagged stones digging into her palms and the soft flesh of her forearms. She closed her eyes, wishing she could close her ears. Where were the guards? Or the other Lessers?

"He loved me best," Mahogany hissed in her ear. "And I called *you* mistress? You were so far beneath me, even then! You should be down on your knees begging my forgiveness for the insult of having to bow to you!"

Mercy panted as though she had just run the length of the mountain and back at full speed. Oh, don't let Shipe come in now, she prayed. If he saw her and Mahogany like this, if he thought for a second that they were speaking freely one to the other ... She panicked. Every muscle in her body tightened as though she were again feeling the bit of the

birch he'd used the first and last time he'd punished her for this offense.

She squeezed her eyes tightly closed and prayed for Mahogany to go away. Why wouldn't she just go away? She cried out as Mahogany grabbed a fistful of her hair and yanked her backwards off the stool.

"Interloper?" the Elite hissed, and shook Mercy by her fistful of tresses. "I was the one he wanted! It was my body he took to appease his hungers! How dare you have thought yourself better than me!" She rammed her knee into Mercy's ribs, shoving her at the same time down on the floor, cracking her nose and forehead against the stones. "Beg my forgiveness! If not for you, I would have been mistress and maybe now I would still be free!"

The bell rang out the mid-morning break, startling both women badly. Mahogany let go of Mercy, stumbling back two steps as she stared warily at the door. She drew two shuddering breaths, then straightened her shoulders. The perfect Judgment Elite, she turned her back on the Drone and walked back to the sofas by the fire. She was just sitting down when the door opened to a wave of laughing, giggling Lessers.

Mercy picked herself shakily up off the floor. Both her forehead and nose were bleeding, but she didn't even notice until she felt warm liquid running down between her breasts. She looked down and a steady stream of crimson splashed from her chin onto her unsteady hands and her chest. With nothing but her fingers to stop the flow, she crawled back onto her stool and faced the wall as she was supposed to.

She closed her eyes, cupping her nose and trying to be invisible until the Lessers all went away.

A hand touched her shoulder and Guard Acola tipped back her head. "What happened?" he asked, moving her hands to press a white handkerchief to her nose to stop the bleeding.

Pain exploded behind her eyes when he pinched the bridge of her nose, and without thinking, Mercy said, "I fell."

The lie satisfied the guard and, once out, Mercy could think of no way for it to be painlessly taken back.

Acola slipped a hand under her arm to help her down off the stool. When he turned her towards the door, Mercy saw Mahogany watching them go, her face coldly void of expression.

* * * *

It took Master Doctor Moulton three stitches to close the gap in her forehead. He must have done it while she was still in shock, because she barely felt the needle piercing her skin. Sitting naked on the edge of his examining table, she sure felt it now, though. Her whole head was throbbing. Her broken nose had blackened both her eyes, and she had to breathe through her mouth because the swelling had closed her nasal passages.

Twenty minutes after a guard was dispatched to hunt down Shipe, the scowling master limped through the physician's office on two legs just as Moulton was handing her tunic back to her.

"I don't think anything's broken," Moulton said. "But she's certainly bruised her ribs."

"What the hell happened to you?" Shipe snapped at her, his dark eyes raking her from head to toe.

"I fell," Mercy said softly. Guard Acola had already given that excuse to Master Doctor Moulton, who had put the lie down in his report to Tane. She was well and truly ensconced in it.

"Fell," Shipe echoed, and raked her with another assessing look.

Unable to meet his eyes, she studied her hands in her lap instead.

Stalking up to the edge of the exam table, Master Shipe took hold of her chin and tilted her face up into the light.

"Fell, huh? Do you want to tell me how?"

"I was clumsy," she stammered as, despite his angry tone, gentle fingers examined her cut and bruised face. She swallowed hard before digging herself into an even deeper hole. "I fell off my stool."

"You scratch yourself on the way down?" he asked, and his eyes bored into hers. "Those are pretty deep fingernail marks on your neck."

A chill of panic swept through her stomach. "I-I guess I must have."

He looked anything but convinced.

"I wondered about those," Master Doctor Moulton said as he came back to the table. He handed Shipe her corset. "No tight bonds for a while, and you'll want to take care when tying her down or taking her over your knee. At least for a week and possibly two."

Mercy fidgeted with her fingers.

"I don't need to take her over my lap to blister her ass," Shipe said, glaring hard into her eyes. He took hold of the lobe of her ear and pulled her down off the table. Then he led her right out the door.

Did he know? How could he know? Mercy hurried after him on the verge of tears.

"Are you lying to me?" he snapped, as he marched her down the hall.

She began to cry. "No, sir," she lied again.

He took her back to the common library and her stool behind her desk. "This the stool you fell from?"

There was blood all over the floor, and she couldn't help but nod. "Yes."

Still holding her by the lobe of the ear, he marched her over to the fireplace, where the books she'd dropped still lay scattered across the floor. One had skidded into the fireplace and it lay with its leather cover slowly burning, the blackened pages curling back at the corners. She wanted to reach for it, but his hold on her ear didn't allow it.

"What happened over here?" he demanded.

"I—the bell rang," she sobbed. "The Lessers were coming. I—my stool—"

Abruptly releasing her lobe, Shipe turned her around. "I'm going to ask you again," he growled with another hard look. "Last time. Are you lying to me?"

Mercy shook her head, but she was so ashamed of herself that she couldn't meet his knowing eyes. She buried her face in her hands and just cried.

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"Pick up this mess," Shipe told her. "And from now on, no more stools. You sit on the floor in the corner on your breaks, and if you need something off the top shelves, you ask a guard to get it for you."

He didn't wait for her to answer, but turned on his heel and stalked angrily back out the door.

* * * *

Mercy had just got the last of the spilled books put back on their proper shelves when two guards came into the room. The blond she knew as Stoner. The other, an older man with salt and pepper hair and crinkles around his eyes, she hadn't met before. Both had their switches out, and neither was smiling.

"Come on," the older man said with a wave of his switch to beckon her to him. They didn't spank her, though, but took her from the library and led her up and out of the bowels of the mountain. To Tane's room at the top, she realized with a start. Or to the fortress entrance. That fear made her stumble and she almost dropped to her knees twice. Accustomed to female reluctance, the guards each slipped a hand beneath her elbows to help her along.

But it was neither the entrance nor the Mountain Lord's quarters that they took her to, although Tane was there, along with Masters Deaton, Doctor Moulton, and Shipe. None of them looked very happy with her.

They stood gathered in front of an observation desk, the wall before them covered with security monitors and recording machines. Judgment, she realized with a start, was

crowded with hidden cameras. Some of the monitors showed stationary vantages overlooking a single place, these being mostly the skill rooms and dining hall. Others flashed from camera to camera, room to room.

The monitor the masters and Mountain Lord were gathered before was the stationary camera that recorded the activities within the common library. There were jagged horizontal static lines across the screen, and from the stillness of the picture, she knew they had to be watching a tape. From the doorway she could make out two images: Mahogany and herself.

Mercy felt her whole body run cold.

Shipe snapped to a spot on the floor and she crept to stand before him. "Tell me again what happened?"

Her breath caught in her chest. She stared at the monitor, unable to breathe.

"You see, we have two very different problems here," Tane began when she remained quiet. He tapped the monitor. "This being the first."

He reached over and hit the play button, and Mercy watched the image of herself whirl around to face the obviously conversing Mahogany. There was no sound, but from the angle of the camera and the light of the fire splashing back upon the Elite's face, it wasn't difficult to see her moving lips.

"I didn't talk to her," Mercy blurted, shaking her head wildly. "I swear I didn't talk to her! I thought I missed the bell!"

The Drone in the monitor dropped her books across the floor and ran for the bottom of the screen with the angry Elite following at a stiff-legged stalk. Mercy could just make out the outline of her desk, but the stool in the corner was well out of the camera's sight.

Mercy spun around to face Shipe, her eyes pleading as she sobbed, "I didn't talk to her! I swear I didn't! I swear!"

"She talked to you," Tane pointed out. "That much is obvious from the tape. What was she saying?"

"I-I-I don't know..." Mercy threw up her hands in a helpless, frantic shrug, her eyes searching the floor as though the answer lay at her feet, trying to remember exactly what was said. "That Richard loved her best—that I was below her—I d-don't know! I just wanted her to go away!"

"So the bell rang," Deaton surmised to Shipe. "She panicked, wasn't paying attention and fell off her stool."

"And scratched herself on the way down?" Shipe asked. He flipped her hair back off her neck to reveal three long, furrowed scratches on the side of her throat. "I don't see how falling off a stool did that." He then raised her tunic up above her hip to show the massive, round bruise spreading out over her ribs. "Or that."

"Unless Mahogany helped her to fall off," Master Doctor Moulton suggested, folding his arms across his chest as Tane moved closer to examine the injury.

"It's possible that she knocked the stool over," Deaton said. "She could have hit it on the way down."

"Uh..." The master doctor made a slight face. "Unlikely, but I suppose it's possible. Looks almost like a kick or a punch to me."

Tane looked into her eyes. "Did Mahogany strike you?"

In the monitor, Mahogany stalked back to the sofa by the fire. Mercy watched the Elite seat herself upon the cushions, then lowered her eyes to the floor and miserably nodded.

"Our dealings, it seems, should be with Mahogany," Tane said. He studied her a moment with his dark, unwavering eyes. "If left up to me, I would sentence our deceitful Drone to a Demerit for lying. But considering her current condition, should the opinions of her barrack's master differ, I might be willing to bow to his authority." He arched an inquiring brow at Master Shipe.

Shipe took hold of her arm. "I'll deal with it."

The promise in his voice made her shiver, but she followed him without complaint back to his quarters. She expected to be tied over the bed, to be ordered from her tunic as though her shame denied her the privilege of wearing it, and to be punished. But he didn't. Instead, he brewed a cup of tea and held her on his lap while she drank it, her hands clasped tightly upon her knees because he insisted on holding the cup.

"It'll help with the pain," was all he said, before laying her down in his bed to rest. His gentleness made her feel even worse inside. She rolled onto her side and hid her face in her arms when he crawled into bed behind her. He pulled her back into the cradle of his arms and held her.

"Thanks for the pad," he finally said gruffly.

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Mercy turned her head, not quite looking back at him. She sniffed. "Does it help?"

"Still pinches, but at least the damn thing's endurable." He was quiet a moment, then sighed. "Do you do it deliberately?"

Slowly, she rolled onto her back. She shifted away from him, but his arm twined around her waist and promptly pulled her back to him. She fidgeted with her fingers. "I didn't mean to lie."

"I'm not talking about that. Actually, I can see how that happened. I'm still going to birch the hell out of you, but I meant the other things."

"What things?"

His dark eyes glittered. "You're hurt; I'll humor you. I'm talking about all the damn Demerits."

Mercy looked away first, then tried to roll back onto her side. His hand clamped over her breast, pushing her back onto her back. He moved over her, straddling her hips, bracing his weight off her with his thick hands planted in the pillows at either side of her head.

"We can play twenty questions face-to-face, or with you facing the floor," he growled.

Her breasts heaved as her breathing quickened. "Do ... do you like them ... better?"

"Who?" he asked gruffly.

"Them," she said, even more softly. "Are they ... better somehow?"

He stared down into her eyes for a long moment without answering. Then he snorted and shook his head. "If you aren't the damndest woman I've ever known." He eased his

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weight over her until they were chest-to-chest and very nearly nose-to-nose. "I can honestly say, out of all the females in my barracks, you're my favorite. You're sure as hell the only one I've ever brought to my bed. Does that suffice?"

Mercy couldn't help but smile. "Yes."

"Good." He nodded once. "Now get your legs open. And since you lied to me, if you come one second before I tell you you may, I'll tie your tits to the ceiling."

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Chapter Eight

By morning, her eyes were bloodshot and very nearly swollen shut. And what little bit that Mercy could open them didn't matter anyway since Shipe promptly blindfolded her.

She straddled his lap, her knees to either side of his hips, naked but for the collar he'd fastened around her neck—a narrow strip of black lined by metal rings to which her cuffed wrists were individually attached. She felt Shipe carefully touch the sharp point of a pen next to the stiffening tip of her right nipple, inking a small dot to first one side and then the other. He then put the pen aside.

His fingertips touched lightly beneath both breasts and he shifted away from her before grunting with grudging acceptance. "That looks about even."

She felt the cold swipe of a damp cloth passing over first one rosy tip and then the other, and though she couldn't smell it, the strong alcohol of the antiseptic flavored the air. She could almost taste it as she breathed the smell across her tongue.

"Hold still," he said, and her stomach tightened when he fastened a clamp over the tip of her nipple to line up the dots.

"I'm sorry." She ducked her head, not liking the feel of the clamps but trying her best not to move.

"Your sorrys are like your thank yous," Shipe said distractedly, and she felt his breath brush her chest as he leaned closer. "I don't need to hear either. But I do need you

to hold still, or these are going to be lopsided. And I," he turned the clamp slightly to the left, "will be very cross."

Mercy felt both his hands come to rest on her breast: one holding the clamp and the other, she knew, holding the needle.

"I do this for all the girls here," he said, making a last adjustment with the clamp before shifting away from her so that he could better see both dots at the same time. "Any time a master wants his Personal pierced, I do it. It's a fun hobby that just happens to fit in really well here. Good thing, I suppose, that you're not really mine. Otherwise God only knows how many holes you'd end up with."

She felt the prick of the sharp needle against her nipple.

"Ready?" he asked.

And in a trembling voice, she said, "Yes, sir."

The needle punched through her flesh in one quick, practiced stroke. She winced at the sound more than she did from the minute puncture of pain. In truth, she barely had time to do more than catch her breath, and then it was done.

"Perfect," he said. "Now you're going to feel a little tug."

Now Mercy did gasp as he quickly pulled the needle through the hole, looping a surgical steel ring in its place, slipping in one side and out the other before she had a chance even to hunch her shoulders. A drop of blood splattered down upon her bare stomach, and the metal clamp took hold of her left nipple.

She whimpered. A dull, burning ache suffused her right breast, and the building heat overtook her until she barely felt the clamp.

"Absolutely beautiful," he said, and paused what he was doing to cup her chin between thumb and forefinger and press the gentlest of kisses upon her lips. "In a few months, when these have had time to heal, you're going to look even more pleasing walking with these two lovelies on the end of my leash."

Praise from him was so rare. Despite the pain, his words made her blush. She almost missed feeling the prick of the second needle at her left nipple.

"One more. Ready?"

His praise also gave her courage, and she drew a deep breath. When she nodded, the second needle immediately punched through her flesh. This one hurt worse than the first, and her muscles accidentally spasmed, her legs squeezing around his hips, her shoulders hunching as if she could pull her breast out of his hands. She caught herself and quickly pushed her chest back out again, biting her lip and fighting herself to hold still.

"Not bad," he said, a note of admiration in his voice. "I've had hardened Personals kick and cry while I did this to them."

Mercy managed a weak smile and panted through the worst of the burning pain.

"Here's the tug." He pulled the needle through her nipple and quickly followed it with the ring. As he sat back, his fingers lightly touched the outsides of both breasts and he examined his work. "Absolutely beautiful." He covered each of her nipples with a bandage and fondly kissed her lips one last time. "You're going to make every Lesser in the Pit as green as your tunic. Your first assembly, too. And contrary to

popular speculation, it's not going to be you on the block. Now isn't that a stroke of good luck."

Mercy didn't need to ask who was slated to suffer the most feared punishment in all of Judgment. Her eyes were swollen shut and she could barely breathe through her nose, but there was nothing wrong with her mind. Mahogany was going to be punished for what she'd done.

True to his word, Master Shipe cut the front from her tunic, leaving her with sleeves and a thin pea-green barrier between the corset and her stomach. But as he led her to the dining hall—blindfolded, collared and her hands still bound and fettered to a leather leash before her—her newly-pierced breasts were covered by naught but twin bandages just large enough to blanket each burning and aching nipple.

Because Mercy took each step by feeling her way, they arrived for breakfast quite late. Within the first few steps out of the doorway, she heard the clatter of utensils on dishes come to a smattering halt and all conversations died. Even without the blindfold she knew she wouldn't have been able to see what was going on, but she felt her face flush hot and her belly erupt into a nervous storm of butterflies as Shipe coaxed her right down the middle of that ocean of gawking Lessers and the masters who had to have been watching from their dais.

She thought that he would take her to her table and leave her to fumble her way through the morning meal. But it wasn't until Shipe took hold of her collar and said, "Step up," that she realized what he intended.

Deaton drawled a lazy, "What are you doing?"

"She can't see and I'm old," Shipe snapped. "Leave us the hell alone." He swatted Mercy sharply. "There's nothing wrong with your damn ears, get your skinny ass up the stairs!"

She stumbled on the first step, but his hands on her collar and arm kept her from falling. Mercy could feel eyes on her—envious, curious, resentful—and she swallowed convulsively. It perched on the tip of her tongue to beg to be allowed to eat at her table, but there was little compromise in his hands when he led her to his place at the long masters' table and even less in his tone when he ordered her to her knees.

The fabric caress of a tablecloth fluttered at her back and she sagged partly under the table, grateful to be hidden from everyone's sight.

"This is new," she heard Tane say, and she started. It was the first time since she'd been here that he'd ever taken breakfast in the dining hall.

Deaton chuckled, "He's hardly the first to do something strange before taking a—"

"Say it," Shipe growled, "and she won't be the only one with blackened eyes." He sat down heavily in a chair beside her. Unclipping one of her hands, he promptly slapped a warm biscuit into it. "Here."

"I don't want to cause trouble," she said hesitantly. "I can eat at my table."

She quickly snapped her mouth shut though when Shipe rapped the top of her head with one knuckle. "Did I say you could talk?"

"N-no sir!" she stammered.

"Then less talking," he snapped.

"More screaming," she whispered and bowed her head over the bread. Nobody appreciated her attempt at a joke, and her mouth ran so dry that every swallow felt as though she were choking.

"If you want her for your own..." Tane began, and Mercy jumped when she heard Shipe slap something down on the table.

"I didn't goddamn want her in the first fucking place," he snarled. He pulled her hair when he ripped the blindfold off her face. "She can't fucking see! How can she eat when she can't see?"

To go from dark to bright hurt her eyes, and she blinked rapidly. Tipping her head back, she glimpsed several masters staring back down at her through the sliver of her swollen eyelids.

"She's got a broken nose, all right," Moulton said, and turned his attention back on his plate.

"I am merely pointing out that you could have had breakfast brought to you in your quarters," Tane said. "It's a rather possessive gesture, bringing her to eat at the masters' table."

"Kneeling her at your feet," Deaton added from directly behind her, and Mercy turned her head, blinking up at him. "Feeding her from your fingertips as though she were a Personal."

"It's a gesture that might be open to misinterpretation," Tane finished.

"And eating with her in my quarters wouldn't?" Shipe demanded. "This is what you wanted from the start, isn't it?"

He abruptly shoved his chair back. "I never wanted a damn Personal. I don't need the aggravating bitch! And if that's what you've got planned, you can goddamn well give her to somebody else!"

He stood up, leaving her behind as he stalked angrily off the dais and stormed from the dining hall. Mercy sat in stunned disbelief. Though the sound of his leaving still echoed in her ears, she dropped her bread and reached out to feel his empty chair. Her eyes weren't lying; he really had abandoned her. Her stomach lurched sickly and she started to get up but bumped into the top of the table.

"Look at these." She hunched her shoulders when impersonal fingers cupped and lifted one of her naked breasts. She began to shake, a winding panic shivering out through her limbs, urging her after Shipe. She started to rise again, but Deaton covered her eyes with the blindfold. A hand caught hold of her collar and kept her from retreating under the table. She began to cry instead.

"She's got Personal tendencies," Deaton said.

"Cobb," Tane said.

A man's deep voice said, "I've got her," and Cobb took her collar from Deaton. He led her, crawling on her knees, down to his place on the dais. "Here." He handed her a cup of orange juice. "If you spill any of that, I'll take you over my knee right here. Now, drink."

She couldn't breathe, drink and cry at the same time, particularly not with a nose that wouldn't work. And so she knelt with her head bowed in shameful disobedience, simply holding the cup.

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The echo of a slamming door rolled faintly through the dining hall.

"Well," Tane said mildly. "That backfired miserably."

"She's more than just a natural submissive," Boyden said. "She's a natural Personal."

Spilling the juice, not caring if she was punished for it or not, Mercy curled into a tight ball and just sobbed.

* * * *

The Assembly Hall was a truly impressive room and for a brief moment in the doorway, Cobb removed her blindfold long enough for her to glimpse it.

"Can you see?" he asked, taking a moment to make sure her blood-shot eyes were as wide open as she could manage.

It was an immense room, with huge black marble fireplaces at each end and elaborate chandeliers that reflected the firelight upon the walls and ceiling via crystal-shaped tears. Almost the entire floor was covered by two huge swaths of royal red carpeting, leaving narrow paths of bare stone between the two sections of carpet and around all the walls. The only chairs were those upon the raised dais that occupied the entire front of the room. Directly in front of this was the Block.

Some three feet high and wide, it looked every bit like a butcher's chopping table—except for the liberal supply of straps down all four sides and across the top—but there was no mistaking its purpose. It even had a padded ledge in front, allowing its victim some small measure of comfort when ordered to kneel upon it for a 'legs together' type of

punishment. Mercy shuddered, at the moment very grateful that that victim wasn't about to be her.

"We'll sit back here," Cobb said, as he replaced her blindfold and led her back to the far wall at the very back of the room. "It's not like you can see the action anyway."

She could feel the warmth of the crackling fire as Master Cobb eased himself down to sit cross-legged with his back to the wall. He then pulled her into his lap, into the cradle of his thighs.

"It's been a while since we've had to call an Assembly," he said. "I was looking forward to taking a turn at Mahogany, but..." his voice trailed away as he cupped her bare breasts, his fingers circling the bandages over her breasts, before skimming lightly down over her corset to slip beneath the bib of her skirt. "This is almost better than wielding the birch."

From out in the hall, she heard a voice in hushed excitement asking, "Who's getting the switching?"

"I don't know. Who's missing?"

Female voices giggled and hushed as the steady tramp of a master's boots came down the hall.

"Take your seats," Boyden commanded, and Mercy turned her head, listening as the brisk clicking of highheeled shoes hastened across the stone floor. The sound was quickly muffled by the carpet.

For a time there was silence, and Mercy's skin prickled as she imagined speculative eyes upon her.

"Would you like a Demerit, Shell?" Boyden suddenly boomed.

"No, sir!"

"Then I suggest you face forward."

Mercy heard the master's boots approaching and she lifted her chin a little as Boyden said, "Are you really going to do it?"

Mercy started a little when Cobb kissed the top of her shoulder. Her cheeks flushed as his hand between her thighs parted the folds of her labia and found her clit.

"I am," Cobb said. He chuckled. "It's a dirty job, but someone has to."

"He's going to spit nails," Boyden laughed and headed back the way he'd come.

"Hold still," Cobb told her, and lay a quick swat to her clit when she continued to wiggle her hips to evade his fingers.

Mercy tried to hold still, but her stomach still churned and her body was processing the touch as invasive rather than pleasurable. That it wasn't Shipe's hands seemed to make a difference, though she knew it shouldn't. He didn't want her, and he wasn't her barrack's master any longer. Cobb was. He was the one she had to obey now, and the bulge of his interest pressing up against the crack of her buttocks clearly said he was more than willing to exercise the privileges that came with the chore.

The Lessers began to whisper again. "How many do you think she'll get?"

"My bracelet for your comb it's three dozen."

"Three with the birch," another added sagely. "Plus one with the strap. She's an Elite. They'll whip her harder."

Mercy felt sick to her stomach, and the clatter of more highheels and more excited whispers heralded the approach of an army of high-heeled Lessers.

"You know your places," Master Deaton said from the doorway. "And you..."

A meek female trembled out a shaky, "Yes, sir?"

"Pay attention. This is you next Saturday."

Helpless to do anything else, Mercy listened to the low murmur of both male and female voices rising in volume as the room began to fill.

"Hold still," Cobb told her again, and gave three warning swats right across her sensitive sex. "I'm not going to tell you again."

Mercy panted, startled by the sting of the blows. She hadn't realized she'd been moving. "I'm sorry."

"You'll be even more sorry if you continue trying to evade my hand."

Mercy stiffened in his lap when he slid a finger inside her. She caught hold of his thighs to keep herself from pulling away. She grit her teeth, concentrating on not moving while he explored her both inside and out. The bulge behind her had grown harder and much more pronounced as it nuzzled up between her buttocks, and his breathing became uneven.

"When the whipping gets underway," he said against her nape, "you're going to straddle my thighs." His finger withdrew from her sheath to circle her reluctantly responsive clit with the moistened tip. "You're going to show me a little appreciation for taking you under my wing, and we'll see how quiet you can be. Long, slow strokes, do you understand?"

You're going to move up and down with long, slow, sensual strokes."

He swept her hair back from her face to kiss the shell of her ear, and Mercy nodded, but inside she felt brittle. Had he made this request of her at any other time, perhaps she would have felt differently. Instead, inside her there was only a disquieting revulsion and a plaintive wish that it was Shipe that she felt beneath her, so eager to be buried in the warm welcome of her body.

The whispering shushed as three sets of boots came through the Assembly Hall door and headed up the aisle to the dais.

"Masters Tane, Deaton and Hutch have just entered," Cobb murmured in her ear. He took his hands from between her thighs. "Lift your head."

Mercy raised her face as though she could see through her blindfold to the dais. She wondered if Shipe were up there, watching her yet.

"What are the rules I gave you concerning the Drone?" Tane boomed out over the dead-silent assembly, his tone calm and yet as hard and as cold as steel. "Do not talk to her. Do not look to her. Do not have any interactions with her. I want everyone to take a long, hard look at her right now. Get your fill."

Mercy didn't know it was possible to hear someone staring at her, but she could. She heard that entire assembly of Lessers, all sitting on the floor before her, turning in place to fix her with their unblinking eyes.

"Make damn good and sure that this is the last time you—any of you—ever do so again." Raising his voice, Tane called out, "Bring forth the penitent."

"She's nude," Cobb whispered in her ear as two guards marched Mahogany into the hall and down the long aisle to the waiting block. There was a definite amusement to his tone as he added, "I would say she looks a little scared. She's probably been through this before, back before she was sold."

"You deceived your barrack's master," Tane said, "and used the opportunity to sneak into the common library, where you never should have been. You assaulted the Drone and injured her. Your sentence is four dozen strokes with the birch for your crimes, with an additional fifteen with the martinet to atone for your dishonesty when later questioned about it."

A ripple of shock went through the gathered Lessers, but they quieted almost immediately as Tane added, "You will then be placed into Solitary Confinement with a count of six lashes of the strap given each morning and evening for two weeks."

Mercy gasped, not so much over the severity of the punishment as because Cobb had again slipped his hand between her thighs. Almost idly, he caressed the length of her slit, running the tips of his fingers up and down her cunt. Her hands clenched into fists against his thighs, and he whispered in her ear, "I can see her shaking now. Yes, I'm sure she's been through this before."

And yet, softly, Mahogany managed a trembling, "Thank you, Master Tane."

Mercy turned her head as she heard the unmistakable sound of clinking buckles and opening straps as the block was prepared for her.

"Don't worry," Cobb murmured. "It's not you who'll be feeling the bite of the birch rods." He cupped her chin, tipping her head back until she rested upon his shoulder. "At least not until you've healed up a bit."

Struggling to hold her breath, her stomach a flutter of knots, she struggled to interpret the sounds of Mahogany being securely fastened down. The Elite whimpered once, but whether that was because the reality of her eminent punishment was sinking into her or because the birch rods—still soaking in the brine that harden them and increase their durability—were brought out, Mercy couldn't tell.

"Up on my thighs," Cobb whispered, and Mercy's stomach dropped all the way to her toes as she felt him start to unfasten his pants.

Her breath whooshed out of her in a noisy exhale and she dared to shake her head. She pushed from him, whispering a broken, "Please..."

Cobb caught her chin again. Pulling her back hard against his chest and holding her immobile, he softly said, "Shipe is not the only master in these halls that you must heed. You will not find me cruel, Mercy, but you can either straddle my lap now, or you will do it later with a very sore backside."

"Let the punishment proceed," Tane said from the dais. "Master Grayson, the first dozen, if you please."

Mercy eased her legs apart to straddle his cross-legged lap.

"Remember," Cobb whispered, raising her bib of her skirt and tucking it into the waistband so that her bottom was bared to his eyes. "This is to be a quiet venture. If you draw attention, I'm not going to be pleased."

Bowing her head, Mercy tried not to think about whether or not Shipe might be watching.

"Master, do your duty," came Tane's booming voice and Mercy heard the rustle of the birch rods knocking together as they were lifted from the brine and lightly tapped upon the side of the bucket to dislodge excess drops of salty water.

Warm and smooth, the thick, knobby head of Cobb's cock nestled up between her buttocks to press against her pussy lips. He pulled her hips back over his own, forcing her to rub back and forth upon him. "Master Grayson is measuring his first cut. Seven switches; he must really want to slice into the woman. You must be feeling very vindicated right now."

Mercy swallowed hard, trying not to throw up. She heard the birch hiss through the air and all but felt the burrowing smack as the switches sank into Mahogany. The Elite made no sound, but somewhere to her left a Lesser was softly crying. Probably the one scheduled for her own Assembly hearing next week.

Mercy could sympathize. Her one and only meeting with the birch had convinced her that it was an implement to revered. She could only imagine the one in use now. The verges would no doubt be slender, long and whippy enough to wrap around the hip, with each individual rod forming its own smarting band of color upon which all future strokes would deliberately be aimed, widening and deepening the shade

until there was nothing of paleness left anywhere in her. On the birch that Shipe had used, the buds and twigs had not been stripped away, and Mercy could still remember how that extra biting pain had nearly driven her half-mad before he was even halfway through her count.

The second and third strokes snapped across bare flesh at surprisingly lengthy intervals, giving Mahogany plenty of time to reflect on the agony and to dread the blows yet to come.

"Lean against me," Cobb whispered, and Mercy raised her head, laying it back on his shoulder as his fingers pulled her nether lips apart. It nearly got the better of her, her frightening desire to tear away the blindfold and to run from the room, or up to the dais to fling herself at Shipe's feet and beg him take her back. She'd have willingly accepted Mahogany's punishment as her own, if it would have made the difference. She'd even have doubled the count, although that resolve wavered at the hiss and snick of the fourth stroke, when Mahogany lost her ability to remain silent.

"Hah!" Buckles clinked as she jerked in her bonds, and Cobb chose just that moment to push his rampant manhood up inside her, the length of him opening and filling her.

"Her bottom is clenching and bucking," he whispered, breathing harder against her ear. "Damn you feel good. Seat yourself upon me, Mercy. Long and slow." He sighed his contentment as, hating herself for the cowardly creature she was, Mercy sank all the way upon him. Her traitor's body was even growing wetly aroused, despite her aching heart. Each violent snap of the birch and pain-filled cry made her pussy tingle and clench, as though it were her own bottom bearing

the ensuing punishment and growing wealed with streaks of violet hurt.

"Good girl," Cobb whispered, and Mercy bit her bottom lip. She began to cry, as soft as she knew how, her tears hurting her eyes even more than they already did and soaking into the fabric of the blindfold.

At the ninth stroke, the Hall rang with Mahogany's wail, "Oh God, no! PLEASE! UUNGH!"

And to Mercy's horror, her body responded to the sound with the same hungry zeal that she had heard in the voices of the Lessers only moments before.

"The marks are melting into one scalding contusion," Cobb said huskily, his hands on her hips, helping her to find a slowly rhythm of movement. "I'm going to love watching your ass bounce like that when you go to the block for your lies—my God, yes, squeeze like that again!"

He grabbed hold of her hair, pulling back on her head as he lifted his hips and ground his shaft to the root up inside her. Mercy grabbed at her hair, nearly losing her composure to a cry of pain when he promptly twisted her arm back behind her.

"You'd love a whipping, wouldn't you?" he hissed in her ear. "Well, if you don't start riding me the way I've told you, you're going to get a good one! Or maybe I should reverse it and say you'll never get another one again!"

Mercy struggled to keep her movements slow and steady, and her sobs soft. But her body, a thing totally detached from her mind, thrilled at the thought, at least, of bearing such a whipping as the one she was hearing. The friction of hugging

his cock within her was creating an unwelcome warmth that was growing harder to ignore. She couldn't keep from tightening all around him, and particularly not when Cobb whispered, "Smile for your old barrack's master. He has, it would appear, eyes that are only for you."

Mercy bowed over, covering her mouth with her free hand, her shoulders shaking with sobs too deep for sound. Cobb yanked her back up by her hair, and on the block, the dozen was completed with three brutal swipes that must have stung to the very soul. Mahogany's shrieks certainly made them sound that way.

"It's a toss up which activity I like more," Cobb panted, grinding his hips in the slightest of circles as Tane called Master Smith to continue with the next birch and the next dozen strokes.

Her belly heated. Molten liquid smeared across her thighs and soaked Cobb's hand as he fondled and rubbed her clit. And Mahogany screamed all through the next dozen, which hewed so mercilessly into her.

Master Hutch was given the third set, and the buckles and straps creaked and groaned as the Elite writhed upon the block, sobbing and howling, unable to hold still. Despite his amiable nature, his were not gentle or pitying blows, and pain must have been the whole of her conscious world.

A collective sigh, like a summer breeze, swept through the Assembly Hall when she was given a moment's reprieve between the third and last dose. Master Wilhite was called down to deliver the final twelve, but not before Mahogany's

face was bathed with cool water and smelling salts were waved beneath her nose to revive her.

Cobb tensed and tightened beneath her as he rocked Mercy's hips, forcing her to ride him in short, slow strokes, keeping time with the sound of each diabolical cut. They fell with dreadful sound. The harshness reverberating through the closed room, echoed by hoarse, and growing ever hoarser, cries from Mahogany. The jerks of the impacts made it sound as though her contortions shook the block.

"Meeeeeeerrrrciiiieeeee-ooooough!"

Cobb found her clit between his fingers, and Mercy came, hard, silent, the convulsions of her cunt milking along the length of his shaft until he, with a soft expulsion of breath, joined her in the throes of pleasure.

The final stroke fell, and Mahogany was almost gone. She panted, making raw grunting sounds. "No more," she called weakly. "No more, Master, I beg you ... Ooh!"

Mercy shuddered, wave after wave of sensual pleasure rolled through her, gradually dying away as Cobb whispered, "Good girl. Good girl. He looks ready to kill me."

He slid out of her with a slickness that seemed betrayingly loud, and Mercy turned her face away from his kiss.

"Master Deaton," Tane said. "The martinet, if you would."

"No, please!" Mahogany sobbed.

Mercy shivered, curling back against Cobb as Mahogany rasped her pleas, and the frozen stillness of the room carried her sobs with the same chilling clarity as Tane's response.

"Remember this the next time you dare think yourself master enough to pass punishment onto another."

Cobb squeezed his hand one final time over her still clenching sex, then began to fasten himself back into his pants.

"Fifteen strokes," Tane announced. "Take your time, Master Deaton, and let each one be felt."

Mercy whimpered, but the sound was lost in the frantically renewed sobs coughed out by the Elite on the block.

"They're untying her legs," Cobb whispered in her ear. "They'll be fastened straight behind her. Deaton likes to stand far enough away that the ends of the whip separate with each stroke. He'll catch her entire bottom with the first blow, and rip her legs all the way down to her knees with the second."

Two Demerit sessions with Master Deaton had shown Mercy that the brother of the Mountain Lord had many loves, the majority of which were best expressed with an implement held firmly in the palm of his hand. With the martinet, he was a veritable artist, and Cobb's admiration shone in his voice as he described the unfolding punishment.

From the moment Deaton combed his fingers through the knotted strands, to the swing of his arm as the many strips whooshing through the air around his head, Mercy listened with every muscle as tense as Mahogany's must have been. That beastly whip cracked down with a thick sound across what must have been by that time thoroughly martyred flesh. Fifteen times Mercy heard that sound from the cradle of Cobb's restraining arms, as well as the most dreadful gargling wail as, without any voice left with which to scream, Mahogany still made the valiant effort to try.

When at last it was all over, only the sound of mucousy gasps and voiceless sobs could be heard underlying Tane's voice as he again lectured the room. "The Drone is off limits. You do not talk to her. You do not touch her. And not even an Elite may presume to be a master and discipline her. Parade her through the room. I want everyone to take a good look at what her fate will be if this rule is ever again disobeyed."

"She's bowed over," Cobb murmured, hot against Mercy's ear. "The guards have to support her almost entirely; she can barely move. There is nothing of her bottom left but marks of purple and deep, dark red. Her thighs will likely be blue-black by evening. If your eyes weren't so swollen, I would let you see it. It's the same condition your bottom will soon be in for daring to lie to a master."

"I'm sorry," Mercy trembled.

"You should be." His hand between her thighs patted her mons twice. "You will be. But not for a day or two yet."

Mercy swallowed hard. She felt Master Cobb move beside her. "Over here," he called out and stumbling shuffle of feet approached their spot at the back of the room.

"Beg forgiveness of the one you wronged," Cobb said.

A wet drop splashed across Mercy's bare foot and she jumped, turning her head and listening intently.

A whispered, "I'm sorry," rasped from a throat screamed raw an instant before the kiss of warm, wet lips tremblingly touched her toes.

Even knowing she would be punished for it, Mercy grabbed at her blindfold, yanking up high enough so that she could peer through her lashes at Mahogany. The Elite was held

bowed on the floor before her, her arms held by the two guards that had paraded her through the room. She was covered in sweat. Her nose was running, her face was red, and her eyes, when she raised her head to glare at Mercy, burned into her with a hatred that made her shake.

"Try again," Cobb commanded. "Beg her forgiveness, and this time mean it."

The hatred flared in Mahogany's red-rimmed eyes an instant before she lowered them to stare at the floor.

What she rasped, Mercy could barely distinguish as words, but she hastily blurted, "You're forgiven," and yanked her foot back lest the vindictive Elite be made to kiss it again.

The guards lifted Mahogany and helped her, stumbling and continuously making that horrible, gargling groan, her legs barely able to move one foot in front of the other, from the room. Mercy got more than a passing glimpse of the proud woman's cruelly whipped backside and legs. She was all purple, streaked with near black-colored blood welts. It would be weeks before her skin was white again, and in the places where the birch and martinet had cut her, there might possibly be even scars.

Shaken, when Mahogany finally disappeared out the door, Mercy snapped her head back around to seek out Shipe upon the dais, but she froze when she saw every Lesser in the room staring back at her. Not merely ostracized anymore; now she was despised.

"Eyes forward," Master Deaton boomed from the front of the room, and as obedient as puppets, they put their backs to her.

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"You're being naughty, Mercy," Cobb said, as he took the blindfold from her fingers. He tugged it firmly back down over her aching eyes.

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Chapter Nine

Master Cobb didn't have the same spacious quarters as Shipe did. His were more cluttered and the closet too full to empty into a room for Mercy. Instead, a makeshift barrack-for-one was created for her in the cleaning closet directly across the hall and right next to the entrance of the Pit. She got a real bed, though. A nice cot beneath her that was certainly softer than a mattress on the floor.

The extra comfort went a long way towards making up for the spilled-cleanser smell of her new room, although there wasn't a lot that it could do for the dreadful loneliness of having to sleep alone. Cobb made nightly appearances, but even that felt different. The pleasure was muted somehow. It felt more like a job and less like the privilege that it had been with Shipe. And when he was done, Cobb always went back to his room, leaving Mercy to lie awake in the dark for a long time, just listening to the sounds of a hundred women sleeping in the resonating Pit next door.

It didn't take very long at all for her sleepless nights to begin affecting her days. Always tired, she found herself sitting down more when she should have been putting the previous day's books away, or cleaning the tables, or cataloguing the volumes gathering dust on all sides of her. It was her third week anniversary with Cobb when she gave up all pretenses of trying to work at all. Sitting down at her desk, tired in both mind as well as body, Mercy folded her arms

over the top and lay her head upon them. Sleep didn't come easily then either, so she got up and turned out the light.

She completely missed the bell that announced the mid-morning break, although the one that signaled the end of it did start her awake long enough for her to raise her head, blink sleepily around the brightly lit room as the Lessers filed out back out to their skill classes. There were two white Demerit slips for Laziness lying on the desk beside her arms. She crinkled them up and threw them in the fireplace. Shutting out the light again, she stretched out on one of the sofas and went back to sleep.

She never saw the light come back on. Instead, what she heard was a gruffly barked out, "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Mercy reared her head as a hand hooked the back of her corset, and she was unceremoniously yanked into wakefulness. She cried out as her knees hit the floor and she barely got her feet under her before Shipe dragged her across the room to her desk.

"This isn't a Motel Six," he snarled, shoving her over her desktop. He clamped one hand across the back of her neck to keep her bent, while in his other, he held a lithesome switch. Every part of her contracted when she saw it; every part of her came tinglingly to life, for the first time in three long weeks.

He grabbed the back of her tunic, flipping it up and tucking it into the back of her corset to keep it well out of his way, and then raised that switch high. Mercy shrieked as it

snapped across her bare thighs. She grabbed the desk, and then she got mad.

"Get off me!" Swinging her arm, she elbowed him in the side as he brought that switch cracking furiously down all over her bucking and kicking flanks. She raked the desk with her fingernails, screaming not with pain but with outrage.

Her hand knocked into a short stack of books, knocking most to the floor, but one she managed to grab. Rolling half onto her side, she swung it at him and the book struck his shoulder and neck. When he stumbled back a step, Mercy fell off the desk. Her hands and knees both stinging, her bottom smarting where the switch had raised marks on her skin, she glared at him, panting and shaking with anger.

Shipe stared first at the book, and then at her. His black eyes narrowed and his face darkened. Dropping the switch on the floor, he reached for his belt instead.

"No!" She flung herself at him, kicking, hitting and screaming. "You left me! You have no right!"

Shipe grabbed her arms, lifting her clean up off the floor and shoving her back on the desk. He fell on top of her and, while she screamed and bucked, struggled to get her kicking legs apart and himself safely between them. She punched him, cracking all four of her knuckles on his hard jaw and knocking his head back before he caught her wrists and pinned them to the desk above her.

Pinned beneath him, without the leverage to keep fighting, Mercy stopped struggling. She seethed in silence. Her hair had fallen across her face and, with each ragged pant, wisps of blonde puffed and billowed around her mouth.

"You done?" he growled. When she didn't move, he reached up with his free hand and brushed her hair back from her face.

Her eyes flashed, her flanks smarted where her buttocks were pressed to the desk beneath his slender hips, and she could hardly breathe under his heavier weight. "Get off me," she snarled.

He glared, his head cocking slightly to one side. Then he laughed, a hard and bitter sound. "You have to be so damn different, don't you?"

He got up, but he pulled her up as well. In one fluid jerk, he yanked her around and shoved her face-down back over the edge.

She shouted as her arms were wrenched up behind her and pinned between her shoulders. "Ow! Let go of me!"

She kicked back at him, but caught the wrong leg and he fell on top of her, crushing her beneath him again. In the struggle, her tunic skirt had fallen back down and she both felt and heard it tear when he ripped it out of the way. The corner of the desk jabbed into her thigh, and with every renewed attempt to struggle, he wrenched her wrists ever higher until it felt as though her arms would be snapped from her shoulder sockets. Unable to move without hurting, Mercy gave in with an angry sob as he leaned his weight into her back. He tried to kiss her, but she bit at his mouth.

"Go to hell!" she wept when he reached for his belt again. But he didn't beat her, as she thought he would.

"We'll go together," he said, over her angry shout as he thrust between her legs and deep inside her.

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He conquered her with brutality, yanking her back to meet his thrusts by her imprisoned wrists and fistful of her pale hair, and yet he felt so good inside her. She was so angry that she'd rather have hurt him than to submit, but he still felt good, the vigor of him pushing inside her evoking all the wrong sensations. He forced her head back to kiss her mouth, and she even forgot to bite. It was a devastating betrayal to be so hurt and yet so absolutely lost to his touch.

Shipe was completely unrepentant. "You're mine!" he told her furiously. He made her repeat it as she came, not once, but many times, until she lay beneath him, unable to move, feeling raw and yet so brittle that all she could feel inside her was him moving.

He left her lying on the desk when he was done. She turned her face away so she wouldn't have to watch him leave again, and he fastened himself back into his pants without a word.

Picking up his fallen switch, he said, "You should go to the Assembly block for fighting me." He wrote out two Demerits: one for Resisting Chastisement, and the other for Physically Striking A Master. "Either way, they aren't going to go easy on you."

She didn't look at him. "I don't care."

Mercy waited until he left the library before she peeled herself back off the desk. She sat down gingerly, his forceful entry having left her sore, and picked up the slips. Curling into a ball, she hugged them to her chest.

* * * *

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It was the middle of the night when Mercy heard the door of her closet open. She was still awake, still groaning, every movement a fresh shock of agony that laved the lower half of her in fire.

It had taken Master Wilhite, the Black Master on duty, forty minutes to clear the four white-buttoned stigmas from her tunic. For the sin of burning two Demerit slips, he had given her ten strokes apiece in addition to the initial six for Laziness. For striking Shipe with the book, his cane had crossed her buttocks with vindictive force no less than sixty times. She'd had to be carried back to her closet and was left to sleep as best she could atop the blankets, her punished flesh the color of deep and overlapping bruises.

Not that that had stopped Master Cobb from seeking his own entertainment shortly after the guards had gone. No, he'd simply rolled her onto her back, and while she mewed and gasped, draped her knees over his shoulders and pumped into her aching sheath until he found his own completion. Tweaking her nipple rings while she groaned and struggled piteously to roll back onto her stomach, he had then bid her a fond goodnight.

As the faint splash of the hall lights dimly flooded her walls, Mercy buried her head in her pillow. It was halfway through her mind that Cobb had returned to again sate his hunger for the pleasures of her aching body, when she heard a woman's voice, "She looks as bad as you did, Mahogany."

Mercy froze, her eyes opening wide as Mahogany replied in a flat, dead tone, "She didn't have to beg my forgiveness or kiss my feet in front of an entire Assembly."

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Mercy sucked a breath to call out for Cobb, but she was jumped on from behind, her head wrenched back by a fistful of hair and cloth shoved deep into her mouth.

"You owe me, mistress," Mahogany said nastily, as she and two of the three females who'd accompanied her dragged her from her cot and dumped her on the floor. "Kiss my feet! Help her, Brook."

A red-headed Elite hit the back of Mercy's head, knocking her to the stone floor and shoving her head down towards Mahogany's bare toes.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Mahogany demanded. "I kissed yours. I did it in front of an Assembly! Do you think you're better than me?"

Mercy looked down at the woman's bare feet, but she couldn't make herself touch her mouth to them. Instead, as evenly as she could, she spat the cloth from her mouth and said, "I can't control what the masters do, but if you lay one hand on me, you will be put back on the Assembly block. And so will your friends."

Mahogany stared at her with something akin to hatred.

"She must still think she's a mistress," said the fourth Elite. A willowy blonde, she laughed nervously from where she stood sentry at the door, nervously peeking out of it.

"Pearl," Mahogany said coldly. "Shut the door. Hold her for me, Sashay."

Arms grabbed Mercy from behind and Mahogany slapped her hard across the face. Mercy cried out, her cheek stinging, and when she looked back at Mahogany, it was as though she could see the anger roiling within her.

Behind her, Brook snapped out, "She's not better than us. Teach her a lesson!"

Mahogany drew back her fist. She swung like a prize-fighting champion, her knuckles connecting solidly with Mercy's nose, and she felt the cartilage crunch. Blood spurted everywhere. It was as if a red flag had suddenly been waved.

While Pearl watched for guards at the door, the other three converged on Mercy, kicking and punching. Sharp nails scoured the flesh of her stomach and thighs as someone raked the rings from her nipples, ripping them out of her breasts. Her cry was abruptly stifled when Sashay sank a fist into her gut, doubling her over. Mercy fell to the floor, retching.

Something too hard and solid to be a fist struck her across her back. There was a dull crack and pain exploded through her chest. Brook yanked up on her hair, and they fell off balance and smashed into the cot, which broke.

Vaguely Mercy heard Pearl's frantic screeches from the doorway, "Don't kill her! What are you doing? You're going to get us all whipped!"

Mercy curled into a fetal ball, struggling to protect her head as Mahogany grabbed a broken leg off the cot and began to pummel her—her shoulders, chest, and legs. She heard bones breaking under the blows. A roaring filled her ears and everything went blessedly black.

* * * *

"Oh my God," Pearl kept whispering. "Oh my God..."

Hushed hysteria trembled in Brook's voice. "Look at all the blood!"

"Is she dead?" Sashay whimpered. "Did we kill her?"

"Oh my God ... Oh my God..."

Mercy tried to open her eyes, but there was only blackness. A deafening pulse kept pounding in her ears, drowning out the whisperers huddled around her. She tried to call for help, but there was only a liquid gurgling.

Hands took hold of her arms and Mercy's whole world exploded in white-hot pain as she was partially lifted from the wet ground.

"Get her feet," Mahogany said. "We'll hide the body."

"Oh my God!" Pearl wailed.

"Would you shut up! You're not helping!"

"Hide the body?" Brook half-whispered and half-shrieked. "Where? Where could we possibly hide it?"

"In the refuse room," Mahogany said. "If we're lucky, she'll get carted out with the trash and no one will ever be the wiser."

"No..." Sashay began to pace. "No, we ... w-we should just leave her here."

"What if someone finds her?" Pearl wailed. "Oh my God, what if they find her dead?"

"Then the whole mountain will catch a whipping," Mahogany snapped, "but it'll be ten times worse if they find her alive and she tells them what happened! Now get her damn feet!"

Mercy's scream of pain was a hoarsely gurgled exhale as she was heaved up off the floor, and the deafening pounding

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became an overwhelming roar that carried her back into the blackness of nothing.

* * * *

"She's making that rattling sound again," Sashay hissed.

"Is she dying?" Brook whispered.

Trying to cry softly, Pearl moaned, "She's bleeding all over the floor! I can't wipe it all up, it's just smearing!"

"Get the door," Mahogany said.

"Shh! Somebody's coming!"

A hand clamped over Mercy's mouth. Her entire body was drowned in agony as she was shoved up against a wall, and the four frightened Elites leaned into her. It felt like knives stabbing into her shoulders, back and hips. She coughed a bloody breath and lost consciousness again.

* * * *

Mercy...!

It was very cold, and she could barely breathe. Every time she tried it felt as though red-hot knives were jabbing into her back and side.

Mercy...!

Painless darkness lapped at the edges of awareness, one side offering oblivion while the other stung her with cold.

"Mercy? Where are you?"

"Can you hear us?"

She shied from the sound of the calling men and let the nothingness overtake her again.

* * * *

The sound of rummaging, of empty aluminum cans clanking together and the rustling of plastic bags, lifted her back into a vague sense of now. The smell of trash drifted assaulted her nose, but she couldn't move to get away from it.

"Bloody clothes," Cobb said in the distance.

Boyden swore. "We must be getting close."

"Has anything like this ever happened here before?" This from someone Mercy didn't recognize. Her face felt caked and stiff, and she tried to turn her head, but a stab of pain shot through her neck.

"Mercy! You get your skinny butt out here!" That voice she recognized very well, and it started her from the darkness that was beginning to creep back over her. "Where the hell are you? You answer me, goddamn it!"

She was so cold. She couldn't feel her toes. She couldn't see; she couldn't move. She tried again to turn her head and felt her forehead press up against something hard. The same hardness, she belatedly realized, that she lay on and which was pushing in at her from all sides, squashing her into an unwilling ball.

She was in a box. Her legs were tucked around her with her knees almost touching her nose. Pain burst all through her when she tried to move just enough to find her arms. She sucked an involuntary breath and the knives returned with a vengeance, stabbing into her back and up through her chest into her lungs. She vomited.

Somewhere beyond the pain, she heard Boyden snap,
"Shut up! Listen!"

The warm drip of blood and bile coursed down over her almost numb hand, at least enough for her to recognize that one arm was beneath her. Experimentally, halfway expecting for it to hurt, she flexed her fingers and touched the side of the box. She scratched at it with her nails.

"Mercy?" Boyden called again, and again she scratched at the inside of the wooden box.

She tried hard not to breathe, each shallow gasp when she failed sending the knives plunging back under her broken ribs.

"Over here!"

The digging resumed even closer now, almost right above her.

"Damn! How deep did they put her?" That was from Cobb, and he sounded as though he were right over her head.

The box jostled sharply, as though someone had grabbed hold of one end and lifted, and the knives sent her gasping back into unconsciousness and blessed relief from hurting sensation.

* * * *

As anyone who'd ever experienced severe pain could attest, it was morphine, and not honey or wine, that was the one true nectar of the Gods.

She couldn't remember a whole lot from the first week or two of her recovery, and most of what she did recall was blurred and faded, like a dream. She remembered Master

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Doctor Moulton smiling down on her as he said, "Boy, this takes me back to my army days. I haven't had to put someone back together like this since the war!"

And she remembered weaving in and out of wakefulness: sometimes to the light, with Shipe holding her hand or caressing her face, and sometimes to the dark, with the warmth of his body stretched out in bed beside her.

She was given a private room somewhere near the very top of the fortress. During the day, it was brightly lit and had a window. A window. She had almost forgotten what one of those looked like. For one hour each day, Shipe, who for three months never left her side, would roll her bed over to it so that she could see out. The snow-capped mountains were beautiful, especially at sunrises and sunsets, when the birthing or dying light of day would paint the snow and the skies in brilliant shades of orange, pink, and brilliant blood red.

If she was extra good and didn't itch at the casts that covered nearly all of her but for one arm, or complain about the pureed food that Moulton made her eat, sucking it through a straw for the weeks that her jaw was wired shut, then Shipe would sometimes open the window and the cold mountain air would caress her face. It was early spring, and she could smell the bloom of the flowers in the valley below.

Tane came to visit only once after most of the casts were off. It was the morning Master Doctor Moulton finally unwired her jaw.

"I want a burger," she was saying as the door swung open.

"Too bad," Shipe replied. Sitting in his chair beside her bed, he didn't so much as glance up from the newspaper he was reading. "You get jello."

"Good morning," Tane said, and came inside. He held up a small paper bag. "Beware hardened masters bearing gifts."

"Is it a burger?" Mercy asked.

The newspaper crinkled as Shipe dropped it into his lap. "Less talking," he snapped, then gave her a warning look. "No screaming until your lungs are fully recovered."

She shoved her plate of jello aside and folded her arms across her chest. She wasn't particularly successful at keeping a neutral expression on her face.

"Moulton's going to proclaim her well and throw her back into circulation," Shipe told Tane. "And I'm going to put her right back up here."

The Mountain Lord smiled and handed Mercy the small bag.

"Peppermints!" she crowed as she looked inside.

"To help wean her off the morphine," Tane said, and handed the second gift to Shipe: a small, round, hand-held paddle, nestled in a white box with a blue ribbon on top. "Also for help while she's weaning herself off the morphine."

She wasn't as thrilled with that as she was with the candies, but Shipe took it from the box and tested it against his palm. The crisp smacks made her bottom tingle.

"What about my gift?" Shipe asked. "Did you get them?"

"As requested." Tane passed over an oversized manilla envelope. "Where will you go?"

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"I haven't been home in a while." Shipe slid his finger under the top flap, tearing it and spilled two passport books into his hand. He opened them up to look at the photos.

"England is the land of corporal punishment, after all. I could thrash her all day and I doubt anyone would notice or care."

"When will she be released?"

"This afternoon maybe. Tomorrow's more likely." Shipe shook his head.

"You don't have to leave Judgment, you know," Tane said. "The problem has been resolved. I'll be meeting Buchanan tomorrow to give him Mahogany."

"Buchanan?" Shipe grunted. "Didn't he kill the last one you sold him?"

"He's so pleased that I'm giving him a second chance that, unlike her predecessor, Mahogany will likely live a long and miserable life in his tender, loving care. She thinks it's so bad here, but she has no idea how much worse it can be."

"Don't ask me to feel sorry for her," Shipe said. "She could use the education."

"I could use your expertise right here. As I said, you don't need to leave."

"I'm old, and I don't care about the job like I used to." Shipe held out his hand, palm up and waited. "Besides, you just want to get out of paying me."

After a moment, Tane sighed and handed Shipe a check. "Your percentage of the sales on every girl you've ever trained."

Shipe looked at the sum. "I want my things, too."

"As soon as I get an address, I'll ship them to you."

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Mercy had three candies in her mouth when Tane turned to her. She did her best to flatten her cheeks and look a little less greedy, but he still smiled knowingly as he approached the side of her bed. When he bent down, she had to struggle to swallow what was in her mouth before he kissed her. He lay his hand between her legs and she felt a delicious warmth unfurling in the pit of her womb.

"Take care of him, Mary Blackwell," he said as he straightened back up.

And she and Shipe said in unison, "Mercy."