

The Witch, Solana

WARNING Contains graphic torture descriptions, sexual content, and death.

One - Inquisitors

Solana stumbled across the Town Square, her wrists tightly bound behind her back with rope. It was autumn, but she was barefoot and bare-armed, her feet aching with cold, her arms coarse with goosebumps. She was gagged, a thick leather ball the size of her fist that crammed her mouth to the back teeth, secured tightly with a leather strap, making her jaw ache.

Two guards and a sergeant-at-arms, steel armour clattering, strode with their dusky captive held between them like a trophy. Solana kept her eyes down, humiliated by the stares, loud comments and laughter of passers-by and stall merchants. Across the square, beyond the colourful stall canopies, a grey pall of smoke rose from the elevated stone stage upon which the condemned were executed. There had recently been a witch-burning, and the remains still smouldered at the tall wooden stake.

Fear made Solana's heart quick as she was hurried towards the thirteen steps that rose to the forbidding Justice Hall. The façade's grey stone columns, iron fittings in which unlit torches rested, a black metal cage suspended from a gibbet, the off-white of old bones within its bars.

Solana had been working in the barn of her mother's farm at the time of her arrest, and had never expected to be seen in public: all she wore was a simple sleeveless shift. The dress' slender straps had slipped part-way down her arms, and her plump breasts were dangerously close to being exposed, bouncing shamefully as she was hurried across the square. The skirt was muddy. Her hair was loose, a thick black mane tumbling to her shoulder-blades.

Half African by birth, her father black, her mother Spanish, Solana had inherited the beauty of mixed races. The slender nose and rich, curly hair of her mother, the full cheekbones, sculpted lips and perfect teeth of her father. A life tending animals had blessed her with strength and good health.

But now her slim fingers were dark with strangled circulation, the coarse ropes painfully tight around her wrists, confining her hands behind her back. Her feet were bruised from her journey through the city streets.

They ascended the steps into Justice Hall. Solana would have pleaded to turn back, but for the gag, and she was marched into the cavernous atrium. Perhaps a hundred people stood within, most queuing to have petty grievances settled. But all moved aside for the beautiful prisoner and her armed escort. A few pitied her: most simply felt relief that it was her, and not themselves, being led inside.

The four stopped at the head of the queue. A Clerk, robed and sombre, regarded the ragged girl. He dipped his quill in ink, reached for a heavy leather-bound book. Worn fingers leafed through thick pages, filled with the names of hundreds who had come this way before.

"Name?" The Clerk's voice came in a monotone, his disinterest plain.

"Solana Degas," grunted the sergeant on his gagged prisoner's behalf. From beneath the rim of his iron helmet, deep-set eyes watched the quill scratch its path. "She is accused of witchcraft."

Solana tried to protest - but the size of the leather ball filling her mouth seemed to prevent sound even forming in her throat. She simply blew a little air through her nostrils, her dark eyes burning with rage as the Clerk wrote.

Solana knew only too well her accuser. Catalina Lacrosse, her only rival in beauty, the blonde, lithe vixen from the nearby village. Catalina, the Mayor's daughter, who had been jilted by Solana in her efforts to be crowned Harvest Princess. To Solana, it had been a frivolous and childish celebration, but accepting the crown had pleased her fellow villagers and satisfied tradition, so she had borne the formalities with grace.

But Catalina, jealous, had begun causing trouble for her rival. Months of rumours, gossip, and finally this: Solana arrested, wrists bound behind her back, and dragged half-naked through the cold for five miles here to the city, and the foreboding Justice Hall.

The Clerk finished writing. He looked briefly at Solana. "The Inquisitors are in session, you may proceed to the Hall of Justice."

The guards propelled her forward, through a second chamber, finally halting outside tall oak doors trimmed in brass, with elegant gargoyles as knockers, four guards outside. The Sergeant pounded once with his gauntlet, and the door was opened from within.

Solana's teeth pressed on the ball filling her mouth in trepidation as they entered a cavernous hall, cloisters around its perimeter, a public gallery above, from the heights of which perhaps a hundred people were watching the day's proceedings. At the far end of the hall, huge stained glass windows splashed coloured light across a mosaic floor. A dozen guards stood silently at posts along the walls. A brazier glowed sullenly in a far corner.

Directly ahead, on a raised podium, three stern-looking men sat at a huge oak table. All wore the robes of Clergy. They had been in discussion, but all three now looked up.

A figure scurried to meet the four newcomers. A scribe in his fifties, ferret-like in appearance and manner. He looked openly at Solana, his eyes taking in her shapely form, the lush tangle of her hair, her pretty face, her plump and half-exposed breasts. Without breaking the stare, he listened to the Sergeant's brief communication. Finally, as Solana was brought within a dozen paces of the dais, the scribe turned to his superiors.

"My Lords, the prisoner is Solana Degas, an accused witch. She comes this day from Sanguesa, where she lives with her mother."

The central of the three figures glowered at the woman before him. Solana's racing mind identified him as the Chief Inquisitor, a deeply religious man, whose role was seeking the truth from those accused of witchcraft or heresy. He, she hoped, would be kind.

"Strip her."

Solana's eyes bugged over her gag. Momentarily stunned, she had no time to react as one of the guards grasped her flimsy shift and ripped downwards; the fabric tore across the torso, the slim straps snapping, her breasts bouncing free. The triumphant guard shredded the garment from her body, leaving Solana standing stark naked in front of a hundred faces with hands still lashed behind her back. The humiliation flushed her face with heat, even as her nipples hardened in the chill.

The three Clergymen leaned forward

Five-seven in height, slim, beautiful. Her skin flawless, rich brown in colour, darker at elbows, knees, and groin. Her full lips were naturally several shades darker than her skin. Her face was oval with wide cheekbones. She had coal-dark eyes, a slender nose and strong, level eyebrows giving her a resting expression of strength and confidence. Her black hair was loosely curled, tumbling rich and abundant down to her shoulder blades. Her breasts were high, full and firm, topped by sturdy black nipples like ripe berries. Her belly was shaped by muscle, quartered by defined gullies centred on a deep navel, a slender, strong waist with worked obliques. The sleek flare of her hips was the frame for a full triangle of tight black pubic hair. Her buttocks round, firm. Her legs were long, thighs thick and strong, calves firm teardrops; her feet broad with high arches and pale soles, straight toes slightly curled on the cold tile floor. From broad shoulders, her arms, still held at the wrists behind her back, were shaped by worked muscle; the strong swell of laterals, through the defined landscape of triceps and biceps, the taper of forearms brushed with fine hairs. Soft feathers of hair peeped from her armpits.

"What is that?" The Clergyman on the Inquisitor's right pointed.

Solana flinched as the guard grasped the fine gold chain about her throat. "I believe it is an adornment of some kind, My Lord."

"Huh." The Clergyman sat back. "Remove it. Melt it down. Then burn her clothes."

Solana's heart sank as she was stripped of her jewellery; the necklace, along with the single rag that had been her clothing, were taken away.

"Sergeant, remove her gag." The Inquisitor spoke. "I wish to question her."

"Aye, My Lord."

The Sergeant loosened the buckles of Solana's gag. The leather ball was extracted carefully from between her teeth. Solana slowly closed jaws strained by the cruel gag. She licked her dry lips with a numb tongue.

"Your name is Solana Degas?"

Solana straightened. Though she was naked, in full view of so many, with hands bound humiliatingly behind her back, dignity blazed from her brown eyes. "It is."

"Your age?"

"I am twenty-seven years, My Lord." Her voice was strong, confident.

"And not married?"

"I have not yet met a man worthy."

Amusement echoed from the public gallery. The Inquisitor seemed less inclined to laugh. "And what do you say to the charge of witchcraft?"

Solana fixed him with cool eyes. "I say it is a lie, My Lord. I am innocent."

"Hm." The Inquisitor sat back. "The Court shall investigate further. Take her away."

Hands still bound, Solana was led to another door. It opened onto a steep stairwell, and they descended to a small guardroom. There, at a table, were three men and four women.

The male guards wore the armour and violet uniform of soldiers. But the women were unusually clothed. Both near Solana's age, they wore simple black laced corsets over white sleeveless blouses, and short, earth-coloured kilts, with calf-high boots. Their arms and legs were bare, their hair was loose, but each wore a white kerchief bonnet, reminding Solana of housemaids. And yet there was a confidence to their manner as they ate alongside the men that had Solana wondering if they were whores.

But it was the eldest of the women, perhaps approaching forty, handsome-faced, with porcelain skin, straight jet black hair falling to her waist, black eyebrows, who stood to meet the newcomers. Solana saw that she had a soldier's belt about her hips, with a heavy ring of many keys, and a sheathed long dagger.

"With me," the woman said.

Solana lost count of the doors that opened and closed to the keys on the woman's belt. The five of them descended countless narrow stairways, surely deep underground; they marched between wet and slimy walls. Stark naked, Solana's skin tightened with goosebumps in the chill, nipples hardening. The stone was hard and icy to her bare soles, wet in places. Guttering, oily torches lit claustrophobic passageways lined with heavy, windowless doors. It stank of human waste.

A cry echoed eerily from some distant place, and Solana's eyes grew wide in alarm.

Did the soldiers not hear it? Solana looked to each in turn, but they seemed oblivious, perhaps intent on leaving this hell-below-ground, this tight, intestinal nightmare of cells. The woman finally stopped alongside an iron door with a single, small barred window; she unlocked it with a thick key, pushed it open. "In here."

Solana nearly choked. Dark, the cell was eight feet square, windowless rock walls and a ten-foot ceiling. There was no bed, no pot, no source of water or light. But there were horrors that quickened her heart in an instant.

An iron ring set in the wall opposite the door, five feet from the floor. From it, on a short, thick chain, dangled heavy iron manacles. Below them, a larger open ring, secured to the floor by two chains.

"What is this place?" she demanded in horror.

"This is where you stay," the woman finally spoke to Solana directly. Her voice held authority. "You will quickly become used to it."

"Are you mad?" Solana looked wildly about as her wrists were again untied. The moment her hands were freed, she tried to bolt, dodging easily from the grip of first one soldier, then another. There were shouts of alarm; Solana was faster and stronger than any expected, but as she fled through

the open door, the woman Jailer blocked her way, grasping her shoulders, flinging her backwards. With a shriek, Solana tumbled, back into the tiny cell.

"Restrain her, fools!" the woman shouted.

Solana tried to struggle up again, but this time the soldiers and sergeant-at-arms seized her, the woman catching her right leg, and she was dumped against the rear wall of the cell. With her back to the slimy stone, the sergeant's hand on her throat, the men stretched her arms up to the open manacles.

"Let me go!" Solana fought in rage and disbelief as the woman clamped each of her wrists in a heavy shackle; then securely locked them with a key. They were all but too small: cold, hard iron snugly enclosed each wrist, trapping her hands, leaving her with arms stretched over her head.

The iron hasp was next: the woman closed it around Solana's waist, locked it quickly with a key. Its effect was to anchor her to the floor, and it took only moments to realise that she was fastened in place inescapably. Vulnerable, naked, her breasts and belly, hairy loins and the black-haired hollows of her underarms naked to her captors.

"Stupid wench!" The woman's boot thudded hard into Solana's unprotected ribs. She shrieked, but could not even fold over with the pain, instead wrenching her hands in the manacles, sagging but unable to lower her upstretched arms.

Breathing hard, the woman Jailer paused to rearrange her black hair at her back with both arms lifted, glaring at the chained prisoner. "Do not test me again."

"Wait - please!" Solana gasped breathlessly as her captors turned and left; but the iron door clanged shut, leaving her in darkness. The cell door's lock was turned, a restraining bar clanked home.

Despite the pain in her side from the woman Jailer's kick, she scrabbled her heels against the stone floor, trying to lift herself from her sitting position. But the iron hasp on her waist allowed her hips to lift only a few inches. Nor could she turn, with arms stretched overhead and wrists fixed to the ring by just a few links of chain. The shackles were so tight they would not even turn on her wrists.

Solana gave a wail of despair. "Listen to me! I am innocent!" She closed her fists, urged forward again and again on her chains, twisting her hands, trying everything in her power to free herself. She placed her bare feet wide on the floor and tried again to lift her hips, pushing with all of her strength, her arms' muscles bunched. Her teeth were gritted in determination. "*You bastards! Set me free!*"

Solana was strong, but the chains were unforgiving. Regardless, she fought their restraint for almost an hour, until her body shone with sweat and her breasts heaved. At last, exhausted, sobbing in frustration, she acquiesced, chains holding her arms over her head, her naked back against the wall.

Nausea and weakness swelled from the pit of her belly. Her will was strong, her face rarely giving way to grief, but now it overwhelmed her, and she burst into tears, her head against the stone behind her, hands fisted above the metal cuffs. The shackles' cold grip seemed to burn into her wrists, the hasp heavy on her waist, a bitter reminder that she was now a captive, a prisoner, deep in the dungeons of Justice Hall.

Two - The Cell

There was no light in Solana's cell but for the faint glow of a burning torch in the dank passageway outside. By its light, Solana could make out the close stone walls, the rough floor, the heavy iron door. Besides the iron rings to which her hands were fettered and the hasp around her waist, there was an old iron pulley moored high above, in the centre of the ceiling. A heavy black chain ran through it, its dangling iron ring drawn all the way up, its free end hung in ominous loops from another iron ring high in one wall. Directly under the pulley, a small drainage hole centred the cell floor.

There was nothing else.

Naked, her hands confined in the fetters high above her head, and anchored to the floor by her waist ring, Solana quickly discovered the cruelty of her restraint. Even after nine or ten hours, when she guessed night was well advanced, she could not lie down to rest. She could only sit, legs across the floor, her arms up. She could not bring a hand to her body, nor even bend her arms. Goosebumps covered her naked skin and she shivered through the long night.

Despite the chill, her armpits crept endlessly with sweat. With armpits clamped either side of her face, she could smell their staleness.

It was Catalina. All Catalina.

Everyone knew of Catalina's beauty, she had made sure of it. At the Harvest Festival she had dressed with extravagance; a rich, elaborate gown with a plunging décolletage revealing her milky cleavage, flowers through her carefully-arranged hair. Her necklace, paid for by her father, would have been a year's wages for most.

Solana had simply turned up wearing a white sleeveless dress for the late summer heat, her brown skin shining, a single pink flower behind one ear, and had only entered the contest upon the urging of her friends. But the townsfolk had voted her Harvest Princess.

It was only late in the sweltering evening, when people finally began to leave for their beds, that Catalina had swept past Solana and hissed, "*you will regret this.*"

Now, here Solana was. Chained, deep underground, in a cold and lightless cell. As hours crawled, she sometimes lost all self-control, and shrieked curses to Catalina into the darkness. At times, she fought against her restraint, tugging on the shackles that held her arms up over her head. But inevitably, sobbing, she slumped against the wall, arms lifted and head lolling. Her eyes stared into darkness.

Endless hours.

Solana was aware of her growing thirst and hunger. At first, no more than a minor discomfort, but as ten hours became twenty, twenty slowly wore into thirty, the need swelled and grew to the intensity of torture. Solana found herself calling weakly towards the door.

But there was no sound. No water. No relief.

A thousand days passed. An entire lifetime.

Daylight and fresh air seemed distant memories. The freedom to move her own arms seemed no more than an imagined luxury. Numb with despair, Solana remained against the cell wall, arms up, prisoner to the silence, the slow passage of time. The odour of her own armpits tormented her.

She barely registered the rattling of the cell door being unlocked. As it creaked open, she turned her face, hiding her eyes behind her uplifted arm against the glare of a torch - but glimpsed, briefly, a slender figure padding into the tiny enclosure, guards standing in the corridor beyond.

"What is your name?" the maiden asked.

The voice was soft, sweet. As the cell door was closed and locked, Solana dared to look. The girl was young, slender, and, like Solana, completely naked. She paused to secure her torch in the bracket on the wall to which the cell's morbid overhead chain was anchored.

In the flame's light, her skin was given a golden sheen, softened with the finest dark fuzz like the skin of a peach. Slim arms and legs, graceful hands and feet. Her breasts were small, but sat high, tipped with chestnut-brown nipples. Below the arch of her ribcage, her lightly-fuzzed belly was firm, her waist tiny. Long black hair tied in a loose ponytail that hung between her shoulder blades. Abundant hair

between her slender thighs and in her armpits. She was very pretty; high cheekbones, her lips a puffy rosebud, her eyes deep black. Her eyebrows were bold hyphens, naturally tousled, that angled up from the bridge of her petite nose.

The girl held a basket, which she brought to Solana's side.

"My ... name?" Solana found the strength to move her head. "Solana Degas."

"I am Maria," the girl offered. "It is my job to tend the women imprisoned here."

"You are naked," Solana observed.

"I am a Chamber Slave," Maria admitted. "I have been for three years. My mother was a witch, and salvation for me can only come through my indenture to the Church."

"My God. How old are you?"

"I am nineteen now."

Solana's heart hurt. Her own predicament seemed nothing compared to this poor girl's. "I'm so sorry, Maria."

Maria shrugged. She reached into her basket, lifted out a carafe of dirty terracotta. "I am used to it, now. Drink." She held the vessel to Solana's dry lips, and the latter drank gratefully, though the water was stale. Soon she was at least partially slaked, and let her head rest against the stone.

"Thank you. God, thank you. I do not know how long it has been since I last drank."

"You were brought here almost two days ago."

Less than two days? Could it really have been so short a time? To Solana it seemed forever. Her wrists hurt within the fetters' hard grip, her arms ached from having been held above her head for so long, her fingers and toes were hurting with cold. *And only two days.*

"You are beautiful," Maria said quietly as she retrieved bread from the basket. "It is a shame."

"How is it a shame?" Solana frowned.

"You must know that your life is over? You are condemned already."

"What?" Solana was so shocked that she completely ignored the food offered in Maria's fingers. She shook her head. "How can you say that? I am innocent!"

"Please!" There was already a shine of tears in the girl's eyes. "Do not say that! When she comes for you, confess all. That way she will not torture you much."

"*She? Torture?*"

"That is why you are here. You will be questioned under torture until you confess. Just confess early, or your suffering will never end. At least once you confess, you will go to the stake and it will be over quickly."

"*The stake?*" Solana's voice carried the outrage her eyes flashed. "How dare you! I am a free woman, wrongly imprisoned! I will have justice done!"

Maria shrank from the outburst, fear on her young face. She fumbled for her basket as she found her feet. "I have to go! I beg you confess, or you will suffer greatly!"

"Maria, wait!" Solana begged as the girl grabbed her torch and pounded on the cell door. It opened, and she hurried out, taking light and hope with her. Darkness closed in again as the door was slammed and locked.

Gradually, Solana's ire ebbed, and doubt began to creep into her mind. Chained, locked away from daylight and humanity, a horrible realisation grew. How many witches had she seen arrested, in her twenty-seven years? Dozens. None had returned. And often, upon her visits to the city with her mother, Solana had seen the executions. Witches taken naked into the Town Square, pale and weary, and bound to the tall wooden stake while their confessions were read aloud to all, and wood was piled around them. Solana had never cared for these executions, the screams, the hissing flames, the rolls of oily smoke as flesh caught alight. But it had never occurred to her that these might be innocent women, forced by torture into confessing false sins.

Solana's hands closed into fists above her manacles at the thought of such injustice. *Surely not!* And surely they would not try to make *her*, Solana Degas, confess to witchcraft, when she was guilty of none? Chained in her cell, Solana felt her strength ebb in growing despair.

Three - The Threat

The bar was lifted, the key turned in its lock, and the door swung open, but Solana did not stir as light splashed across her grubby face, her lips parted for the wisps of frost that illustrated slow breath.

Three women entered cautiously. "Is she awake?"

"She's awake." Solana recognised the voice of the woman Jailer.

The cell air was rich with the aroma of Solana's armpits. A trickle of urine, not yet sluiced away, ran from between Solana's legs to the cell's drain. Her black mane was grimy, tumbling about her face. Her skin shone with old sweat and grease. Her hands, high over her head, drooped from the fetters.

Forty days had passed, and Solana had not been freed for even a moment, the iron shackles fast about her wrists, the hasp sure around her waist, in her cell. Anger had become self-pity, despair, and finally numbness.

Solana willed herself to raise her head. As before, these women wore the black corsets over white sleeveless blouses, the short skirts, the boots and bonnets.

"Do not speak, or you will be gagged. Do you understand?" The woman Jailer spoke sternly, and Solana nodded. The Jailer fitted a key into one fetter, then the other, unlocking each in turn. Solana's arms finally fell after a month and a half, her shoulders feeling fiery shocks of pain at the movement.

Without pause, she was leaned forward, the iron still around her waist.

The two women, female guards, pulled Solana's hands behind her back and crossed them over. Cord was passed about her bruised wrists, so tight it bit into the flesh and made her gasp, around and around, between, and then around again. Her wrists may as well have been cast in granite; she could not move them at all. The bindings were painful, and she winced as the final knot was fastened, beyond reach of her numb fingers.

Finally, the waist ring was unlocked and its heavy iron clanked to the floor.

"Let's go."

Solana knew not to speak. Her legs would scarcely move as the women hauled her to her feet, hands behind her, and she staggered with them. Far from a relief, her release from the false security of her cell was an unwelcome disturbance.

At the end of a long passage, a heavy door swung open. Another female guard, with a sword in a shoulder scabbard at her back, but wearing the same skimpy uniform, held the door. Here, the woman Jailer left, but Solana and her two female guards entered a room of gothic dimensions. Torches threw orange light onto stone walls that glistened with slime and seeping water. Stone pillars supported a vaulted ceiling veiled by darkness. The chamber felt huge, its depths foreboding. Solana could make out shapes: huge frames, odd-looking tables, devices of which she had only heard tale. As the dungeon door was closed and locked, another woman's voice reverberated from the darkness.

"Bring her."

Fearful, Solana stumbled forward, towards an open well in the chamber, a winch and pail astride its black maw. From the shadows of a stone pillar beyond, this new woman stepped.

She was Solana's height, in her forties, beautiful, with an athletic physique. Lightly tanned skin. An oval face with defined jawline, brown eyes, cascading brown hair tied atop her head with ribbons. High cheekbones, a slim nose, downturned lips, gullwing eyebrows. Her arms were strong with worked muscle, her legs long and gleaming.

Like some Greek goddess, she wore a simple white sleeveless tunic with an angled hem sweeping from left hip down to right mid-thigh, belted with a gold cord at the waist. Her breasts, full and soft and round, strained at the fine fabric of her tunic, nipples raising visible nubs. She was barefoot; unthinkable for a woman of status, but she looked completely comfortable with it.

Her voice was rich, deep. "I am Luisa Consuela."

"Why am I here?" Imagination had given Solana answers enough, and fear tainted her voice.

Luisa raised one angled eyebrow. "You know why. You are an accused witch, and it is my job to discover the truth." The goddess turned away, but paused to glance over her own gleaming bare shoulder at Solana, brows pitched in disapproval. "The girl is filthy," she told her guards.

The two younger women impelled Solana towards the well, then forced her to kneel, hands still tightly constricted behind her back, while one retrieved a pail of water. It was flung full over Solana's body, icy rivulets coiling down her skin. She shrieked with the shock of cold.

The pail was filled twice more, the filth sloughed from Solana's body. When it was over, she crouched low, arms twisted behind her, gasping and shivering violently. Water dripped from her bedraggled hair. Gooseflesh peppered her bare skin, her nipples were stones, her muscled belly heaved.

A hand closed in her hair, twisting her head back, until she was looking up into the dark eyes of Luisa Consuela. "Confess that you are a witch, and save yourself a lot of suffering."

It was the first direct reference to torture. Solana was afraid, but gave a firm reply: "I am not a witch, and nothing you can do will change that."

Luisa Consuela smiled. It was disconcertingly beautiful. "How naive. Actually I am going to wrest the truth out of you, even if you do not know it." She released Solana's hair.

"If it's the truth you must hear," Solana spat, "then do your worst!"

"My worst is something you do not wish to experience." To the women: "bring her!"

Solana was led through the chamber. It was a madman's labyrinth: pits and alcoves, narrow stairways through the rock, passageways, cells. There were places it was so dark, Solana could barely see to walk. Their first stop was a shallow fireplace, dead embers piled within. Immediately alongside were stocks, so that a prisoner's feet could be locked in place above the flames to roast.

Solana regarded it grimly, before Luisa led on. In a low alcove, a wooden bench to which a victim might be tied, her arms stretched to a thumbscrew: tightened, the studded vice would crack and shatter her finger-bones. Deeper, a broad oak table, shackles at each corner, alongside which were irons, pokers, pincers, the Spider: a clawed instrument for the tearing and twisting and burning of female flesh. A brazier shimmered nearby, ready to heat the cruel instruments. A 'pear' was shown to Solana: a bulb-shaped device, which, once inserted into the vagina or anus, would be opened by means of a screw-handle. Its expansion would cause, first, unimaginable pain, then irreparable damage. Luisa cranked the device open, slowly, to demonstrate.

Nearby, Solana saw a girl hung from shackles against the wall, her toes twelve inches above the floor. Alive or dead, Solana could not discern.

She was shown a Judas Cradle: like an obscene, oversized arrowhead of wood with an iron tip, standing on four sturdy legs, its spike upwards beneath a pulley moored to the ceiling. Sat on top of the Cradle, a victim's anus or vagina would be slowly penetrated with agonising effect.

Through a low passageway, to a small, rough-hewn cell, central to which was a huge object, a vile machine that Solana recognised from tales in the local taverns: like a bed, with a massive wooden winch at its head, around which chains were wound.

"Ah." Luisa caressed the wooden surface tenderly. "On this rack I have confessed many women. You see, the pain begins within just a few small turns. But it grows and grows as you are stretched. The rack will surely and slowly dislocate every joint in a woman's body, tear her belly and rip every muscle from its mooring."

While one woman guard held Solana, the other went to demonstrate the rack's mechanism, playfully fondling its handles, agitating the roller that would stretch its victim. The girl's eyes were fixed upon Solana, as if she was already imagining the newcomer stretching on the vile machine.

"Nobody has withheld confession on this rack," the girl told Solana simply. "It breaks everybody, trust me, I've seen. Everyone confesses."

Luisa smiled at Solana. "And you challenge me to do my worst?"

Solana almost faltered, then straightened, her bound hands closing into fists behind her back. "I am innocent of -"

A groan, so desperate it barely seemed human, echoed from somewhere not too distant. Luisa Consuela gestured towards the sound. "Indulge me."

Borne by the two women guards, Solana stumbled from the racking room to an adjacent cell, her eyes discovering the source of the sound. A pregnant woman, perhaps in her thirties, naked, was bowed backwards over the broad rim of a huge, six-foot wheel. Her ankles were secured by ropes to rings in the floor: while her wrists were fastened to the wheel itself. Simply by turning the wheel upon its ratcheted axle, she had been stretched to her body's limit. Every muscle was stark, the skin drawn harshly across her ribcage, her entire body shining with sweat.

The woman's head was secured to the wheel rim by means of a broad leather strap across her brow. Around the lower half of her face, a brace of sorts had been fitted: by way of its iron callipers, her mouth had been levered open, so widely her jaw was all but dislocated. An iron funnel had been pushed part-way down her open throat, which Solana realised with horror was for the introduction of liquid. The woman was not pregnant after all: her belly was distended by gallons of water.

Another of the maids was here, impeccable and pretty in her sleeveless blouse and skirt, corset and bonnet, blonde hair in a ponytail.

"In a few hours, we will listen to what Rosita, here, has to say," Luisa explained.

Even as the torturer spoke, the maid was bending to a ceramic urn beside the torture wheel, where she scooped a pint-tankard of water. With the nonchalance of a servant dusting a window-sill, the girl poured the liquid into the open funnel lodged in Rosita's mouth.

Rosita was stretched so tightly that she could not struggle, but her swollen belly heaved, and her eyes bulged at the ceiling as the water sank down her throat with slow, evil glugs. When, at last, it was all gone, a long, low groan reverberated through the funnel protruding from Rosita's mouth.

"She will confess soon," Luisa promised.

"You are evil," Solana hissed, stricken by what she saw.

"She is a witch. I do what is necessary," was Luisa's scornful retort. To the maid: "Tighten her."

With the same indifference, the maid stepped to the lever that operated the black iron gears of the wheel. Though she was unable to speak, Rosita began making terrified shrieks through the funnel as, using her full weight and the strength of her thighs, the girl hauled the lever. The huge wheel shifted, creaking and groaning, a full inch. Solana had never before heard a human body stretch; but as Rosita's wrists were pulled further from her ankles, a terrible creaking came from her limbs and torso, and a horrible scream of pain boomed up through the funnel.

Luisa watched a few moments, then nodded approval to her assistant, "Let us move on."

They emerged into a large room hewn from rock perhaps forty feet across and twenty feet high. Chains adorned the walls, a black iron cage hung on a chain in one shadowed corner. But Solana's eyes were fixed on a single, terrible sight: central to the chamber a woman hung, groaning in agony, by wrists bound behind her back, the muscles of her arms fiercely striated and defined with the unnatural stress. The rope from which she was suspended ran all the way to the vaulted ceiling, then back down to a simple winch and brake. Her slim ankles were weighted with lead ingots, perhaps fifty pounds at a glance, adding unbearable strain to her back-twisted arms and dangling body. She was clearly in terrible pain: her whole, naked body shone with sweat, and her moans were constant.

"Esmerelda. Do you wish to confess yet?" Luisa asked as she crossed to the winch.

The hanging woman half-lifted her head: white teeth clenched against the pain.

"Oh, dear God, stop the pain," she pleaded. "I am not a witch, I am innocent!" Her voice was filled with agony and dread.

"I will hear the truth, now." Luisa began to crank the winch: slowly, the rope was wound in. Solana watched as, by her wrists, Esmerelda was lifted higher and higher, until her toes were some nine feet above the floor. Luisa told Solana, "This is strappado."

She released the brake. Dragged down by the weights at her feet, Esmerelda plunged six feet, the rope howling through the overhead pulley - until Luisa snapped on the brake.

There was a tremendous *BANG!* as Esmerelda was jarred to a terrible halt and both her shoulders instantly ripped out of joint, dust flying from the rope. Esmerelda, with her arms now fully vertical behind her head, gave a terrible scream, urine spraying from between her thighs, twisting and swaying like a sack of grain on the end of the rope, the weights swinging from her ankles.

Esmerelda's scream seemed to last for half a minute, a howling, bawling of agony; but through it she managed to shriek, "*I confess! I confess!*"

"And that," Luisa said, "is the discovery of truth. I shall take her confession presently."

The horror of what she had just seen made Solana feel faint, and she looked for the reaction of the two women guards. They seemed utterly unmoved by the animal screams of poor Esmerelda; one even had a faint smile on her lips.

Luisa grasped a fistful of Solana's hair, and pulled her onwards. At the realisation that Luisa meant to leave Esmerelda hanging in unbearable agony on her own dislocated shoulders, Solana's knees felt weak and she felt vomit rise in her throat.

Led by her captor, with the two women guards as escort, Solana stumbled through the bowels of the torture chamber, the ongoing screams of Esmerelda becoming oddly hollow and distant. By now, Solana was shaking, and not just with the cold that invaded her naked body. She was terrified. Her hands, roped securely behind her back, were fisted with anxiety, palms and armpits sweating, her stomach tight.

They returned to the main chamber of the torture dungeon, with its dangling chains and glowing braziers, the machines of torment looming in the shadows.

"Raise her," Luisa told the women.

The command took Solana completely by surprise. They had come to a space between four pillars, where a long chain with open fetters hung at eye level from a pulley in the twelve-foot ceiling. Though women, slim and pretty, the women guards were strong; despite her protests, Solana was held in place while her hands were finally untied from behind her back by the woman with the sword; in a matter of moments the girls were lifting her arms, closing her wrists into the manacles, her arms in a high diamond above her head. Naked, she felt obscenely exposed in the cold dungeon air, standing in front of Luisa and the three women.

Solana's bare body was coarse with goosebumps; the hairs on her arms and thighs stood. The floor was cold to the bare soles of her feet, and she lowered her face against the humiliation, biting her lip. Fear had her heart pounding and temples thudding, but she was determined not to show it.

As with Esmerelda's strappado, the chain of Solana's manacles ran to a heavy windlass, which Luisa herself now turned. Solana heard the creaking drum and the chain's clatter. As her captors looked on, by her fettered wrists Solana's arms were pulled higher until they were stretched straight up; Solana felt the rising shackles draw a stretch through her entire body.

The humiliation of being stretched in front of women was unbearable; but Luisa turned the windlass still, until Solana's heels were pulled up off the floor. She teetered on her toes, her body straining; then Luisa rotated the windlass again. Solana's hands crunched down into the shackles, fingers curling with the pressure of her own bodyweight, and she felt her reaching toes clear the floor.

"Oh my God! Oh, God!"

Solana had never been hung by her wrists before, and she had never expected such pain. Her wrists hurt, and she could feel a brutal stretch through her elbows and shoulders, down the straining muscles of her arms.

She was turning on the chain, her face between her armpits, her view of the chamber shifting as she slowly rotated. Utterly helpless, a dangling pendant. Her feet instinctively searched for support, but the floor was three inches below her toes; the columns were easily seven feet away, leaving her slung in empty space.

"Let me down!" Solana barked desperately.

But Luisa locked the windlass. "Use this time to reflect upon your confession," she said. "I shall return in four hours."

Four - The Lash

As a child, Solana had dangled from trees and monkeyed across the wooden beams of the barn, high above the floor. It had been almost effortless, so never would she have imagined that hanging from her wrists might be torture.

But less than an hour after being hoisted off the ground, she was learning a terrible new truth. Her head locked forward by her up-wrenched arms, sweat wet on her back and running in streaks from the tight hair of her armpits, she fought on against the suspension. Her wrists hurt unbearably, it felt as if the iron would break her bones; and her own bodyweight had drawn her hands down into the cuffs so that her fingers were compressed together and useless.

Beyond her wrists and hands, whose agony seemed unavoidable, Solana had tried to find ways to battle her suspension. Her arms were strong from years of work on the farm, and with muscles tense, she could escape any real pain through her shoulders and elbows. She could also swing her legs, pedal her feet, or draw both knees up: while it resulted in little more than her body rotating a half-turn and giving her a view of out-of-reach walls and pillars, it also shifted her weight on her arms and gave relief from the strain.

Over the second hour, though, things began to get far worse.

Solana recognised that her arms were failing when the muscles started to tremble all along their shining landscape; straining laterals and biceps, ridged triceps, the striations and contours etched by standing veins. Their shaking was involuntary, as muscle fibre reached exhaustion point. The ache was severe, as if she had been lifting heavy straw bales without pause for a day.

Solana clenched her teeth. She stirred her feet, trying to shift her weight, but finally, over the course of a minute or less, she felt her strength ebb as the trembling stopped and her muscles were depleted against her will.

As soon as it did, she felt the strain in her arms shift. A distinctly hot, burning sensation seemed to ignite deep in her armpits and elbows. She had no strength to fight it, though, and hung helplessly as the hot pain quickly spread along the bones of her arms. She shifted her legs again, toes searching the air for some support or anchorage, but this time the swinging only worsened the pain.

She could feel her whole body weakening. It was not her will, but her own flesh and bone failing her after less than two hours suspended. She had not been aware of tensing the muscles in her back, but even they had been tight, and as they gave up their strength, the heat began to spread down her spine and into her lower back.

Solana's head, pushed forward by the position of her arms, gave her a view only the stone floor, mere inches below her dangling toes, but completely out of her reach. The pain in her wrists was still fierce, but now the new fire of stretching ligaments began to make itself known. She had become a limp, shining brown deadweight on a long chain, rendered helpless.

The third hour of suspension by her wrists was a more savage lesson still.

Deep, tortuous pain slowly but surely set in; through the bones of her arms, down her back and radiating out to her sides, spreading around to her belly. At the same time she felt her body stretching under its own weight, her ribcage lifting, her shoulder blades shifting outwards.

Any kind of movement created pain, so she did not move. But with her immobility, the cold of the dungeon embraced her, creating its own particular torment. Her skin was cold, but the sweat of suffering continued to wet her underarms, chill droplets creeping down over the goosebump-roughened corrugations of her ribcage while she hung motionless.

The fourth hour was an eternity.

Cold, hanging unmoving, under the impassive watch of the woman guard, Solana had no more physical resources to fight the pain that racked her. Now it was about her ability to suffer, the power to hold on to sanity despite her body's failure and the constant torture of suspension. She simply had to hang by her wrists, feel the pain, and choke back the groans that rose up from her core.

When she heard the approach of bare feet and boots, it brought hope of mercy, mixed with fear of what might come. Solana's heart began to thump and her stomach churned.

"By now, you cannot move."

In an emotionless voice, Luisa's simple truth showed she understood her tortures better than the victim herself. Stopping in front of her dangling prisoner, flanked by her two women assistants, eyes on Solana's face, Luisa retied her long hair into its knot at her crown with both hands, the strong muscles of her bare arms shifting with fluid grace. Even the hair in Luisa's armpits was trim and pretty.

So helpless and vulnerable in front of the women, Solana felt more humiliation than she had ever experienced in her life. She wanted to cry with it.

"Please, let me down." With her head forced forward by her suspension-locked arms, Solana discovered her voice oddly strangled. One of the girls laughed. The shame was unbearable.

Luisa smiled too, as she finished tying her hair. "Surely you know, it is not negotiable whether you are let down or not. If I tie your hands they will remain tied until I choose to free them. If I hang you by your wrists, you will hang until I choose to let you down."

"Please." Luisa's gloating only worsened the humiliation. "What do you want from me?"

"Confession."

The injustice seemed to stab Solana through the heart. "But I am innocent of anything!"

Luisa snorted, and glanced to her girls. "Secure her feet."

As if it could not get worse. The two women were quick, each fetching a ten-foot length of chain ending in a shackle. Kneeling behind the dangling prisoner where her toes were inches above the floor, the women grabbed an ankle each; Solana shrieked, tried to kick free, but had no leverage. She merely twisted her body, unable to stop cold iron being fitted onto each ankle.

The shackles were closed in short order, and each woman took up her chain and moved to where iron cleats were anchored into the stone floor on either side.

"Pull," one of the women said, and both tugged on their chains. Solana gave another shriek as they drew her legs apart with ease.

"No! Stop!" Solana squealed. Added to the horror of hanging in the shackles, this humiliation was mortifying. With legs apart, the hairy tangle between them was exposed, like a bird's nest in the gap between her thighs, and she could feel the cool air invading her most intimate parts.

The girls, both laughing now at Solana's distress, had attached their chains to the cleats, and Solana was fixed, hanging on her arms, legs out, in an inverted-Y shape above the floor. Solana let her chin drop to her chest again, giving a short grunt of defeat.

"It helps to stop you thrashing around under the lash." Luisa's explanation of the ankle chains came casually. From the corded belt of her dress, she pulled a looped whip of braided bullhide. "You would dislocate your own shoulders trying to evade its bite."

Solana was staring at the whip. Its length was polished with years of use, the thickness of Solana's finger, tapering to a fine knotted tip. Luisa drew near. Every muscle in Solana's now-splayed body looked taut and defined, her arms wrenched straight up, tight and close behind her head, her full breasts lifted and pulled together on her raised ribcage, the eight firm pillows of her abdominal muscles and the firm undulations of her obliques defined. Strong, but now rendered so vulnerable.

"What are you going to do?" Solana's voice was shaking, pitched higher than she would have wished, and one of the girls stifled a laugh. The answer was more than obvious.

Deliberately, slowly, Luisa drew the coils of the whip between Solana's legs. As the bullhide dragged through the thick hair, it tugged on tangles and drew out strands that Solana felt with awful intimacy on her labia, a clear demonstration of the access Luisa's whip would have to any part of Solana's body.

Luisa said simply, "this will be your lesson in not withholding truth."

"I am not a witch!" Solana objected, fresh sweat prickling across her body in a wash of hot, panicky fear.

Stepping over the ankle chains without needing to look, Luisa slowly circled behind her prisoner. After four hours hanging with muscles depleted, and now with legs spread wide and secured with chains, Solana truly could not move.

Luisa lifted Solana's woolly cascade of black hair and carefully tucked it between neck and upstretched arm, baring the prisoner's muscled and gleaming back.

Solana heard the whip slither and circle behind her with a low note like wind through branches, then hiss forward through the air and *crack* across her back. Savage pain flashed across Solana's flesh, drawing a shriek from her lungs, and she was jolted in her shackles, the chains creaking.

The impact of the whip was horrifying in its pain: but instead of ebbing, the pain seemed to swell and explode in the seconds that followed, burning and searing. Solana could not believe that a single lash would hurt so badly. She found herself crying out.

Luisa threw the whip again. It cracked smartly across Solana's shining skin, driving another scream from her lungs, the leather wrapping around her, laying a cruel welt across her back and ribcage. As with the first lash, the impact was like lightning, sending a bright flash before her eyes, followed moments later by a terrible, fiery, rolling and swelling thunder of agony.

"Stop!" Solana managed to cry out, before the third stroke hit, forcing another scream. Solana found her heart hammering as a heavy sweat broke on her skin. The pain in her wrists and stretched arms was forgotten, washed out by the searing horror of the whip.

Luisa moved to the side, aiming then flicking the whip. The leather landed hard across Solana's bare breasts, making them leap, the whip wrapping around her back and biting into her shoulder blades, throwing Solana in her shackles with another scream.

She could not move, could not protect any part of her body. "*Stop! Stop!*"

Luisa did not stop, slicing the whip at Solana's helpless body again and again, slowly circling while Solana was splayed, shrieking. Cruel strokes landed on her thick thighs, her belly, her breasts and back, her flanks, her buttocks.

When Luisa finally paused, Solana's entire body was on fire, a cross-hatch of blood-speckled welts across her brown skin. Twenty five lashes had landed; every inch of her body was wet with sweat, and she wailed and squealed, overwhelmed with the pain.

"You can avoid this," Luisa said. "Give in to it. Offer your confession and it will stop."

Solana's eyes closed and fresh tears slid down her wet cheeks. Her lips trembled. "Fuck you."

Luisa's response came hard and fast.

As a girl, Luisa had learned the lash from her father: she had practised with a borrowed whip on trees, stripping the bark with well-aimed blows. Now, she laid into Solana with true expertise. The whip cracked hard on Solana's flesh, measured stripes as Luisa circled, hotly biting sensitive skin, wrapping around her hips and torso with score marks like burns, its tip snapping. Solana screamed without inhibition.

A well-aimed stroke across the back of one knee; chased with a second to the same spot, then a third, until Solana gave a scream of true anguish, helpless to avoid six more biting strokes of the whip to her outstretched legs.

Solana hung. Spots of light floated in front of her eyes, the pain so intense it made her ears ring. Her chin rested on her chest. Her whole body burned in unbearable waves and the sweat ran.

Luisa was in front. Now, again, came the precision strokes; she flicked the whip so that its very tip *cracked* into Solana's armpit. The pain drew a shrill scream from her lungs, radiating into her breast and down into her ribcage. Twice more into the same armpit, a cruel amplification of that drove agony into sensitive flesh.

The next slice crossed Solana's breasts again, followed by a back-stroke, then a fore-stroke, the soft globes lurching, swinging and colliding with each lash as their sweat was flung in a mist. Then to those firm obliques and abdominals, body lashes that flung the shrieks from Solana's core with their force.

One after the other, until Solana had suffered fifty strokes of the whip.

Luisa took pause. "Give your confession of witchcraft, and it stops."

Even through the pain, Solana felt a tide of anger in depths of her stomach. The injustice tore at her very gut, and Luisa's challenge simply goaded Solana to shaking her head slowly.

With a slice across the left side of Solana's body, spraying sweat into the air, throwing a fresh scream from her throat, the whipping resumed. Luisa would lay a lash so that the leather cracked across Solana's ribcage, nearly splitting her breast; or fling it so that it wrapped around her hips, its knotted tip snapping at a buttock or biting her navel to punctuate the agony. Each time a scream; without hurry, Luisa laid lash after lash across Solana's vulnerable body.

Luisa came to stand in front of her prisoner. Her body still shuddering on the creaking chains, Solana hung on her stretched arms, her legs out wide, sobbing, striped with welts.

Sweat had begun to glisten on Luisa's own bare shoulders and arms, and she was breathing hard, but she did not give Solana a chance to recover, as she threw the whip again. Once more the leather *cracked* across Solana's ribs, flinging sweat, wrapping itself around her body, leaving a fresh welt.

One by one the strokes came, slow and hard; and Solana could do nothing but shriek and cry. The whip hit five times across her bare breasts, making them bunch and jump and slap together. It slashed at her exposed sides, the sensitive skin of her lower back, each impact making Solana sway in her splayed suspension like a spider web in the wind.

Framed by her own tangled hair, Solana's head drooped forward, fluids strung from her face.

"Admit the truth! Confess that you are a witch!" Luisa shouted.

Solana's mind was swimming with the roar of pain that ravaged her body, but at Luisa's demand, she closed her eyes and accepted that pain.

But worse was coming.

Behind Solana, Luisa circled the whip again, her eyes on the hairy target between those wide stretched legs. When the whip sliced hard up into her vulva, the breath exploded from Solana's chest in a wild shriek, and the most awful fire engulfed her. A second ferocious lash in exactly the same spot, then a third, and agony seared into Solana's vagina and cervix like nothing she had felt before.

For all its thickness, her pubic hair offered no protection, and when the whip smashed up into her vulva for the fourth, then fifth times, Solana's shrieks melded into a long scream. Equal to the pain was the absolute horror that such an intimate and vulnerable target would be so viciously exploited.

Luisa reappeared in front of Solana, now. Though her eyes would barely focus, Solana saw the fluid motion as Luisa twisted at the hips with a swift upswing as the whip, with precision, impacted again hard into Solana's agonised vulva, flinging a shockwave into her uterus. Solana's scream was piteous, even as the next lash found the very same spot, tripling the pain, followed by a third that seemed to split her clitoris and drive the most excruciating pain into her vagina and rectum.

The next stroke was even more accurate; the whip's knotted tip was so fast it was invisible, but snapped with an echo off stone walls directly into Solana's clitoris again, sending a fresh scream through the vaulted chamber. The last delivered with the same precision to Solana's anus.

When the whip was still, Solana was spilling snot from her nose, whimpering on every breath. Her entire sex felt as if it was being burned with a giant flame, and she could not draw her legs closed to protect it.

"*No more, please,*" Solana sobbed. Even in such agony, the humiliation was intense; the two women to the side had their hands near their own groins in imagined pain, but their smiles told that this was great entertainment to them. One girl blew a kiss in mock sympathy.

Luisa circled behind once again. Solana was panting. The whipping was never-ending, an eternity, and she felt the urge to scream her confession, to say anything to stop the torture.

The lash returned with a long, whistling impact that wrapped fully around Solana's body, the tip snapping on a nipple so hard it split the skin, and Solana screamed between her upstretched arms with a rope of drool spilling to her sternum. More strokes came, measured, hard, merciless; each impact *cracking* on wet skin with reports through the torture chamber, crossing earlier welts and reawakening their pain with new, compounded agony.

The final lash, Luisa threw as hard as she could, putting all of her strength into an upstroke that smashed on the full with a gunshot sound directly into Solana's vulva and clitoris, splashing the two female guards with warm droplets, flinging the most terrible scream from Solana's throat.

The whip whistled, slithered, and was silent; Solana's scream was still going with the pain of the last lash to her genitals.

It was a long time before Solana, whimpering, realised that the whipping had not resumed.

Her head down, her body encircled in fire; her vulva searing pain, her breasts and armpits, back and thighs all feeling as if they had been flayed with a knife.

The whip tucked back into her cord belt, Luisa was untying her hair, shaking its brown cascades out with both hands as she stopped in front of Solana once again. The sides and front of her simple dress were soaked with sweat, her bare arms and legs shining, the muscles defined. Despite it, she was barely out of breath.

Slowly, through her pain, Solana found resolve to speak in a croaking voice. Even the weight of her own woolly hair seemed to drag her down. *"To Hell with you."*

Luisa raised one eyebrow. "Have you not had enough?"

"You know I have," Solana croaked in dread.

Luisa carefully coiled the sweat-wet whip, retying it to her belt, and stepped close. The prisoner's skin was slick with sweat, a mass of raised welts from the merciless lashing. Luisa put her fingertips under Solana's chin and lifted her head a little, looked directly into the suffering face framed by the dark gullies of her armpits.

"Then know this. Every time we do this, it will get worse. Confess now, and it will end. Fight me, and in the end you will lose your mind."

Solana said nothing; she hung heavily on her manacled wrists, legs outstretched, her whole body burning; her toes touching nothing in the dungeon air.

Luisa turned, and told her women guards, "leave her for two hours, then return her to her cell."

Five - The Judas Cradle

To be left hanging in chains with her legs spread simply added to a horror beyond anything Solana had experienced before in her life. Her whole body was on fire from the hundred lashes of the whip, and the mere touch of air made it worse still. Her arms hurt unbearably from hours in suspension; the iron fetters about her wrists burned terribly into her bruised bones. Now, too, her legs and hips hurt from being held wide for so long.

Solana hung motionless, her shackled feet hovering above their shadows on the floor, her arms hugging her bowed head.

After a lifetime of torment, Solana's ankles were finally released, her body lowered from suspension, and she crumpled, exhausted, to the floor. Even as beaten and weakened as she was, the two women guards pulled her arms behind her back and bound her wrists once again. Every movement of every muscle was pain. The hundred scores of the whip on her skin made her body raw, every touch and movement agony.

Unable to walk, Solana was dragged back to her cell.

There, the women guards unpicked the bindings holding her hands behind her back, dragged her to the rear wall of the cell and clamped her wrists in the shackles again, arms stretched above her head, her waist encircled with iron so she could not move. Still bleeding and swelling from the whip, but fastened in her cruel restraint regardless. She was forced to sit on buttocks and a labia so swollen and tender that it drove fresh tears from her eyes.

After a few hours, though, Maria came. Never had human tenderness been so welcome. Solana could move little, but she could ease forward enough for Maria to wash her wounds with clean water and apply a soothing balm, wincing at each touch.

Once Solana's injuries were attended to, Maria brought out food. Soft bread and cheese, even fresh milk. To Solana, it was a banquet greater than any king ever had. There was an intimacy to feeding that Solana had not shared with another human being since she was an infant; Maria would break off a piece of bread, a fragment of cheese, and with her own fingers place them in Solana's mouth, even brushing a stray crumb from Solana's lip. She would hold the small jug of milk to Solana's lips, then, and patiently tip while the prisoner drank.

Maria looked into Solana's eyes as she fed her, an unabashed gaze that made Solana forget her burning whip wounds and the chains that secured her to the wall.

"Why?" Solana finally asked, grateful for such food.

"Señora Luisa wishes that you recover," was Maria's reply.

"Recover for what?"

The question did not need to be asked, and Maria finally averted her eyes; answer enough. Solana quickly changed the subject.

"The guards assisting her were women. They are slaves, too?"

"Oh, hell, no!" Maria giggled. "They are Dungeon Maids. The young wives of fallen soldiers, or orphans grown up from the convents. They earn a good living in Señora Luisa's service. They are trained in fighting, and with the sword, and it's even said some have learned to read and write.

"Señora Luisa prefers women to keep her dungeon and prisoners. Men help themselves to more than they should."

Had she not been at these Dungeon Maids' mercy, Solana would have admired them.

For the first week after her whipping, Solana was all but paralysed. But by the end of it, her healing aided by more bread and cheese brought to her by Maria, she could move again. The bruising and swelling began to subside, and Maria gave assurance that the cuts of the lash, although painful, would heal without scars. That, as everything else, was Luisa's intention.

Weeks followed, languishing alone and chained in her cell, marked only by the visits of Maria. The dungeon diet of old bread, water, and sometimes scraps of cabbage or turnip salvaged from a guard's supper had returned.

Each feeding was followed by ablutions. The Jailer or a Dungeon Maid would bring a pail of fresh water and a scrubbing brush. Maria could only spare enough water to clean between Solana's legs, but made sure she was thorough, before using the remainder of the water to sluice and scrub any waste from the cell into its drain. Luisa demanded that hygiene at least.

It was always done quickly, the ritual of feeding and cleaning. But it was the words of Maria, though few and cautious, that kept Solana from losing her mind.

Even so, Solana would often weep until her eyes were puffed. Dreams seemed to interweave with her darkened reality, and the awful instruments at Luisa's disposal haunted her. She could not rid her mind of horrific images. Poor Rosita lashed to the wheel, her belly swollen, her limbs stretched and creaking; and even worse, Esmerelda hanging on arms fully out of their sockets, screaming in a madness of pain. Solana wondered if she could have done more: perhaps fallen to her knees and begged on the women's behalf, offering her own confession in exchange for their freedom.

"What became of Rosita?" she asked the young Maria one time.

Maria's eyes remained down. "You do not want to know."

"It matters to me," Solana insisted.

Maria shrugged. "She was broken that day. She confessed."

Solana drew breath, pity in her eyes. "Poor, poor girl. And what will happen to Esmerelda?"

Maria looked sad. "When she is well again, she will be taken to the stake and burned."

Solana was silent for a time. It seemed so cruel, so unfair. She could not put out of her mind the expression on Esmerelda's face, inhuman agony and confusion.

Maria's eyes found Solana's face. "When Señora Luisa next puts you to question, *confess*. Tell her what she wants to hear."

"And go to the stake?"

"You will confess in the end, anyway," Maria said. "Why make the journey so much worse?"

Solana's voice shook with fear, but there was strength, also. "I will not give that bitch the satisfaction of breaking me. I will *die* before confessing false crimes."

"She will not let you die. She will not even harm you in any way from which you cannot mend. She will just make you scream until you break."

Maria's solemn prediction made Solana's chest tighten with fear. But in her mind, she saw the eyes of Luisa, burning with triumph beyond a shimmering wall of flame. If she confessed, she knew, she would die begging and screaming in the hissing fire while her tormentor looked on.

"I cannot confess if I am innocent. I will not."

The weeks dragged. Confined to her cell with arms chained above her head, Solana's eyes knew every gloomy shadow: the looming arched door, the chain overhead draped from its pulley, the rough-hewn blocks of the walls. She had forgotten what sunlight looked like, forgotten the taste of fresh air: forgotten the feeling of clothes on her body. She had forgotten, even, what it was like to touch her own skin, to have the freedom of her hands to scratch an itch. She was a creature of confinement.

Waiting.

Six weeks after the whipping, Solana was once again fetched by guards.

"Do not speak, or you will be gagged."

The Jailer, bare-limbed in her sleeveless and skirted wear, fitted a key to Solana's heavy fetters, unlocking her wrists. Solana did not resist as she was bent double, a Dungeon Maid kneeling at her side. Her arms were pulled behind her back, her wrists crossed over, and cords were put about them. Solana gave a whimper as the woman tied her wrists painfully tight, crunching into her flesh, biting bone. She could not move her hands at all; it was as if they had been cast in iron, their grip on her wrists aching in their savagery.

Satisfied with the bonds, the Jailer unlocked the waist ring and ordered Solana pulled to her feet and taken from the cell. They traced a familiar route to the torture chamber: descending into its dim depths. Solana's legs were weak with fear as they took her to an enclosure surrounded by torches.

Luisa Consuela leaned against a pillar, a hand on her hip. She wore a tunic of white, pinned at one shoulder, leaving her arms bare as always, her full round breasts clearly outlined. Its skirts fell to her ankles, but open on either side, leaving her gleaming legs exposed; torchlight glinted on their lean muscularity.

Tiny flames reflected in those dark eyes. "Come with me, Solana Degas."

Solana was brought forward.

She had seen this obscene device once before, but now, confronted with it truly, her legs lost their strength. She collapsed to her knees in terror. Sweat broke out over her body.

Five feet high at its apex, the Judas Cradle resembled a tall, narrow stool; but in place of a 'seat' was an eighteen-inch high pyramid of wood, its steep sides converging to a single, hideous point. Nearby was a pulley and a winch, its long chain dangling from a ring in the high ceiling. There was a hook on the chain's end.

"Prepare her."

"No! Please, please please!" Solana gibbered in sheer horror as she was wrenched up by her trussed arms. The two girls propelled her, stumbling and sagging and shrieking, to the hook, raising her pinioned arms up behind her back and passing her bound wrists over it. It had the effect of doubling Solana forward with her arms twisted up behind her, the strappado she had seen before.

"I beg you!" she pleaded to Luisa.

"Pain will release the truth," Luisa said coldly as she stepped to the winch.

Luisa turned the windlass, and by her wrists, Solana's arms were wrenched upwards behind her. She bent forward as the pressure increased in her shoulders, gasping with the growing discomfort. But as Luisa turned the winch more and Solana's wrists were pulled higher against the resistance of her bodyweight, her arms were drawn upwards, past their natural resistance: muscles became stark, her shoulders bunched and cracked loudly, the geography of her armpits twisted. Now the pain began, and intensified as another turn drew her arms higher behind her.

"Oh, God! Stop!"

When her heels left the ground and her arms went higher still, true pain hit. For a time, Solana teetered on her toes, arms wrenched high up behind her back, every muscle fiercely defined. Sweat was already streaking her ribcage from each armpit. Her calf muscles were bunched in the effort to keep her weight on her toes. Pain was spreading through her shoulders and down her back.

At Luisa's command, the Maids fitted manacles to Solana's ankles where she stood, each with six inches of chain ending in four-inch iron rings. As the girls stepped back, Luisa casually turned the wheel again and, by her back-twisted arms, Solana was lifted off the floor.

The pain was immense. Light flashed in Solana's eyes as agony speared through her shoulders and along her taut triceps, lancing down her back and sides. It was more than she could stand and she shrieked and screamed. It felt as though her arms were breaking. As she was winched higher, the iron rings trailing from her ankle fetters clattered - and then cleared the ground also.

"Oh! Oh!" Solana's shrieks filled the chamber as she slowly rotated above the floor.

Luisa turned the wheel, drawing in more chain, watching as Solana was hoisted higher and higher in the strappado. Her arms, high behind her back, cruelly and unnaturally strained; feet kicking futilely in mid-air, the heavy iron rings swinging from her ankles. Luisa continued to raise Solana until her desperate toes were five feet from the ground, then locked the windlass.

"I shall give you two hours to think upon what awaits you," she told Solana.

Of all the tortures she had experienced at her own request under apprenticeship, strappado had been the quickest to bring true pain. Luisa had agreed an hour with her father. He had tied her slim wrists behind her back and winched her into the air, and she had at once been shrieking, so quickly and intensely had the pain begun. The muscles had been defined and bunched in her arms as they were raised backwards up behind her head, and her feet had kicked and reached desperately.

She had begged to be let down after just fifteen seconds. Her father had refused, and she had slowly twirled for the hour, crying and shrieking. At the end of it, he had told her that she would hang for another hour, deaf to her desperate pleading. When he had finally lowered her after more than two hours, she refused to talk to him for a week.

When she had ears for his words again, he had explained that strappado could be very effective, but hard to control; joints could dislocate within seconds and the damage could quickly become permanent, and unlike other tortures, it could not be easily incremented. It was best saved for the strong, the young, and the lithe.

Luisa had learned much more than to endure pain, during her experiences of torture. She knew how to position a witch's arms so that strappado would be intensely painful but less damaging; and she had learned the importance of letting the victim hang before beginning any additional tortures. Once muscles were exhausted and she could no longer struggle or thrash about, there was less chance of unplanned damage.

When Luisa returned to the chamber, Solana still hung groaning, high off the floor. In the light of torches her mahogany skin shone as if oiled. Her bound-together arms were wrenched up behind her head, their muscles still fiercely bunched and defined; but Luisa could already see that, drained of all strength, Solana's body had relaxed, lengthened and extended by inches. The pain, in that time, would easily have doubled in intensity.

"Bring the Cradle."

It took both Dungeon Maids to shift the heavy Judas Cradle, as it scraped across the floor. Upon Luisa's direction it was placed below Solana's feet, between the iron rings that dangled from her ankles, the fearsome wooden spike looming beneath her.

"Guide her legs," Luisa ordered.

Eager, bare-limbed and playful, the Dungeon Maids took hold of Solana's ankle chains, one at each of her feet, pulling in opposite directions and spreading her shining legs wide. Solana shrieked, every tiny movement sending new agony through her tortured arms and back. With legs drawn wide, the hairy black nest of her sex hovered high above the waiting tip of the Judas Cradle. The Maids could not hide their amusement, laughing at Solana's shame.

Luisa began to unwind the winch. Still in the blinding pain of strappado after two hours hanging, Solana could not struggle as, her legs spread, she was slowly lowered towards the cradle. Nothing could prevent her slow decent, and the Maids, delighted with their sport, held her legs stretched out.

Adrenaline gave her voice through her agony. "Please! You cannot!"

"Only suffering will wrest the confession from your lips."

"I am innocent!" Solana cried in her panic. Strappadoed as she was, she had no choice but to watch as she was lowered towards the spike, its tip between her widely-spread legs. "Please, stop!"

Her tormentors' response was to pull even harder on the ankle rings, so that Solana's legs were stretched wider still, tendons and muscles stark. The hair between her thighs veiled her vulva, but less hair guarded her asshole, and it was below this that the Judas spike loomed. Luisa's eyes were fixed on her victim as she eased the winch around, controlling Solana's descent. A few more inches, and the sharp tip of the Cradle was between the shining, parted globes of Solana's buttocks, gently stirring the hair around her twitching anus. Goosebumps appeared all over Solana's naked body at its terrifying touch; the hairs on her back-twisted arms rose up as she looked down, wildly and in panic, trying to see the approaching horror.

"Oh, dear God!" Sweat ran down her ribcage from her armpits, her bare back was wet, and perspiration dripped from her face and neck, the pain of strappado now compounded by the heart-pounding dread.

After half a minute's pause, the two Maids holding Solana's long legs outstretched in a tug-of-war, the muscles lean in their bare arms, Luisa released the chain.

Solana dropped fully onto the Cradle; her mouth flew open in shock as its wood speared directly into her anus and lodged three full inches inside her rectum. At once her asshole was spread, the violation intimate and terrible. *"Oh God! God!"*

Luisa held the descent.

It was then that Solana discovered the horror of this torture. In strappado, she could not possibly gain any leverage to lift herself off the cradle; her arms, unnaturally wrenched high up behind her back, were completely without leverage. Her legs were held wide by the two Dungeon Maids for the Judas Cradle's intrusion. She was anally impaled, naked on top of the narrow pyramid, without any means to save herself.

Even in her pain and fear, Solana felt a terrible wave of humiliation. She could see the faces of the Dungeon Maids, and the beautiful Luisa, amused at her position atop the Cradle.

Solana wailed. "Please, Señora Luisa, please take me off this!"

"I will not. We must seek the moment at which your mind is no longer your own, and only the truth can be spoken." With those words, Luisa released more chain. Solana gave a wail as she sank further onto the Cradle. Her bowels automatically spasmed, trying to force the vile intrusion out, but she could not rise.

Luisa turned the wheel again, easing Solana lower. The spike pushed deeper inside her, spreading the flower of her sphincter wider. Solana's jaw cracked as she clenched her teeth, arms quivering up behind her head. Her legs, still held wide by the Maids, shook and shuddered with the growing agony.

Luisa noted the effect with satisfaction. "Release her legs."

The Dungeon Maids released their hold on Solana's chained ankles; and her legs fell against the steep sides of the cradle. She did not even try to use her legs and feet to lift herself off the spike that was inside her; every small movement caused pain. She wailed.

On top of the pain of the monstrosity in Solana's anus and the strappado, the humiliation was unbearable. She could see that the Dungeon Maids were enjoying her suffering: straddling the Judas spike, shining sweat, bound, moaning as her ass was penetrated, she looked like a woman in orgasm.

But the reality was far more cruel. Luisa released more chain. Solana sank further onto the spike, and she screamed, tears running from her eyes. Another drop, now five inches of the cradle inside her arse, her sphincter spread by nearly three inches. Solana's bowels heaved, but to no avail.

Luisa released more chain. Solana sank further down onto the Cradle: it eased up into her ass, and she screamed in pain. From the hairy nest between her shining thighs, urine streamed down the steep sides of the Judas Cradle, splattering to the floor far below her dangling toes, steam crawling into the chill air.

"Where's your pride now?" The scorn of one Dungeon Maid was echoed by laughter from her companion, and of the Maid guarding the door. Solana's head sagged forward, tears streaking her face, her mouth contorted in pain as she fought to endure.

But the torture had not even begun.

"Bring the weights," Luisa commanded.

Solana had not imagined that such horror could be added to her torment. But as she suffered atop the awful Cradle, inches of wood inside her ass, the Maids fetched lead ingots, placing them close. Such was the ingots' weight that each impact sent a shock through the floor that Solana could feel in her rectum. The tears fled her eyes and she shook her head.

"No, no, no," she begged.

The muscles in Luisa's arms were defined as she hefted one ingot in each hand. "Twenty pounds apiece, witch. These should hasten your epiphany." With that, she slung the ingots' hooks through the iron rings that dangled from Solana's ankles, and let go.

Forty pounds wrenched on Solana's shining legs, and with a dreadful scream, she was dragged down another inch onto the Judas spike. At the same instant, her strappadoed arms were stretched an inch higher behind her head, her straining shoulders *cracking* loudly, *pops* coming from her spine. Her rectum, distended, stretched, sent waves of agony as if her pelvis had shattered. She had no strength to

fight as the heavy weights bore her down on the cradle, screaming as her shoulders bent and her rectum was speared ever deeper.

In amusement, the Dungeon Maids watched the wet, naked girl atop the cradle, its upper apex deep inside her, her hairy asshole spread by inches. Tears and snot spilled from a downturned face framed by her woolly cascade of hair. Her hanging breasts shook with her sobs and cries. In the dungeon's chill, her wet body steamed. She had never known such pain, nor humiliation, taking this obscene spike inside her rectum, feeling it searching her very bowels.

"Let her sit and think upon her confession," Luisa said. Leaving the Maids to watch over Solana, she left the chamber.

Wrenched high up behind her head, Solana's twisted arms roared with pain, her shoulders close to dislocation. Pain speared down her back. Her legs, now with the lead ingots hanging off each ankle, were burning with strain, her knees aching; the manacles on her ankles grinding cruelly into bone. The Judas Cradle seemed to have penetrated to her very core, filling her abdomen with a ravaging pain as if she was being split in two. Every breath hurt.

Time lost all meaning. Over an eternity, Solana suffered. Tendons and ligaments swelled and pain flared in Solana's shoulders and elbows, her back and obliques, her straining hips and knees, her spine. The pain of the Cradle tortured her rectum and gut, drilled into the very marrow of her pelvic bone.

Another two hours.

The flames of torches reflected in the sweat that polished Solana's mahogany skin like a dark mirror. A droplet quivered on the end of one nipple as she gasped and heaved, her arms twisted up behind her, impaled upon the Judas Cradle.

Luisa had returned to the torture chamber. She slowly circled the prisoner skewered on the Cradle's tip, her eyes taking in every taut and defined muscle, every rib, every bead of sweat. Held by the weight of the ingots, Solana's legs were motionless, shining. She groaned.

"Will you give your confession?"

Solana could barely raise her head. A long string of snot hung from her nose. Her wet lips were parted. Her teeth chattered weakly as she breathed. Finally, the words came.

"Go to Hell."

Luisa could not help but smile. Here was a woman of strength and great endurance. But the game was far from over. Luisa beckoned her Dungeon Maids, and pointed to the lead weights on the floor near the Cradle. Without hurry, each girl hefted one of the heavy ingots, hooked them over Solana's ankle rings, and released.

Eighty pounds dragged on Solana's ankles, stretching her legs, and dragging her further down onto the Judas Cradle. She was screaming; there was a muffled *crack* from somewhere inside her pelvis, bowels or bone, as the wood thrust deeper, distorting and distending her most intimate anatomy.

Solana's screams went on: heart-rending, cries of agony that echoed through the torture chamber, disturbed the anguished rest of prisoners. A bright red trickle of blood ran down one side of the wooden Cradle, groaning sounds coming from inside the tortured woman. At the same time, her wrists were held fast, her descent stretching her upper body as her arms were pulled vertically behind her back, her spine lengthening, her hips cracking loudly.

Ten minutes. Solana's screams slowly died to long, low whimpers of pain. The agony was no less; but exhaustion stole her breath and reduced her to moans.

"Confess to me," Luisa urged. "Confess, and I will take you off. I will stop the pain. Just confess, and it stops."

Solana's head fell forward. Her twisted arms shone, her own elbows inches from the back of her head, muscles fiercely defined in their straining confinement. Another line of blood ran from beneath her. She sobbed and groaned aloud, but no confession came. Luisa put her hand to one wrenched and muscle-tight thigh, feeling the nap of fine hairs, the slickness of perspiration. "May God guide you quickly to reason."

Solana was unable to reply. Through eyes that swam with pain, she saw Luisa stride off into the depths of the chamber, the torchlight and shadows flirting with the fluid muscles of her bare limbs, the playful dance of her tunic's skirt at her buttocks.

The guard was changed; the Dungeon Maids who had tormented her replaced by new girls, all pretty, in the same sleeveless uniforms of blouse, bodice and skirt.

It had already been many hours, and now, as the night crawled, Solana suffered on, moaning and shrieking into the echoing darkness, her skin glossed with sweat. The pain was unending, her head lolling from side to side in anguish, her black hair sweeping her bare breasts. Her arms, wrenched up behind her back, roared in unceasing agony, her shoulders twisted and bunched, ligaments and tendons torn. And always, the torment of the Judas Cradle. Dragged down by the lead weights hanging from her ankles, the narrow wooden pyramid was buried seven inches inside her ass. Agony racked her colon, her grotesquely stretched anus.

From time to time, the Maids standing nearby heard her muttering breathlessly, hysterically, as if in prayer or desperate pleading.

The torches guttered and flickered, were refuelled, burned on.

The guard was changed again, early in the morning. The two Dungeon Maids who had stretched Solana's legs wide yesterday had returned, satisfied to see the ongoing sufferings of Solana impaled upon the Judas' spike, twisted and wrenched and restless in her agony.

Finally Luisa Consuela returned, refreshed and beautiful from a night's sleep. She wore a simple halter that left arms and broad shoulders bare, her back naked to her sacrum. The flanks of her full breasts peeped either side of the halter, nipples raising their distinctive peaks at its front. Its skirt swept from one hip to the opposite ankle.

She paused, as was her habit, to tie her hair, bunching it on top of her head and fastening it with gold clasps, baring her graceful neck. "Well, Witch? Are you any closer to telling me the truth?"

After a full night of suffering, conscious but exhausted almost to delirium, Solana said nothing. Her head remained bowed between her twisted and racked shoulders. Only the heaving of her wet and muscled belly told of her ongoing anguish.

Luisa circled her prisoner. Every witch was different; but being an effective torturer meant reading the physical limits of the subject, and adopting a technique that would push her beyond her pain threshold without damaging or crippling her body. In Solana's case, Luisa saw, she had read well. Solana's body was supple and strong, and with the right bindings her arms had been pulled straight up behind her back without the shoulders dislocating. But the pain must have been excruciating.

Likewise, a gradual descent upon the Judas Cradle had meant that there would only be superficial damage to Solana's anus and rectum, and that recovery would be assured. But the agony of such a deep, impaling intrusion would be like death itself.

And there was still more that could be done. Solana's eyes had been downcast, lids halfway closed, but when the Maids came before her, clutching lead ingots, the prisoner's head lifted a little and her expression became dread.

"No – no, no!" As adrenaline flooded her veins, she suddenly found lucidity, but could not move for her bondage, and could only watch as the Maids hooked the new ingots over her ankle chains, and released them.

One hundred and twenty pounds were suddenly slung from Solana's ankles, further stretching her legs, and the consequences were instant and terrible. So weighed, over the next five minutes she eased another inch down onto the Judas' spike, its tip seeming to reach the pit of her belly. Despite the descent, her wrists remained where they were, held by the chain; it was her arms, shoulders, and spine that stretched that extra inch, and the agony exploded through her entire length. Her legs, with sixty pounds slung from each ankle, felt as if they were tearing from her body.

The screaming was unending.

Luisa and her Maids watched, as Solana's shrieks echoed from the stone walls. There was no ability to resist, only an incremental compounding of pain, an overwhelming, all-engulfing horror.

"Let the truth come!" Luisa shouted. "Confess, and you shall be free!"

But Solana did not confess. Bathed in sweat, running snot and urine and tears, her skin wet and her belly trembling even as *pops* and *cracks* came from her distending and stretched body, she gave voice to her agony in shriek after howl, a piteous creature of suffering.

Over half an hour, though, Solana's screams gradually lost their magnitude as her voice became hoarse, but she wailed endlessly, skewered on the Judas Cradle by the oppressive weights slung from her ankles. Eight inches of the obscene monster were now buried inside her rectum. Her shoulders were all but wrenched from their sockets, her back and arms pulled almost straight in the merciless strappado. Her legs, slung off the sharply-sloped sides of the cradle, were defined and strained hideously by the terrible weights stretching her ankles.

She had sunk as far as she would onto the Judas Cradle. Prevented from descending further by the spike jamming against the very framework of her pelvis, the torture had become an ordeal of the weights' unending pressure, of bending joints, of distended rectum, anus, and fissured bone.

Luisa stepped close and looked up into the suffering face. She put her hands again on the wet, hot skin of Solana's bare and straining thighs. "I can stop this," she promised. "Surrender to the truth, let God's words come from your lips and your pain will be lifted."

Solana did not reply.

"Let her suffer," Luisa casually told the Dungeon Maids, as she strode again from the chamber, the muscles of her naked back shifting with the grace of a goddess.

For another six hours, Solana was left to suffer upon the Cradle. Pains speared through her rectum with such vile intensity that she vomited what little fluid was in her belly. Every breath brought shattering horror, every beat of her heart sent a reverberation of suffering through her ribcage.

And yet, she did not call out her confession.

When Luisa finally returned to the chamber, it was to see Solana's head hanging forward of her twisted arms, her body unmoving save the random heaving of her belly. Unconsciousness was close, and there was little more that could now be added to her suffering.

Luisa was impressed by the brown witch. Solana's confession would come, but not today.

Six – Resolve

With the weights taken from Solana's ankles, she had been winched up off the Judas Cradle, inches of wet, steaming, stained wood sliding out of her rectum. Lowered to the floor, her bound wrists were unhooked from the chain. With her wrists still fast in their crushing bindings, she was dragged back to her cell.

Only then, held by the two Dungeon Maids, were her hands freed; but her agonised arms were stretched up to the manacles that hung open against the slimy wall, and their iron was closed tightly and snugly about her wrists by the Jailer. The hasp was put about her waist, fixing her in place.

Fresh from torture, she slumped once again with arms chained over her head, the pains and cramps still roaring in her swollen shoulders and an agony in her bowels. She could smell her own armpits, the powerful aroma of suffering.

Maria's visit had come within a few hours. Solana sat with her head resting against one upstretched arm, tears streaking her forlorn face.

"I am dying," she told Maria.

Maria had smiled. "No, you are not."

"But there is blood." Even dazed as she was, Solana had seen blood trickling from between her thighs, and was sure that the end was near.

"It is hardly even a wound," Maria had responded. "I told you, Señora Luisa will not cause harm. No scars that can be seen, no injuries that cannot heal, and definitely not death."

"She cannot cause harm?"

"An innocent woman must be able to walk from this place on her own feet, and live her life with no marks and no ailments. ... Be quiet, now. I have food, and milk."

"I did not confess, Maria," Solana said, triumph in her exhaustion.

"I know. Most would have." Maria was clearly impressed.

The weeks passed.

Chained in her cell, Solana had nothing to do but to sit, to reflect, to sleep. The early days in which she had felt shamed by her nakedness and craved the cover of clothing had long gone; she no longer cared that she was naked. It had become her natural, preferred state. Clothes looked strange to her now, and would have felt uncomfortable on her skin.

She also no longer felt trapped by the iron that hugged her wrists and held her arms high over her head. The manacles meant certainty, assurance. Fear and suffering only came when the manacles were unlocked, so she would rather they remain fastened.

But as her shoulders recovered from the strappado, as her bowels healed and health returned, Solana realised that Maria had been right. The torture of the whip, the awful strappado and vile Judas Cradle; they were unbearable agonies, but she had survived them.

I can beat you, Señora Luisa.

Solana realised that she only had to endure, to weather the pain for as long as it lasted, and to maintain her innocence no matter what. Suffering was temporary; but to betray herself with a false confession, she would have surrendered her life, her soul, and her relationship with God, merely for the easement of physical discomforts.

She had cheated the beautiful Chief Torturer of confession twice already; she could do it again.

It was a new faith and a new strength. As the days passed, Solana prayed, or quietly sang, not bothered by her nakedness or her arms stretched above her head. She welcomed the visits of Maria, and talked of matters other than her own fate.

"You are so pretty, Maria," Solana said during one of Maria's attendances.

Maria blushed and lowered her gaze. "Thank you."

"Have none of the guards ever tried to take your virtue?" Solana had seen the male guards posted through the dungeon, in their pointed helmets and steel armour with violet uniforms beneath. And she had her suspicions about the piety of some of the Dungeon Maids, as well.

Maria's eyes returned to Solana's with a shine of amusement. "Well, I do know many of the men's cocks are hard even before they arrive here, what with Chamber Slaves and prisoners being naked, and the pretty Dungeon Maids." Solana's eyes went wide at Maria's sexual boldness, and she bit her lip against a giggle. Maria asked seriously, "why, has anyone touched you improperly?"

"No, never," Solana assured her. That fear, at least, had never been realised.

Maria nodded. "So it should be. We Chamber Slaves are kept naked to deter escape, and stop us bringing any weapons or indulgences in to the dungeon. Not for the guards' pleasure.

"But of course, once a male guard did try to grope me. Señora Luisa put his balls in a vice and crushed them flat over the course of four hours. Then she garrotted him, and made each male guard witness his misery before he was allowed to die."

"Oh my goodness!" Solana could not conceal her amusement. It seemed Luisa Consuela had at least one admirable quality.

"The men may not molest or violate *any* woman here," Maria concluded. "They all understand that rule. But sometimes they are excused to have a few minutes alone with their hand."

This time Solana laughed. Maria laughed too, but quickly stifled it, and put her hand over Solana's mouth, lest they be heard. Presently, Maria removed her hand from Solana's mouth.

"You have a beautiful laugh," Maria told Solana, but sadness had entered her voice.

Despite languishing, chained in such an undignified pose, prevented from even the most basic of freedoms in her cell, Solana found strength over the weeks that followed. Maria's visits pushed the limit of the Jailer's patience as the two talked, swapped stories. Solana began to realise that she could endure whatever Luisa put her through, and would emerge vindicated, her innocence preserved.

"She can only question you under torture three times," Maria said once, when asked about the interrogations. "Your next session will be the last."

And so, when the cell door opened and two Dungeon Maids and the Jailer entered, Solana looked up at them with calmness and confidence.

"Do not speak, or you will be gagged," she was told.

They did not need to bind her; she would not have tried to flee. All the same, pressed forward with her waist hasp still secured, Solana had her hands pulled behind her back and lashed tightly with creaking, biting cord. The pain was real and brutal, but did not fight it, nor make any sound.

Drawn to her feet, she was walked from her cell by the girls, and through the catacombs of the torture chamber. She moved with dignity, her head high, her crossed and bound hands resting at the small of her back. Her heart pounded and she felt wetness under her arms. She knew the magnitude of agony she would soon have to endure, but she refused to show her fear.

The room to which the Dungeon Maids brought Solana was one she had seen months ago, when first shown the torture chamber. The small iron door creaked open, revealing a rough-hewn cell; the light of the lantern brought in by the Jailer cast its glow upon a terrible machine.

The rack.

Made of solid oak, as beautifully crafted as the finest furniture. Eight feet long, four feet wide, it had slender iron roller at its head, with an exquisitely-made cog and ratchet, a four-handled lever by which to turn it. The rack's surface was smooth and polished. At its foot, iron manacles on short chains were bolted deeply into the wood at either corner.

Solana's stomach tightened and she felt her legs turning to liquid, but she clung to her dignity as she was led to the dark machine.

"Put her on," was the Jailer's command.

Solana knew that racking was inevitable, so she did not resist, but gave her fullest cooperation to the Dungeon Maids. She willingly shifted into place as they sat her upon the cold wood, and waited with knees drawn up as her wrists were untied from behind her back. With a woman each holding her arms at elbow and thumb, she was made to lie down, and her arms reached up, high above her head. Without hurry, the Jailer closed a cold, hard manacle about each wrist. Each manacle was tight, bone-crushing in its grip, so secure that it would not move upon her wrist in the slightest. Each was locked with a key.

Next, her legs were pulled outwards and apart, wider than she would have wished. The same care was taken in fitting a manacle about each ankle, as tight as the wrist manacles. The chain from each ran to its ring at a bottom corner of the rack.

Solana lay on her back, eyes towards the shadowed ceiling, chained spreadeagled, feeling the wetness in her armpits, the chill air between her widely-spread thighs.

Finally, the Jailer took the handle of the rack's roller, and, the muscles in her bare arms shifting, began to turn it. For the first time, Solana heard the deep groan of the axle. The chains shifted, the manacles pulled on her wrists, and Solana felt her body shift slightly, her buttocks and shoulder blades sliding on polished wood. The iron ratchet *clinked* one, two, three, four, five, six times, until she felt tension in her arms and legs, the manacles pulling on her wrists and ankles.

It was not uncomfortable, nor painful, but she quickly realised that she had no movement at all in her limbs. She was trembling despite herself, and closed her eyes, spreading her fingers until they felt the unforgiving chain that ran from her wrists, to the roller.

"Solana Degas. Welcome to the *rack*."

The low voice of Luisa set Solana's heart thumping even faster. Suddenly, lying on her back and stretched out, she had never felt so exposed, so vulnerable, so absolutely helpless. She could barely even lift her head, but she could turn it to see the graceful form of Luisa. She wore her white Greek Goddess chiton, pinned at the shoulders with brooches and tied at the waist with gold cord, the garment otherwise open at the sides from armpits to ankles. Gleaming shoulders, arms, legs; the flanks of her full breasts revealed by the open sides of her dress. Trailing Luisa was the slender, naked Maria.

Solana fought to keep her voice level: "I am innocent, and this machine will not change it."

Luisa allowed herself a smile. "The rack upon which you lie was brought here from Rome, where it was made by the most skilled craftsmen, more than two hundred years ago. It is the *perfect* machine to do God's work."

There was true passion in Luisa's voice. As she spoke, she checked the shackles on Solana's wrists and ankles, the tension and angle of each chain. With thumb and little finger, she measured the distance between wrists and roller, between ankles and mooring rings, to be sure that all was exact. "It will bring the confession from your lips."

"Pain cannot change anything," Solana said as bravely as she could. "I am innocent."

Luisa did not respond, but said to Maria, "give her water."

The Chamber Slave's eyes were brimming sympathy and grief as she obediently stepped forward. Solana accepted the carafe Maria offered to her lips, drinking as deeply as she could. Though Maria was forbidden to speak, she kept her eyes locked to Solana's for the entire time. Her dark hyphen brows showed worry, but she forced a reassuring smile as she finally stepped away.

"Stay for this, Maria," Luisa ordered. The naked girl remained in a corner and watched as Luisa idled to the wooden lever that would turn the rack's roller.

Her hands closed around the smooth wood, and she cranked it over.

The roller turned, the iron ratchet clicked four notches. Solana's fettered wrists were drawn two inches towards the roller, while her ankles remained anchored. Her whole body stretched.

"*Gnnnn* ..." The grunt through clenched white teeth was involuntary, as Solana's muscles tensed to fight the stretch. She could feel strain in her arms and legs, an uncommon heat along her spine. A dull burn seemed to spread through every muscle, every tendon.

Resisting it, she lay for several minutes, her breathing coming in grunts of exertion. Sweat tickled in her armpits and beaded on her brow. She was forced to feel everything about her restraint: the shackles bedded hard against her hands and feet, her limbs hot with strain.

Without warning, Luisa turned the roller again, two more notches.

"Oh, dear God!" Solana's mouth flew open as a muffled pop came from deep inside her shoulders and a secondary pop from her lengthening spine as her body stretched further. Pain, sudden, burning, intense, speared along her arms and down her sides. A fire seemed to spread from her hip joints, all the way up her back. It was unexpectedly severe, the shock was clear on Solana's face. She lay

helplessly panting; her ribcage jutted starkly, her plump breasts quivering, gleaming in the orange light, nipples stiff in defiance of her pain. Sweat quickly appeared in droplets on her dark brown skin. Her belly shifted rapidly.

Luisa took her hands off the lever, looked over the woman on the rack. Solana's shackled wrists and ankles; her legs long and taut, her stomach hard, her arms tight.

"You are now prepared for torture."

Prepared? The question was plain on Solana's face. This was not torture already?

Luisa had a key in her hand, and deftly turned a lock at the rack's roller. "This rack locks in place, so nobody but I can relieve the stretching. The same key fits the shackles, so nobody but I can release you from them. You will be amazed what favours a witch will promise her Maids for some easement.

"When I return, it will be to take your confession."

"Wait!" Solana gasped through the pain in her straining limbs. "Do not leave me like this!"

"Think upon your sins, so that when the rack wrenches confession, the words will come freely," Luisa advised. "This rack is geared to draw a half inch at a time from the victim upon it. You may be stretched even to the twentieth turn."

Framed by her own upstretched arms, Solana's face showed new horror. Ten inches would surely rip her limbs from her body. *But Maria said I would not be harmed!* Her breasts shifted with each fearful breath as doubt cast its first shadow across her mind.

Luisa went on. "The rack will gradually pull every joint in your body apart. You will feel every moment, and the pain will grow worse and worse, without end. I guarantee the rack will do its job, and you will confess before the fourteenth turn."

The reality of this new horror now became clear to Solana. She was already stretched past her body's limit, she was already in pain; it was unthinkable that she might somehow stretch inches further. Despite her dread, she forced herself to speak. "I am no witch. You need not make me suffer to know it. Please, Señora."

Luisa reached out, put a cool hand to Solana's ear, fingers stroking through thick hair. "But that is exactly what I must do."

The door was slammed shut, locked and barred, this time leaving Solana completely alone.

Time was a cruel torturer.

Lying stretched beyond her ordinary limits, Solana was more helpless than she had ever been in her life. Pulled to either end of the rack by the wrists and ankles, her joints burned with slow fire; and yet she could not move a muscle to ease it. She could not turn her hands, nor even move her fingers from the tension. She could breathe, and nothing more.

For a while, Solana was able to hold the worst of the pain at bay by keeping the muscles in her arms and legs, pectorals, abdominals and obliques, tense. It alleviated the strain on ligaments. But it was exhausting, and doomed to fail.

Inevitably, with no way to loosen the rack, Solana's muscles, first quivering, then deeply aching, finally failed. It was like lifting a heavy weight too many times, and finding there was no strength left to repeat it. So her body exhausted itself, and the tension transferred to ligament and bone.

Solana groaned aloud, then, alone in the dark. The continued strain would mean her muscles would not recover their strength. From this point on, it was a battle simply to endure.

The night was an eternity, an unending war of will and fortitude against the tension.

As hours crawled, the pressure on Solana's body seemed to grow. Pain in her shoulders, hips, elbows and knees. This was a hot, deep pain that spread the length of her body. Her brow and neck and armpits, between her breasts and along her spine, were wet with sweat. Always, she could feel the hard iron grinding into her wrists and ankles, the chains never relinquishing their pull on her.

Hour upon slow, tormenting hour.

Unable to move, Solana tried desperately to find some focus other than pain. But in darkness, feeling herself stretched across the wood, her legs spread wide, distraction was impossible. At times, she groaned: at others, she called out to the God who had deserted her.

She knew she could do nothing to prepare herself for Luisa's return. Her mind returned again and again to the roller, just two feet beyond her fingertips, but forever out of her reach. She heard, in her mind, the ratchet's metal clicks, the creaking axle, felt the growing tension in her limbs.

Solana lay in the darkness, upon the rack.

Luisa's induction upon the rack had happened when she still young. At that age she was already warding off the advances of men convinced that she would make a comely wife. But Luisa already had other ideas about her calling.

Her father had talked to her at length over supper about what the rack would involve, and gave her a week to think upon it. Did she want just a taste, an hour or two? Did she want longer?

She had gone away and prayed, and imagined herself upon the rack, and eventually had returned to him with her answer.

"It must be for a whole day, Father. No changes of heart, no safe-words, no release."

There had been tears in her father's eyes. "You are brave, Luey, but what you ask is impossible."

"Why, Father? Did you not tell me that no permanent hurt will be done?"

"I did, but -"

"But the rack would pull bone from bone, and draw apart my joints?"

"Yes, Sweetheart, it would."

Luisa had felt a strange pounding in her chest, and an unbearable surge of something between her thighs. She had felt herself growing moist. "Then you must. If I am to learn, you must." Her eyes had brimmed tears. "I know it will be dreadful, but I must know what it is like."

"My daughter, I cannot do that."

"Only break my shoulders and hips, Father. And slowly, so I am not made cripple. Then only stretch me a little more, and leave me like that. When I have felt that, it will be enough."

Her father had not been able to carry out the racking. But at her request, he had been the one to tie her wrists and ankles to the rack, checking the bonds a dozen times. He had left long and detailed instructions to his most trusted colleague. And he had asked his daughter if she might change her mind. But stripped of her clothes and laid upon the rack's wooden bed, with wrists and ankles already roped to its rollers, she had told him to go away.

The colleague had racked her well.

She had quickly realised how bad it was going to be, and began begging him to stop after just a few turns of the roller. But they had already agreed, and he had ignored her pleas, stretching her young body while she screamed for him to stop.

After several hours, her shoulders had pulled out of joint. Then her hips. He was not supposed to do more, but he had then dislocated her elbows, and her knees.

She had vomited, lost control of bladder and bowels. She lost her mind to pain, seeming to swoon with eyes rolling back into her head, only to scream again with the agony in her young limbs. Even with all of Luisa's joints dislocated, her father's colleague had followed her instructions, stretching her further to induce the dreadful pain of parted joints agitated and strained. That pain had been more frightful still. He had left her racked until the twelfth hour, when he had sent for her father, sent for the physician, and they had loosened the rack.

She had howled, too, when her joints were reset, and had been too pained by her injuries to stand once wrists and ankles were freed. But with tears still fresh upon her face, Luisa had thanked the torturer, thanked the physician, and bade them farewell as she was helped from the chamber by her remorseful father.

Seven - Racked

Luisa Consuela paused in the doorway, then advanced a step, lifting the lantern towards the shining, hard-stretched Solana. She was flat on her back, lips slightly parted to reveal perfect teeth, her woolly mass of jet-black hair splashed across the wooden bed of the rack.

Luisa's eyes trailed from Solana's hands, distorted by the iron shackles, along the gentle lines of her forearms to her elbows, along the firm landscape and defined musculature of drawn biceps to the hollows where arms met upper torso. The tight hair of her armpits was plastered to her skin with the sweat of her suffering.

Solana's full breasts quivered atop a ribcage lifted by tension. Her defined belly shifted rapidly. Her hips, broad, sleek, the cradle for her thick tangle of black pubic hair, shone in the cool air. Her long legs gleamed, stretched and spread, thick quadriceps defined, calves taut, shins gleaming. About her ankles, the fetters were tightly anchored to the rack's mooring rings by their short chains. Her feet were perfect; slender toes, pale toenails and pale, grubby soles.

Placing the lantern in its alcove, Luisa drew close to the rack. Again, Luisa had dressed in her Greek-style chiton, open at the sides but for the gold cord belt at its waist. Her lean arms and legs and the sides of her soft round breasts were bare. Her hair was tied back with a single gold band, casually cast over one shoulder, her haughty face beautiful in the half-light.

Luisa stepped closer until she could hear Solana's shallow breaths, smell her armpits' rich aroma of fear and pain. "You are strong," she told Solana. "Young, stubborn, and so strong. But before I leave this room again, I will have your confession."

Solana said nothing, her eyes fixed to the dark ceiling, so Luisa called, "the prisoner is ready!"

People filed in: two armed Dungeon Maids with swords in shoulder-scabbards who took up positions flanking the door; and a male scribe. The latter carried an ink-well, quill, and an open book in order to log the confession.

Two armed male guards positioned themselves outside the cell, closing the door, barring and locking it from the outside. Without ceremony, Luisa stepped to the head of the rack. Taking the key from a string around her neck, she carefully unlocked the rack's ratchet.

Solana felt terribly, desperately helpless. She could not move at all, already pulled tight, already in pain. The thought of more stretching struck her with terror. Her heart began pounding in panic, and she finally spoke with a throat dry from hours of thirst. "Wait! Please! Would you rather have me lie to save myself the suffering?"

Luisa replied coolly as she put her hands to the wheel. "A lie is maintained by a mind in control of its body. Once the body controls the mind, only the truth can be spoken."

"No, no ..." There was despair in Solana's denial.

Luisa cranked the roller a single notch. With her body already held past its natural limits, already in pain, Solana visibly stretched further with a sound of popping and creaking. She gave a squeal as the fire spread through her joints and along her limbs, down her spine. Fresh sweat quickly appeared on her face and breasts. Most prisoners would have screamed.

Luisa slowly rolled the winch over again, another notch. Solana's eyes and mouth flew wide as she stretched, shock at the sudden and awful pain that flared through every joint and limb, exploded from the small of her back. It felt as if her bones had turned red hot.

"Oh God! Oh, my God!"

Without pause, Luisa turned the roller again, two notches this time: the chains stretched Solana a full inch, and she screamed, her resistance shattered as true agony engulfed her. Her shoulders, hips, elbows and knees seemed to be speared by red hot knives.

Solana had broken, the pain of being stretched quickly overwhelming her. Luisa watched as Solana screamed, drew breath, screamed again. Held immobile by the tension on her body, she could do nothing else, sweat clustering in droplets on her body.

Solana's world had exploded. It felt as if boiling water was coursing through her bones. She could not feel her hands or feet, nor the iron upon them; just the raging, hideous agony that wrenched scream after scream from her lungs.

This was where Luisa gave the torture time to work. She retreated to a corner of the small room, folded her golden arms, leaning against the stone and watching. Being so stretched was not a pain that ebbed or lessened. It spread, grew gradually worse, as muscles tore, tendons frayed.

Solana's initial screams went for a long time, then matured to long cries, shrieks, staccato calls of agony, that would suddenly become the full release of another scream. Luisa waited, watched.

After twenty minutes, she returned to the roller.

"No, NO! I beg you, oh God, I beg you!" Solana shrieked desperately, automatically, without thought for the words she uttered. She was already in unbearable pain, muscles and ligaments strained and damaged. The chains at wrists and ankles inflicted horrendous pressure in every joint, burning and agonising, beyond anything she had experienced. And now Luisa turned the roller another notch.

Solana's body creaked loudly and she gave a new, terrible scream, pain like molten lead poured into her joints. From the screaming, Luisa knew what was coming, and she kept turning the roller slowly. A dreadful sound came from Solana's armpits, like breaking green branches from a sapling, as Luisa dislocated both her shoulders. The pain was compounded beyond comprehension. Solana's hips began to echo the same, her elbows and knees sending tendrils of fire to her extremities.

Solana pissed herself without even realising, her urine spreading across the rack from the tangle between her wide-spread thighs. Held motionless by the strain, but with mouth wide, she screamed without restraint in pain and the abject horror of injury.

"Oh, dear God! Oh Jesus! Help me!"

For long minutes Solana lay screaming, her armpits now up beside her ears. In the shackles, her hands were purple, her feet likewise. Every muscle and sinew, glossed by her sweat, was deeply defined, every rib was stark. Her wrists, elbows, hips, knees and ankles were creaking.

Luisa had been waiting, watching, with her hands on the roller's handle. Finally, she demanded: "Speak, now. Confess that you are a witch."

It took a moment for the implication to sink in.

"Oh, please, no!" Solana began to squeak. *"Please Señora, please have mercy, you are killing me! Please, I am innocent! Oh God, don't stretch me!"*

Luisa stretched her. Solana's screams were frenzied as her feet remained fastened, but her wrists were hauled towards the roller; her body stretched again. Deep cracking, popping sounds came from her pelvis and Solana's eyes bulged.

There came a distinct wet, fleshy *crack!* as her left hip was pulled fully from its socket. A few awful seconds later, the right dislocated. To Solana, it felt as if her pelvis had torn apart, fire spreading the length of her legs to her very toes, like molten lead through her spine and abdomen, even as the agony in her shoulders and arms grew more intense with it.

The next turn came at once, no pause, no mercy, two notches: its cruel purpose only to draw the dislocations further and add strain to the joints yet intact. Solana could not deny Luisa that: her screams heightened in frenzy at the skyrocketing torment as she stretched another inch.

Returning to her corner, bare arms folded, Luisa listened to the sounds that were so familiar by this stage of racking. The slow groans of the rack, the grating of chains, the cracking and popping of a breaking human body, the screams and shrieks of the accused. Solana's elbows were beginning to tear, her knees creaking.

For the pain it gave, Luisa knew the rack was unparalleled. The whip was cruel, and its effect cumulative; but it could easily leave scars. Strappado was hard to control and brutal. The Judas Cradle often brought injuries that could be fatal. But the rack left no external scars; it was both incremental and cumulative in its horror; it could bring pain greater than any of the other torments, and that pain could be maintained for days on end.

Unmoved by the shrieks that filled the cell, Luisa eventually yawned, stepped forward once more. Her bare feet felt the chill stone as she returned to the rack: the skirt of her chiton played at her bare legs. Sensualities that were such a contrast to the raging, raw agony that tore through Solana. Tilting her hips, she stood beside the rack with arms still folded. "Have you anything to say?"

Framed by her own wet and distorted armpits, Solana's face was dark, her eyes overloaded with pain, unseeing and panicked. She had been in the worst agony of her life for two hours. She was close to spilling any confession, admitting any sin, that Luisa wanted. "*Please, please, please ...*"

Luisa put her hands to the lever. "You are blind to your sins, I will help you see."

"*Oh God! Oh God! No, no, no!*" Solana shrieked desperately as Luisa put her weight against the lever and the roller turned. Solana screamed anew as her body was stretched again. With a slow, earthy creaking and snapping sound, her elbows were pulled apart, tendrils of terrible agony spreading to the depths of her chest and the tips of her fingers as bone separated from cartilage. Every fibre exploded with new pain. A fresh series of wet *popping* and *cracking* sounds reverberated from her dislocated shoulders and hips as ligaments cracked from anchorage, tendons groaned.

She screamed and screamed. Luisa leaned back against the wall, watched, waited.

Solana's screams lasted quarter of an hour this time, decaying into mindless gibbering, half-prayers, beseeching God for mercy. Every gasp brought its own agony. Solana had been stretched long inches, bringing suffering beyond comprehension.

Every bone, every joint, every inch of her body roared with savagely-hot, unbearable pain; concentrated with unbelievable horror in her dislocated shoulders, hips, and elbows, her knees also on the brink of separation. Bearing little screams of her ongoing agony, Solana's short, panted breaths blew puffs of vapour in the air. Her breasts barely shifted on her straining ribcage.

Luisa moved close to the rack, standing at its head, then, bending at the hips, leaned her elbows on the roller, her chin cupped in her hands. She looked along Solana's stretched, shining arms to her suffering face. There was such beauty in her agony; such sensuality in her cries.

Solana was strong. One of the strongest. Many witches confessed at the mere threat of the rack. Others broke within just a few turns, certainly when shoulders or hips dislocated. Few fought so fiercely that they would be racked this severely. But Luisa could see that Solana was close to losing her mind to the rack. But not yet: as Luisa watched, Solana's throat shifted.

"*Please, oh God, please stop the pain,*" she squeaked.

"You know what you must say to stop it," Luisa said quietly.

Solana could barely speak, each word coming on a heaved squeal: "*Please, just tell me!*"

The denials had stopped. Confession was so close now.

Luisa straightened. "You must speak the truth, Solana Degas." She grasped the roller's handle.

"*Oh my God, no!*" Solana shrieked.

Luisa stretched her.

Over the course of five long minutes, shifting the roller with precision, Luisa delivered the stretch that pulled Solana's knees apart. Solana's screams were lung-deep even as it began. Luisa could feel the vibrations and tiny shocks of cartilage separating, ligament splitting, tendon fraying, through the handle of the roller. Twice the ratchet rose and fell, almost silently, measuring and maintaining each stretch of Solana's body as her knees were fully dislocated, bone from bone.

Every new stretch had compounded her agony; but this was the most terrible yet. It seemed to feed tendrils of lava that snaked down Solana's shins to her toes, up her thighs, doubling the agony in every other dislocated joint too.

Luisa stopped to retie her hair, watching Solana scream madly, uncontrolled, frantic. It was not just the magnitude of pain, which was unrivalled. It was the fact that the new pain did not abate, did not end, and Solana's very soul was breaking.

Luisa glanced to the Dungeon Maids and scribe. She knew they could smell Solana's body, her armpits' perspiration rich with her pheromones. It was such an intoxicating aroma that Luisa had seen

Dungeon Maids flush with arousal, and male guards ejaculate their semen during rackings like this, and it always entertained her.

Creaks from the rack. *Cracks* and *pops* from the screaming, broken, straining body upon it. Solana was suffering beyond understanding. Between her dislocated arms, her face had lost all expression, her eyes unfocused, sweat and tears, snot and saliva wetting her face. Her mouth was open, the screams came agonised and raw. Every minute was an hour to the woman upon the rack, and brought her closer to revealing God's truth.

Finally, Luisa returned to the roller. "This turn will get confession," she told her colleagues.

Solana's mouth stretched in a hideous new scream as the rack groaned. Her broken joints separated further still, dislocated shoulders and hips and elbows and knees drawing apart in their swelling hells of agony; even her spine beginning to tear. A fresh gush of urine squirted from between Solana's widely-parted thighs..

Solana's eyes rolled back. She lost all thought, all resolve, all sense of self. The scream caught in her throat, and for a few moments there was just a long, rattled groan. There was no escape from the torment, and her mind had been overwhelmed. Then, she drew a whooping breath.

"I am a witch, I will tell everything!" Solana's shrieked confession came without thought, her resolve ripped apart like her joints. *"I have consorted with the Devil, I have cast spells, I will confess it all, please stop the pain!"*

"You say freely that you are a witch?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"Repeat the words. Say them."

"I am a witch, please, oh God, no more! I am, I swear I am!"

Through screams and shrieks, the confession began, the scribe taking notes.

It had only taken thirteen notches of the twenty that Solana could have suffered.

That was the ingenuity of the rack. The pain was far greater than the damage it caused; joints could be reset. Tendons, ligaments and muscles would heal. But the rack hurt so much that most who suffered it would rather die than be stretched.

Solana had been defeated, and the Chief Torturer folded her arms again, smiled in satisfaction, and listened to the shrieked words of confession.

Eight - Seduction

After her confession had been taken, Solana's body had to be loosened gradually from the rack, and each joint reset. Luisa and the Jailer both worked each bone back into place, while Solana howled with the pain of every small movement.

It took more than an hour to do.

Still delirious with agony, crippled by her injuries from the rack, Solana nevertheless had her hands tied tightly behind her back to avoid unnecessary movement; her legs, too, were tied above the knee and at the ankles. So trussed, she was carried back on the bare shoulders of the Dungeon Maids and laid upon the floor of her cell.

For the first few days, she was paralysed by the effects of racking. A fever followed, the illness leaving Solana shivering and sweating, bound on the cell floor.

"I am so sorry, Señorita Solana." Naked, her downy skin golden in the torchlight, Maria knelt alongside the broken Solana. A cloth wrung in a pail of water helped sponge the sweat of fever from the prisoner's brow and neck. "You did not have a choice. The rack was always going to beat you."

After two days, with sustenance brought daily by Maria, Solana found sensation in her fingers and toes. Two weeks after she had been broken on the rack, she could once again move her limbs.

And so, after having her hands securely tied behind her back, her wrists were instead locked in the thick and heavy iron manacles, keeping her arms stretched over her head while she sat, naked, restrained by the hasp about her waist, against the cold and slimy wall of her tiny cell. She did not try to escape, but slumped silently, with hands above the shackles for day after endless day.

Being stretched had not only broken her body, but her spirit. In the end, barely aware of what she was saying, Solana had babbled countless, rambling stories; of fornicating with men and animals, of casting spells and curses, of sacrifices and murder. The tales had been shrieked in half-sentences, all written down as truth finally wrested from her by pain. Solana had little memory of what she had said; she could only remember the horror of feeling, and hearing, her own bones draw apart from each other, her own flesh and sinew tearing.

In the weeks that followed, Solana cursed herself for confessing. Broken by the torture, she had betrayed God, she had betrayed herself, she had lied just to stop the stretching. It would have been better to have died, there on the rack, than to give in. She despised her weakness. She often wept in her solitude, locked in chains, naked and forlorn.

"Do not blame yourself," Maria had said, on one of her visits. "The rack breaks everyone. Nobody withholds confession upon it, ever. You had no choice. Now, at least, you are confessed." Seeing the tears that brimmed in Solana's eyes, Maria had leaned in close, cupped her fingers tenderly under Solana's chin, and kissed her lips. It was neither brief, nor shy, and the softness of Maria's mouth on hers had left a warmth in Solana's belly that lasted many days.

Three more long months passed.

Months in which Solana languished against the cell wall locked in chains, all but forgotten by those who had accused her, a wretched and grubby creature. Two months in which she had not once lowered her arms, not once been able to touch her own body with her hands.

The measure of each day was the feeding by Maria. The measure of each week was a sluicing-down with a bucket of icy, brackish well-water that washed the worst of the filth from her nude body.

So it was an oddity when, deep in the night, Solana heard her cell door softly open and close.

She had been in the daze that passed for sleep. Her arms and hands had gone numb, and for a time she remained, held fast by the shackles, eyes trying to focus on an orange glow in the gloomy cell. It was a lantern turned low; but when it was hooked to the wall and its light turned a little higher, Solana saw who had entered.

"I am not here to hurt you." Luisa looked beautiful. Her body was draped in her long, sleeveless white chiton, pinned at each shoulder with a golden brooch, fastened about the waist with cord, open at the sides. Her breasts weighed against the fabric, nipples raising dark peaks. Around one slim upper arm

was a thong of leather, upon both wrists were bracelets. More chains and adornments at her ankles. Luisa's hair was braided, and fastened on top of her head with golden pins, leaving her slim neck and collarbone bare.

Her naked feet whispered on the stone floor as she came close to the chained Solana. Slowly, she lowered herself to one knee, her leg bared to the hip. She put her hand out to touch the heavy iron ring fastened in the wall. It was cold, solid, immovable: Luisa's fingers followed each link of the chain down from the ring, counting five until she reached the manacle about Solana's wrist.

The manacle was tight, too snug to even fit a fingernail between the metal and enclosed wrist. Luisa's hand travelled down, feeling the warm satin of Solana's upstretched arm; the gradual swell of her forearm to elbow; the firm contours of triceps softened by the finest hairs.

When she reached Solana's armpit, Luisa gently drew her fingertips through it, feeling the humid skin, the soft hair, the natural gully of muscle and tendon. She leaned her face close, deeply inhaling its rich scent: a powerful musk of flesh and femininity. Arousing and sexual, more intoxicating than wine. Luisa sighed and kissed Solana's armpit. Solana moaned softly, feeling a stirring low in her belly.

Luisa's hands moved to Solana's breasts. Round, weighty, slick with her body's own oils and old sweat. Luisa felt their firmness, smoothness, until her thumbs came to the crinkled surrounds of each nipple, and the fleshy chocolate stubs that hardened like pebbles at her touch.

Luisa's hands travelled down, feeling the slight ridge of each rib, her caress moving inwards until she was touching the firm pillows of Solana's muscled belly. Warm skin softened by a peach fuzz that thickened towards her loins.

Fixed by the iron hasp, Solana had been sitting against the wall with her heels on the floor and her knees slightly bent, her thighs parted just a little. She did not react as Luisa's fingertips combed down into the tight spread of her pubic hair. It was a gentle touch, shifting and tugging on the hair itself, the hand gradually sliding lower.

Solana pushed her head back against the stone wall as Luisa's fingers worked through the tangle of hair to touch her labia, fingers sliding between. Solana was already wet. Her clitoris had swollen at the first touch of her body. Luisa's fingers started to slide back and forth; Solana's thighs opened wider, and without warning, orgasm swept her. Her back arched from the wall, a moan escaped her lips,

When Solana slumped back again, hanging heavily on her shackles, Luisa continued her caress. Solana's clitoris was so sensitive it felt like pain; but pain was so entwined into Solana's existence that she wanted it, clenching her teeth and trying to grind her sex harder against Luisa's touch.

Luisa's other hand returned to the manacle on Solana's wrist, caressing the iron and the flesh locked within its unrelenting grip.

Is this a dream? Solana closed her eyes, uncertain of reality. She felt Luisa's hand between her legs, building her arousal for a second time. She felt the iron that gripped her wrists, holding her arms above her head, and realised that what she had once resented, she now needed. Chained, she felt secure, she felt certain. There was no chance of escape, so she did not need to think of escaping. She did not need her hands, so they curled limply above the shackles. She did not need clothes, jewellery or adornments, a comb or a brush, or anything beyond the certainty of her restraint.

Luisa's mouth found Solana's breast. Solana sighed as the hot tongue searched and licked, teeth gently tugging on the hardened nipple, lips kissing and sucking.

As Luisa's gentle fingers worked Solana's clitoris, she put her mouth to Solana's and eased her tongue inside. Solana welcomed the kiss, sucking on Luisa's tongue, tasting the saltiness of her own skin, and it was more satisfying than the sweetest milk.

One hand still grasping the chain to Solana's shackle, Luisa broke from the kiss to descend to Solana's breast again; teasing and goading the sensitive nipple with her tongue and teeth, her fingers still working Solana's hard clitoris until orgasm swelled again through Solana's body, even more intense than the first. It was an explosion of pleasure that had Solana groaning aloud, her hips lifting and pumping, her arms pulled hard above her head by the shackles, the iron hasp biting into her waist. Solana's helplessness suddenly felt so good, so natural. She never wanted to be set free.

When the orgasm finished, Solana's body tingling, Luisa's lips found Solana's again. This time, Solana returned the kiss with passion, pushing her own tongue into Luisa's mouth, searching her teeth, savouring their intimate exchange of warm saliva, tongues sliding together, the softness of Luisa's lips against her own. With Luisa's arm still raised to the manacle, Solana could smell her armpit, the Chief Torturer's perspiration fragrant like summer sun, indescribably arousing.

Solana could not understand why this felt so good. This was the woman who had broken her, driven her to an insanity in which she had condemned herself. Luisa owned Solana's freedom, her soul and her will.

When their kiss ended, a string of saliva still connected the women's mouths. Luisa whispered, "tell me. Tell me how it felt."

"Hmm?" Solana, still dazed, did not understand the question.

"Tell me how it felt to be broken."

The question sent goosebumps over Solana's bare skin, the spell was shattered. Suddenly, she felt naked, alone, abused. Suddenly the shackles on her wrists were restraint, injustice and cruelty, not safety. Suddenly the hot breath on her lips was that of a monster.

"How it felt to be broken?" Solana repeated.

Luisa drew back. In the orange glow of the lamp her eyes were dark with passion. "When you had no mind from the pain. When you felt your joints separate, and you could no longer think for yourself because of the pain. When the words came on their own, just to make it stop. Tell me how it felt?"

"It ... I ..." How could Solana describe the horror of those awful hours? The nightmares still woke her, screaming out, in the night. She felt the hairs on her body rising now.

Luisa seemed completely unaware. "When you gave in to the strength of the rack and let your agony be your voice." Her expression was that of an adolescent girl, passion and wonder, and yet naive. "Was it not a pleasure beyond any other? Was it not Heaven itself?"

Solana was momentarily lost for words, and for an instant she forgot that she was prisoner, with her hands held fast in the fetters. She said incredulously, "my God. You insane, twisted *bitch!*"

For just an instant, Luisa's face wore a hurt pout. But then it morphed into rage, and a moment later her fist snatched into Solana's hair and slammed her head back against the cell wall. Light flashed in Solana's eyes. A second time, and a third, each resounding *crack!* filling her ears until her vision swam.

Solana became aware of Luisa's face, beauty now in fury. "You will regret those words, Solana Degas. By God, you will regret them!"

Solana gave a fierce, defiant smile. "I am confessed, I am condemned. There is nothing more you can do to me."

Luisa's eyes blazed. "You will see, Witch."

Her head still throbbing, Solana watched as Luisa swept from the cell, long skirts flowing, the lamplight glinting on bracelets and golden skin.

A half hour later, two Dungeon Maids and the Jailer entered Solana's cell, bringing heavy manacles, each pair on a single coupling ring. Her head still sore from Luisa's assault, Solana watched in growing panic as one Maid stepped to the wall-ring of the chain that had loomed overhead from its pulley in the cell for so many months. The Maid loosened the end of the chain and begin to pay it out.

"Wait! Please, what are you doing! Why am I to be tortured again?" Solana asked from her place on the floor.

"This is not torture, Witch," the Jailer said, tossing her long black hair over a bare shoulder with a casual hand.

When the dangling ring of the ceiling chain was low enough, a second Maid, her face cold, fixed one pair of iron manacles to it. The tears were already spilling down Solana's face.

"No," she wept in misery and fear. "No, please, please, I beg you..."

Solana's words were immediately cut off as the gag she had worn, months ago on her arrival at Justice Hall, was pushed into her mouth by two Dungeon Maids. A fat leather ball as big as her fist,

forcing her jaw wide, so big that her lips formed a seal around its curve. The strap riveted to the front of the ball was fastened tightly with a buckle behind her head, over her bunched hair.

Solana tried now to protest, but the stretch of her jaw was so great that her vocal cords were constricted, and she could not even make sound in her throat.

The Jailer unlocked Solana's wrists and waist ring, and, lifting her by her arms, two of the Maids dragged her to the centre of the room. There was a haste to their work; but complete indifference in their pretty faces. Below the chain, Solana teetered on her knees, as her chafed wrists were placed in shackles locked tight with a key.

"Heave!" Three women hauled on the chain's free end; its heavy links rattled loudly through the overhead pulley, and the manacles around Solana's wrists were wrenched upwards, jerking her arms above her head. The girls pulled together once again, and by her wrists, Solana was half-lifted off the floor, the air hissing through her nostrils in pain, struggling to get her weakened legs beneath her.

On the third pull, the chain was drawn up another foot and a half, Solana's arms hugging her head, her body stretched and helpless, only her toes on the floor of the cell.

But they were not done.

"Heave!" Like eager bell-ringers, the three women threw their combined weight into the chain, and Solana was lifted up into the air. Suddenly she was hanging by her wrists, rotating helplessly, her feet kicking out as pain exploded through her wrists and hands. She was raised until her toes were a foot above the flagstones. As she helplessly rotated, she saw the two Dungeon Maids securing the chain's end to its wall mooring.

The Jailer held the remaining pair of manacles; quickly she fastened them around Solana's ankles, a key locking each, chaining her feet together.

Solana could not make a sound, hanging on the creaking chain. The moment she had been raised off the ground, the pain had hit her manacled wrists, the iron grinding cruelly into the bones; but even worse was the burning that ravaged her arms and shoulders. Even though three months had passed since her breaking upon the rack, Solana's ligaments had not fully recovered. In her red-hot whirl of pain and bewilderment, slowly turning where she hung, Solana became aware of another person in the cell. Dressed in white, adorned in gold. *Luisa*.

Solana tried to make a noise, only succeeded in blowing air from her nose.

"There is a matter to be investigated," Luisa said coldly, looking up at her prisoner, her voice tempered with malice. "Somebody has been using Witchcraft in this very dungeon. Everybody knows that a witch's power comes through her connection with the earth, and her spells cast by incantation, so you shall remain suspended and gagged until my investigation is complete."

The horror and injustice whirled in Solana's head. By confessing that she was a witch, Solana had brought this torment upon herself. Luisa handed a heavy padlock to the Jailer. "Secure the chain with my personal lock."

The wall-anchored end of the chain was padlocked to its mooring, and the key handed to Luisa. Solana realised miserably that only Luisa could let her down from this awful suspension.

On Luisa's command, the Dungeon Maids and the Jailer left.

Moment by moment, Solana could feel her body stretching under its own weight. Sweat was clustering in droplets on her bare back. She could not speak, but looked to Luisa with desperate eyes. Luisa returned the look with ice.

"You should not have insulted me," she spat.

The door slammed shut on her departure, its bolts and locks slid into place.

Hanging by her wrists was unbearable. The shackles' aching horror spread hotly to the pain that radiated from armpits and elbows, the length of Solana's arms and down into her flanks. This was Luisa's wrath, her vengeance unleashed. Solana could do nothing but suffer it.

Nine: Betrayal

Maria was a mess. Snot and tears wet her face. The veins on her forehead bulged, the tendons in her neck were tight.

By roped wrists and ankles, the girl's body was fixed cruelly upon a rack in the torture chamber. Her slender limbs were drawn to the point at which bone ends nearly separated from socket, and its pain was unbearable.

Her hands and feet were dark with strangled circulation and misshapen like dough, ribcage stark and lifted, limbs striated and straining with the unending tension on her young body as she lay, widely sprawled in an agonised X.

Even as Solana still hung turning in her cell, Maria had been torn from sleep by the Jailer at Luisa's request, her hands bound behind her, and had been dragged, stumbling and naked, into the main torture chamber. In the gloom, she had glimpsed the dull gleam of bare skin; other women chained to walls or fixed upon instruments of confession. Maria had begged in dread and confusion, but been offered no words in return.

The Jailer had had flung Maria onto the wood of a massive old rack. Sweeping her own black hair aside over one pale shoulder, the Jailer alone had secured the young Chamber Slave to this rack; ropes quickly affixed around her ankles holding her legs wide, then her hands untied and wrists roped instead to the roller.

Lying on the bed of dark wood, Maria had looked so small and fragile, held spread wide upon an engine of fearsome strength.

Luisa had asked the Jailer to bring two Dungeon Maids for assistance.

Under Luisa's instruction, both Maids had together stretched the pleading Maria. The rack had taken up its work with the creaking of a heavy axle, the groaning and squeaking of ropes, and by her wrists Maria's body had been extended. Within a minute the brutal fire of being stretched roared through her helpless limbs, and she had given lung-deep screams of pain.

It was torture, but it was also the cruellest restraint. So tightly stretched, even struggling was impossible: all leverage had been drawn from her limbs, beyond the point of endurance. The pain was unbearable, but so she had been left.

Maria had screamed and pleaded for hours, panicked and agonised, but eventually exhaustion had stolen her strength. Now she lay, fiercely stretched, her hands and feet dark. She was wet with sweat, crying out with the agony in her tortured arms and legs.

Now, after ten hours, Luisa approached from behind Maria, trailed by two Dungeon Maids and a scribe to record confession. Luisa still wore the white chiton that left her legs and the sides of her goddess' body bare. Beautiful, but eyes dark with purpose.

The light of torches gave Maria's skin a golden hue, glinting off its heavy peach-fuzz. Her body was stretched taut by the unrelenting ropes, her ribcage lifted and each ridge stark, her tiny breasts drawn flat, but her brown nipples poked hard into the chill air. As Luisa slowly circled the stretched girl, she saw the shining sweat in the wet pockets of hair of Maria's armpits. Sweat shone, too, on her throat. Sparkles glinted in the fluff that softened her jawline.

Slowly, Maria became aware of Luisa's presence. Tortured by hours stretched to the point of breaking, she could not raise her head, and her voice came in a strangled croak: "Señora Luisa, oh dear God, my arms! Please, please, loosen it!"

"First, girl, we must talk," Luisa said coolly. "I have heard disturbing things. If they are true, then I must hear them from your own mouth."

Bewildered by her pain and exhaustion, Maria stammered in panic, but had no idea what to confess. Luisa paused to tie her lush hair into a top-knot at her crown to keep it out of the way of the roller's gears, then put her hands to the lever of the rack.

"Answer me!"

Muscles in Luisa's smooth shoulders and triceps bunched and defined as she hauled the lever.

Groaning, the roller turned and leathery creaks and cracks came from the delicate body stretching further upon it; a hideous scream rose up. Maria's eyes went wide and she screamed again. Joints and ligaments that had frayed and weakened over many hours now seared agony through her limbs, and bone ends strained in their moorings.

She roared: *"Oh God, Senora, my legs! They are breaking!"*

Luisa went to the table of implements. Screaming in her agony, Maria did not notice as the Chief Torturer selected a long-handled iron with a one-inch wide filigree brand, and pushed it deep into the brazier's shimmering coals.

Luisa knew that the agony in Maria's distended arms; her wrists, elbows, shoulders, down her back and sides; her lower back; her hips, her knees, and the muscles of her spread and pulled legs was unbearable. The rack was the most effective torture for good reason. It rendered absolute helplessness, and was the greatest agony imaginable.

So tortured, Maria appeared like a bowstring, her body lengthened between ankle rings and roller, still screaming from a just single turn of the roller. But Luisa did not wish to dislocate Maria's joints, however easy it would be upon that great machine; she merely needed the girl helpless for the torture that would now bring confession.

Luisa's father had grown ill when she was still in her teens. An accomplished torturer for almost forty years, he had been a compassionate man outside the dungeons in which he practised his craft, and had taken pride in his work. He rarely spilled blood, never maimed, and almost always gained confession, driven by a pious heart and endless patience.

Though his wife had died having never borne him a son, he loved his daughter deeply. Upon learning of his declining health, he had started teaching her how to question witches; introducing her to the machines of the dungeon, how to gain the most effect with the least effort and no lasting injury to the accused. Bravely, she had asked to experience each torture for herself, to be taken beyond the point of what she could bear, so she may learn its particular characteristics.

Luisa had exceeded all of her father's expectations, learning quickly. Long before she turned twenty, he had taken her before the Inquisitors, asking that she be chosen as his replacement. Loath to break with tradition and place a woman in such a role, the Inquisitors had been hesitant: but she had been persuasive indeed, and upon demonstration of her skills in the torture chamber, they agreed to let her work as an apprentice.

Over long minutes, Maria's screams ebbed to wailing and crying like a child. Her body was wet. Now the tension on her body was so cruel, the pressure on hands and feet was so great that she could not even move her fingers and toes. Her paralysis from being stretched was absolute and its pain ravaged her tender joints.

As she returned to the brazier, Luisa could feel its intense heat on her bare arms and legs, on the sides of her breasts. She pulled on a heavy gauntlet and grasped the end of a branding iron heating in the fire. With her other hand she pumped a bellows until the coals were roaring, and the iron glowed white with it. She could hear Maria wailing on, with agonised breaths.

Luisa drew the branding iron from the brazier. Its tip was a delicate metalwork, the intricate shape of a rose an inch across. The no-harm rule of witch inquisition did not apply, here. This was a different matter entirely. But if Maria must scar, it would be a beautiful scar. The iron crackled in the cool air, tiny specks of dust igniting as they touched it.

Exposed by her spreadeagle on the rack, Maria's armpits were an easy target; flattened out, vulnerable, sensitive. Maria's eyebrows were heavy and black and her pubic hair thick and untamed, and so the hair in the girl's armpits; wet from the sweat of her terrible pain and fear, rivulets streaking her side to the wood of the rack.

With limbs stretched and completely immobilised, her face framed by her straining armpits, Maria could only watch with horror as Luisa slowly brought the crackling iron closer.

"Señora, please! Please!" she bawled in terror. "I do not know what to confess! Stop! Stop!"

But with precision, Luisa kissed the glowing iron to the hollow of Maria's right armpit. Maria emptied her lungs in a belly-deep scream of agony as skin hissed, the thick hair smoked and flamed, sweat burst into steam.

Luisa lifted the iron, leaving a smoking brand, then pressed the iron into Maria's armpit again. The girl's screams echoed from stone walls.

Luisa tortured Maria with skill, pressing the glowing iron into her armpit one to two seconds at a time, drawing clouds of smoke, causing the most terrible agony that would not ebb, but not burning deeply enough to destroy nerves.

After a dozen burns, Luisa lifted the iron, leaving Maria shrieking and bawling. The brand still glowed orange, curling grey smoke from the flesh it had touched. Maria's now-bare armpit bore a cluster of red scorched roses. Luisa returned to the brazier, thrusting the iron back into its coals, and drew a fresh one, shimmering and crackling. With the brightly glowing iron trailing smoke, she moved to Maria's left side.

"Oh dear God, no! No more! Señora, I will confess! Please, why, why?" the stretched girl shrieked in her anguish.

Luisa thrust the iron into Maria's armpit and her begging exploded into screams of agony. Flames devoured the hair with pungent smoke. The pain of Maria's stretching compounded by this added torment, the unbearable hell of having her sensitive armpits burned. Little by little, Luisa repeated her touches of the branding iron, burning hair and searing skin until Maria's sobbing face was framed by the bare, shining and scorched gullies of her armpits. Glistening rivulets of sweat ran from her ribcage, her fingers and toes were spread beyond the ropes, her belly heaving up and down.

"No more, no more," she sobbed. "Please, let me die ... I beg you, let me die ..."

In her quest to master her craft, Luisa had taken lessons from a physician. Her learning of female anatomy had been valuable. She knew the intricate branching of nerves that spread from a woman's armpits, and that even the tissues of her breasts were bedded there. Torturing a woman's armpits drove an unparalleled magnitude of pain even into the core of her breasts.

Maria was suffering that agony now. "Please, I do not know what I must say!"

"Confess your sins," Luisa said impassively. "Tell me of the prisoners you have seduced, of the Dungeon Maids you enchanted, of the guards you tried to distract from their duty."

"Oh, my dear god!" Maria was shrieking and crying. "I swear to you I have done none of that! Señora, I have been loyal, I have obeyed you, I love you as my own mother!"

Luisa took long-handled tongs from the table, and with them selected a burning coal from the brazier, smoking in the dungeon air. As she turned again to the Maria, she felt the heat of the brazier on her naked side, the flank of her breast. She realised that she, too, was sweating; the white fabric of her dress was wet with it.

Maria, splayed out and stretched, was shivering in agony, her breath coming in terrified shrieks. Luisa knew that the girl would not hold out much longer.

"Say what you have done."

With the tongs, Luisa thrust the burning coal into Maria's already-agonised left armpit. It hissed savagely and Maria's screams exploded from her lungs, her eyes flying wide as pain spread into her breast, focused like a thousand suns in her armpit itself. The smell of vaporising sweat and searing skin curled up with the sweet smoke. Luisa drew the coal away, then touched it, sizzling, lower into her armpit, and Maria's screaming continued without pause.

A third touch, agony burrowing deep into Maria's sensitive armpit.

"*I confess! I confess!*" When Luisa lifted the iron away, Maria desperately began babbling, telling of sins and seduction, enchantment, of sexual encounters with Maids, guards, and prisoners alike.

Luisa calmly blew on the coal until it glowed orange-white, looked towards Maria's right armpit.

"Names," she said.

Stretched helpless, Maria stammered, hesitated; panicked and bewildered in her agony.

The burning coal was pressed into her exposed underarm and her screams shattered the dungeon air again. Urine sprayed from the hairy tangle between her thighs. Every inch of Maria's skin was wet with her sweat, snot and tears streaming, as Luisa burned her armpit again and again.

When Luisa lifted away the coal, with her armpits still smoking, Maria began giving names; among the very first was Solana. For another quarter hour, while the scribe wrote, Maria confessed her sins of seduction, and the list of names grew long.

Hanging prisoners by the wrists was Luisa's preferred restraint.

It was inescapable. A suspended prisoner could not free herself from rope or shackles, and would remain hanging until released. In more than thirty years of Luisa's tenure, no woman had ever escaped. It was also humiliating; with arms overhead, her body was vulnerable, very exposed, defenceless. It was torture, no question: hanging by the wrists became unbearably painful, worsening over time as the body became exhausted and joints loosened.

After twelve hours left hanging, Solana's body was a motionless, gleaming shape suspended in the dark cell, ankles chained together. Her breasts barely shifted on her straining ribcage. Her head, locked forward by her arms, hung down, her jaw stretched by the leather ball gagging her. Her eyes were half open but saw only her strobing hell of pain.

Nothing of Luisa's instruction for Solana's torment was by chance. Having been racked once before, Solana's joints were already weakened, and with her muscles depleted, over her long hours of suspension, Solana's shoulders and elbows eased partly out of joint.

For hours upon end the breath jetted through her nostrils in voiceless agony as she felt her joints gradually shifting in their beds. Her motionless body was wracked with pain that smouldered deep in her armpits, her elbows, and snaked down her spine. Even her hips were dragged fractionally in their sockets by the weight of her dangling legs, sending shockwaves down to her knees and along her shins until her drooping toes seemed to be alight with flames.

Flashes of light assaulted Solana's dulled eyes. She could no longer feel her hands or wrists; only her torn shoulders and elbows and hips, racked by her own body weight, as if knives had been thrust into the joints, their pain allowed to spread through the marrow of her bones. She could feel her spine, each vertebrae straining on its companion.

And yet, with her head pinned forward by her own paralysed arms, she had no movement save the shifting of her belly as she fought for each sniff of air. The passage of time was slowed by pain: its roaring, unending, maddening nightmare was all Solana knew, as she hung alone in the cell.

The Night Jailer wrapped the remainder of his bread and cheese in a cloth, and placed it back into his satchel. From the table at his station near the stairs, he stood, checked his sword, checked the heavy ring of keys on his belt, then took the lamp and began down the tight, dark passageway.

Although the iron doors that passed in the lantern's orange globe of illumination were identical, locked and barred, the Night Jailer knew which to pause outside. He knew, also, which key to draw from the dozens he carried, fitting it into the door's lock and turning it as quietly as he could.

It was her scent that greeted him first the powerful musk of her sweat, intoxicating and arousing. It filled the room, slightly acrid, and yet the most intensely sexual aroma.

Slung in the air by her wrists like a gleaming carcass, unmoving, was Solana Degas. Her dusky beauty and muscled physique was hypnotising in her suffering. The Night Jailer lifted his lamp to cast light over her body, seeing its mirror reflection in her shining abdomen and breasts.

Above the gag in her mouth, an agonised breath was expelled from her nostrils. She was awake, aware, and feeling every moment of her suspension.

Her hands were drawn down into the iron manacles by which she hung, crunched into tight crimson balls. Her arms had stretched over her many hours of hanging, muscles and tendons taut like cables, their contours defined by tension. Shoulders close to dislocation, her armpits were elongated, their hair plastered to the wet skin. Her head had been forced forward by her own arms as they were

drawn closer together by the hang, and her chin rested on her upper chest, the ball protruding from her lips obscenely. Her scapula bones, shifted by suspension, jutted out below her shoulders.

Her ribcage was raised, its corrugations stark in the half-light: her full breasts lifted with her dark nipples thrusting into the chill air. Below the cathedral arch of her ribcage, her belly was defined by its sectioned muscle. Her torso was drawn and tight, stretched long to the flare of her hips. Her legs, too, dangled limp and lengthened, muscles stark and taut, skin shining with its downy hairs glinting in the lantern's light. Her feet were dark below the fetters that rested at her heels, downturned, her toes pointing to the floor below.

The Night Jailer circled the hanging woman, his face level with her breasts, looking her up and down. Her bare back was a landscape of muscle, her shoulder blades lifted and pulled outwards by the stretch of her arms. Above the full, shining globes of her buttocks, her lower back was softened by the most delicate dark fuzz.

The straining wall of her belly shifted minutely. From her taut armpits, fresh, glistening trails of sweat ran down her ribcage: and on her downturned face, sweat shone, her eyes half-open.

The Night Jailer breathed deeply, smelling the ripeness of Solana's body, sweat and suffering. His eyes travelled her straining physique. Slowly, in front of her so she could see, he unfastened the lace of his breeches, took out a cock already hard as wood and throbbing with arousal. He kept his eyes on the woman hanging by her wrists, and began to pump his cock at the sight.

At the full-length mirror in her quarters, Luisa carefully brought the front and back of her tunic together at her right shoulder, and fastened them with a simple, ornate pin. She had always loved the simplicity and beauty of these Ancient Greek garments; two narrow sheets pinned at each shoulder and belted by a silk rope at the waist. The silk clung to the full outlines of her soft breasts.

As a child, Luisa's father had taken her to the city's Great Library. Although it was forbidden for a woman, he had taught her to read Spanish and Latin. Amongst the ancient manuscripts and scrolls, she had discovered the history of Greece and Rome, and had been fascinated by the freedom with which women had dressed. Beautiful and sensual; not hiding their bodies, but celebrating them.

At nine years old, with the help of their servants, she had tailored her own garments in the classical Greek styles, and had worn them constantly within the house.

When she had first accompanied her father to the dungeons, Luisa's love for ancient clothing styles had caused a scandal. She had been fourteen; but already strikingly beautiful in her exotic dresses. One guard had tried to sport with her. She had deflected his advances and told her father; later that week she had personally racked the guard until his limbs were pulled joint from joint, then had drawn a cord tight around his neck and held it until the life had departed his open eyes.

Clothing was not all Luisa had learned about the Ancient Greeks. She had fallen in love with Hera - the most beautiful and powerful of the goddesses, intelligent, cunning and vengeful. Luisa had learned that women could be every bit as strong, cunning, and ruthless as men.

Luisa turned and admired her dress for a moment, enjoying the way the flimsy garment shifted. The golden candlelight glinted on her bare limbs. Her brown hair tumbled about her gleaming shoulders. The chiton trailed gracefully to the ground, but open on either side, it bared her sides generously, and exposed the flanks of her breasts. As always, her feet were bare.

She thought back to the day that she and her father had petitioned the Clergy for her position as Torturer's Apprentice.

Five stern men had sat at the bench, and yet without fear or hesitation, the young Luisa had shed her cloak and stripped off her modest shift in front of them.

Unashamed, she had knelt naked on the cold flagstones before them while her father had bound her wrists tightly behind her back. With her arms pulled back, her ribcage was lifted and her full breasts thrust upwards. She knelt with her thighs slightly parted to allow a glimpse of the soft hair between.

Lifting her head, she had met the eyes of the men. Their discomfort had been obvious.

"Do you see, My Lords?" she had asked. "Do your cocks not tighten to see me kneeling bound, and naked, and helpless, before you?"

"What do you mean by this!" the Chief Inquisitor had barked. Anger was rising among the Clergy as quickly as their cocks, but Luisa was not cowed.

"The Devil is powerful indeed, my Lords. He brings temptation even to such strong and noble men of God as yourselves. Imagine the temptation for those men charged with the inquisitions of women. How can they do God's work, when they are surely corrupted by desire for their victims?"

The Head Inquisitor narrowed his eyes. He was sweating. Clearly he, and the others, could see Luisa's point. "What do you propose?"

"My Lords, God gave my father a girl as his only child, with the intent that I follow in his work. Only I can serve the Church with purity and integrity, and free of temptations and lust. I give myself to you, as your servant."

Silence. She could see their eyes on her, assessing every inch of her naked body. One of the panel swallowed loudly, awkwardly..

With hands so strictly bound, the only gesture Luisa could make was to bow her head. "My Lords. Allow me to serve you, in obedience, as Torturer's Apprentice, for the glory of God, and the Church, and for the celebration of your honoured names."

They had signed the papers that afternoon.

Luisa sucked her lip, bunched her hair with both hands. Many years had passed since then, and, she was told, she had grown only more beautiful. Her body more toned, her face more serene and features more refined. She gazed into her own eyes, looking across the decades as she remembered the young woman who had shown such ambition.

Then, resolutely, she turned and strode from her quarters.

Ten - Maria

The door to Solana's cell opened; the black-haired Jailer, two pretty Dungeon Maids and a grizzled male physician entered. Central to the room, a dark and taut body, oiled with old sweat, hung heavy from a single chain. Her head was down. She did not move.

"How long has she been hanging?" the physician asked.

"Two days," the Jailer replied, her brown eyes assessing the prisoner.

The anchored chain was released, and clattered through the ring, Solana's limp body sliding to the slimy floor. She fell heavily, moaning. The physician wasted no time in checking that her joints were all in place, then pronounced her fit to be restrained.

The iron cuffs were unlocked from her black-bruised wrists, but immediately she was dragged to the wall-ring at the rear of the cell. Once again the Dungeon Maids locked her wrists over her head, the waist-hasps closed and also locked. Her head fell forward in near-insensibility.

It was not Maria, but a different girl who visited that night with water and food. She did not give her name, nor offer any words, and grudgingly pushed the stale bread into Solana's mouth, tipping the water jug so that Solana spilled much onto her own breasts. Despite the sustenance, Solana was soon dragged into an exhausted sleep.

The Jailer and two Dungeon Maids released the tension of the rack, and Maria's arms fell to its wood, a long wail expressed from her lungs as the awful stretch in her body was eased. Nothing had been dislocated, no ligaments truly torn, but the agony in her joints and muscles had the intensity of a sprain, too painful to move.

Regardless, her bruise-black wrists were tied tightly before her body.

"Bring her," the Jailer said.

Maria screeched piteously with the pain in her limbs and her burned armpits as the Dungeon Maids hoisted the girl between them, holding her arms, and carried her from the torture chamber.

It was a separate chamber, high-ceilinged, rounded, to which they brought the Chamber Slave. Once, the accused witch Esmerelda had suffered strappado here. The long rope hung from its pulley high above. Ten feet from that, a table, waist high, fitted with six iron rings at its solid surface, more at its base. A small gibbet cage hung from a lower cloister of the ceiling to one side.

Here Luisa waited, and with a finger indicated the rope. It was the Jailer, quick and efficient, who tied the long rope around the binding at Maria's wrists, and, while the Dungeon Maids held the whimpering girl upright, turned the windless to draw the rope in. Within a minute, Maria was hanging heavily on her wrists, her delicate toes three inches from the floor, weakly crying out as she rotated above the stone, her arms and shoulders again in agony. The raw, weeping burns in her armpits were the frame for her suffering, downturned face.

Luisa meandered forward towards her Jailer, looking at the dangling Maria. "This Chamber Slave has confessed to bewitchment and seduction," Luisa told her Jailer.

"I see, Señora," was the Jailer's measured reply.

"You may have felt its effects. Certainly, she admits she tried to charm and arouse you. But if so, if ever you felt lust for her, you are blameless."

The Jailer gathered her own long hair with both hands and held it on top of her head, pursing her lips and regarding the miserable prisoner. "Now that you mention it, Señora ..."

Luisa laughed, and moved close, one finger and thumb lightly touching the Jailer's chin, Luisa's eyes on the Jailer's, their faces only inches apart. The Jailer, arms still atop her head, returned the gaze without falter. Luisa: "And yet, I know you, and trust you."

The Jailer's little smile was vindication. Finally, Luisa turned away, but held out a paper scrawled with notes as she did.

"Fetch the whip, and bring each of these Dungeon Maids. They, and you, should each extract a price from this Chamber Slave's skin."

"Yes, Señora." The Jailer lowered her arms to accept the note, and read it briefly. "They are eleven, and I am the twelfth."

Luisa nodded as she circled the petite slave hanging by her wrists. "Ten lashes apiece."

In only ten minutes, the Jailer returned, trailing nine Dungeon Maids who joined the two already with Luisa. Without speaking, bare-limbed in their bodice-and-skirt uniforms, the girls formed a semi-circle in front of Maria, who still hung moaning, no longer turning on the rope.

The petite slave's body was gleaming with oils from her night on the rack, and sweat from her agony at hanging by her wrists. Her chin rested on her chest. In the light of wall-mounted torches, the downy hair that softened her naked skin was turned into a messy halo, downy wheatfields on her naked back and belly. Her ribcage, pulled high by her stretched suspension, was a stark set of ridges, her breasts pulled to nothing. She looked tiny, and vulnerable.

It was the Jailer who carried the whip, and she positioned herself behind the prisoner.

"You may proceed," Luisa nodded. "Do not hold back."

"Yes, Señora." The Jailer's beautiful face was inscrutable. Whether the Jailer agreed or not, the Chamber Slave was confessed, the sentence given, and the Jailer was bound to her duty. One bare arm reached back, the whip in her hand slithering across the floor as her brown eyes reckoned the naked back before her. Little hairs peeped from between the girl's buttocks.

The whip's path through air was a hiss, but when it struck flesh the sound was like cracking stone, a loud concussion that echoed off the stone walls. Maria gave a scream hoarse with agony but her head lifted only a little, her body swung slightly. The cut appeared, clean across her back, from shoulder blade to hip. The Jailer flung again, and the second stroke landed parallel to the first, drawing another scream.

The Jailer circled; the next stroke slashing across Maria's ribcage on her right side, the whip's tip smashing breast and splitting skin just below her left armpit. Another blow then aimed at her mid belly, drawing a line across her navel. The screaming girl finally drew her knees up to defend herself, so the Jailer quickly switched hands; Maria's raised legs had exposed the hairy mohawk of her vulva, and the whip's well-aimed tip exploded with catastrophic accuracy up into it. Maria's scream was hideous, her legs flung down even as whip-torn pubic hairs dropped to the floor.

The next lashes came fast, wrapping around hips, ribcage, shoulder blades, its motion too fast to see, but snapping and splitting skin with terrifying venom. Maria's screams were piteous, her feet now pedalling as the agony in her arms was forgotten, overridden by the fire of the whip. The Jailer's precise upstroke cut vulva hair again, before she spun, flinging her arm with a twist of her wrist, and the whip smashed across bared breasts, flinging a splash of blood to one of the Dungeon Maids.

The Jailer coiled the whip in one fluid move, bowed, presented it to her Maid successor.

The girls clapped, Maria swung, squealing and crying out in pain.

And so it progressed. Under alternating tuition from Luisa and the Jailer, each Dungeon Maid worked her ten lashes upon Maria. Some laughing with the fun of seeing their strokes land well; some focused and serious in their work. The lines quickly began to score and cross Maria's twisting. Her belly, breasts, thighs. Behind her knees, the backs of her thighs, her buttocks and lower back. Her shoulder blades. A line of blood ran from her fluffy navel.

Several of the Maids aimed the whip so that its tip would strike the raw burns in Maria's armpits; when those lashes landed, again and again, the screams would be raw and barely human, reawakening a primal response to agony beyond all bearing. Others saw sport in finding their moment to fling a stroke up between Maria's legs, until even her vulva, behind its thick hair, was swollen and raw.

The rope creaked and Maria hung heavy, but still giving scream after scream, as the whip continued to fall, stroke after stroke. Even at eighty, there were still many lashes to come.

Blood ran with sweat down her back and the stark corrugations of her ribcage. Her head hung forward and strings of snot slid from her nose. At times it would seem she was falling insensible, but when the next lash landed across her vulnerable skin, her voice would raise another scream and the

terrible pain would show on her anguished face, her body shuddering and writhing, dangling helpless by her wrists on the rope's end.

Then would come the next Dungeon Maid; cracking her knuckles, accepting the whip from her colleague, measuring, then slicing again at Maria's fragile flesh. The Chamber Slave was maddened with agony, her cries unending, her body twisting again from her wrists despite her exhaustion.

Finally, after a long time, all twelve women had counted their ten lashes apiece. Maria's body was a mass of scores and cuts, toes drooping, head hanging fully forward.

It was Luisa who went to stand in front of Maria, putting her hand beneath the girl's drool-wet chin and lifting her face. Beneath her knitted brows, Maria's brown eyes seemed dull and unseeing, but the small moan that carried on her breath told that she still was aware.

Luisa let Maria's head drop. To a Maid: "See that the Chamber Slave receives water, then we shall leave her for the night. Tomorrow I shall put this shame all behind us."

She flashed her eyes at the Jailer, who returned a nod of agreeance.

It was the following day when Solana's cell door swung open: as always, two Dungeon Maids led by the Jailer. Still hopelessly weakened and in pain from her ordeal hanging in chains, Solana could do nothing as her wrists were freed from the fetters. She said nothing, made no sound, but her heart pounded with fear at the familiar routine. The girls leaned her forward, pulled her arms behind her back, and the Jailer tied her wrists so tightly with rope that her hands grew purple.

Again, Solana was gagged. The leather ball crammed into her mouth, over-stretching her jaw, her lips forming a perfect seal around it by its size rendering Solana completely mute. The gag was buckled at the back of her head by the hands of a Dungeon Maid.

So I am to be tortured again. Solana felt familiar dread. New sweat crept in her armpits, and her palms, behind her back, became clammy.

Finally, the hasp was unlocked from about her waist and it was time to go. Solana's legs would barely support her, so she was half-carried by the two Dungeon Maids, following the Jailer, whose long black hair swept her back as she walked, through the torture chamber's labyrinth. Past the Judas Cradle, past the dreaded racking room, to the high-vaulted chamber in which Solana had first witnessed the dreadful strappado of Esmerelda, many months ago.

This time, however, it was a different scene. By the light of torches, Solana saw a small gibbet cage across the room; a wooden bench; a brazier near it. She saw at least three more Maids, four armed male guards, the scribe, and a sight that almost burst her heart in her chest.

Maria hung on the long rope by her wrists, her toes just inches above the stone floor, her chin on her chest; from the colour of her hands, she had been hanging for a day and night. Her naked body was wet with sweat. Her bare skin was a mess of welts and bruises, easily a hundred lashes having landed on her nakedness. Her armpits were red and raw, cruelly burned.

Beside the dangling Maria stood Luisa Consuela, flanked by a guard.

Luisa did not acknowledge Solana, but looked to the Jailer escorting her. "Secure her!"

Solana was carried across the room to the tiny round cage that hung on a chain, two feet off the floor. With hands bound behind her back, gagged, every limb in pain, Solana was made to clamber into the cage. It was so small, her shoulders and hips jammed against the sides, and Solana had to fold her legs so that her thighs squashed her breasts within its tight confines, as the Jailer closed and padlocked its gate. The cage had no solid floor, only bars too close for her feet to fit through.

The Jailer handed the cage's key to Luisa, who slung its cord around her neck before strolling over to her trapped prisoner.

"Solana Degas. I wanted you here to witness justice being served," Luisa said. "The Chamber Slave, Maria Ortiz, has confessed to the crimes of bewitchment and seduction. Not only did she attempt to seduce many of my guards, my Maids, and indeed our beautiful Jailer ..."

Here, Luisa's eyes locked to Solana's. "Maria has confessed that she used Magic to take on *my* form, and seduce you, in an attempt to curate all of your witch's power."

Although she was gagged, Solana's eyes gave wide protest, and she shook her head.

"Oh, she told me everything," Luisa said coolly. Her delight at her own triumph was clear.

Solana's eyes turned to the side and she leaned her head against the iron of her cage, numb disbelief, nausea, and the ache of grief.

"I'm sure you will be relieved that Maria was stopped before she could do harm. As a Chamber Slave, her summary trial and punishment are solely my responsibility."

Finally turning away from the caged Solana, Luisa instructed her women: "prepare her."

The rope by which Maria hung was released at its winch, and Maria was lowered to the floor, lying dazed and exhausted on the cold stone. The Jailer and a Dungeon Maid then untied the young woman's wrists, and pulled them instead behind her back, tying them there tightly. Maria was so dazed that she did not even cry out.

The wooden table Solana had seen earlier was waist-high, three feet wide and six feet long, no more than five feet from where Solana was caged. She saw that it was furnished with iron rings by which a prisoner could be secured.

Now Maria gave a groan as, by her bound arms, she was dragged to the bench, lifted and bent forward over it at the hips, so that her small breasts and belly were pressed to its wood. A rope was passed around her elbows: a Dungeon Maid on each side pulled it tight so that Maria's arms were squeezed together behind her back. The rope's ends were then tightly stretched and tied to the iron rings on either side of the table, trussing Maria down like a pig going to market. With the girl's torso secured, her legs were pulled widely apart, and her ankles bound to the legs of the table, her bare toes barely touching the flagstones.

So tied, Maria's slender legs were obscenely spread, tendons defined with strain. Maria's shining buttocks were parted, and between them the thick untamed tangle of black hair that hid her vulva, tufted around her anus, was exposed.

From her confinement, Solana looked on in despair as Luisa stepped close, then saw with horror the instrument the beautiful Chief Torturer held.

"The Pear," Luisa said. She raised the bulb-like device, turned its screw a few times to open the iron petals, then closed them again. "The only suitable punishment for a seductress."

Muted by her gag, bound and confined, Solana could give no response. She could only watch as Luisa put the tip of the Pear against the hairy brown star of Maria's anus. The girl jolted in her ropes, but was helpless. Luisa pushed, and Solana saw the metal bulb sink into Maria's rectum, stretching her anus brutally. At once, Maria was crying out in pain. Inch by inch, it was forced inside her.

"Please, *Señora*," Maria begged, now fully alert. She was well aware of the Pear's function, and her voice shook with terror. "Stop, it hurts!"

"You are a whore," Luisa said coldly. "And you will suffer like a whore."

When the device was in, only its turnscrew and handle protruded from Maria's anus. The girl wept and sobbed, her sweat-wet and bloodied back heaving with each breath. Merely having the pear inside her was enough to send terrible spasms and cramps through her body, her colon racked with pain. Coolly, Luisa put one hand on Maria's sacrum, grasped the Pear's screw, and gave it a brutal twist. Maria's slim body jerked violently as the bulb's iron petals crept slightly open inside her rectum, and true pain hit.

She cried out.

"Watch what happens, now, Witch," Luisa told Solana. As all in the torture chamber watched, Luisa turned the Pear again. Maria let out an uncontrolled scream. The metal segments of the Pear were slowly forcing her rectum wider, and the pain was unbearable. Droplets of sweat sprang all over Maria's naked back. She struggled desperately to free her bound wrists and elbows, but was helpless to stop Luisa turning the screw a third time.

Maria screamed dreadfully. Odd squeaking and creaking sounds were coming from inside her pelvis as the torture device began to do its work. A trickle of blood emerged, to run down the sweaty skin of her thigh. Beyond the ropes that cinched her wrists, Maria's fingers, behind her back and barely an inch from the Pear, spread in helpless agony, as savage waves of pain filled her tearing gut.

Luisa slowly, over the course of a minute, turned the Pear's screw again. As the obscene device expanded, loud *cracking* sounds came from Maria's rectum, and her screams reached a new pitch. Her sphincter and its surrounding mass of hair, tight around the Pear's narrow base, mercifully hid the terrible consequences of the widening device but for another run of crimson blood.

Solana, in her tight cage, wept, her nostrils streaming and her breath bubbling through them over her gag, helplessly feeling her roped hands against her lower back, knowing she could do nothing. Luisa was feeding on Solana's misery, and gradually kept twisting the Pear's screw.

Maria screamed like a woman insane, paralysed in bondage but shrieking and baying in agony as the awful, muffled sounds of her rectum tearing apart reached those around her. But Luisa had not finished torturing her. The Pear was not yet fully open, and Luisa twisted the screw again.

More creaking and tearing sounds, rewarded by Maria's ever more hideous screams. Solana had never heard such awful cries, and dizziness overcame her, her head against the bars of the cage as the room spun. Luisa, now, was rocking the pear back and forth, and the pain its open blades caused the shrieking Maria must have been beyond all comprehension. The girl's body was covered in sweat, as if she had just been doused in water.

Solana almost vomited, but managed to swallow it, knowing that with the gag in her mouth, it could choke her. She could not bear to see Maria suffering so terribly, but was helpless to intervene.

Luisa slowly turned the screw once again, and the Pear opened yet wider. Maria's screams were awful, howls of agony that echoed all through the dungeon. She could no longer even struggle, her bound hands resting against the small of her back as if in surrender to the overwhelming pain.

Luisa finally stepped back, folding her arms, and watched Maria for a time. The screw of the Pear, jutting from her anus, shifted and twitched with the young woman's spasms of agony. Slow drips of blood began to splatter to the floor below her, between her widely-anchored feet.

Leaving Maria to scream, Luisa went to the dangling rope from which Maria had earlier hung by her wrists. To Solana's growing horror, Luisa tied the rope's end into a hangman's noose. Dread married with despair. Gagged, hands pinioned behind her, locked in the cage, there was nothing in heaven or earth Solana could do that would change this.

Luisa took her time returning to the shrieking Maria. Already there was a spreading puddle of red below the girl, and it was clear that her strength was waning. The Pear had wreaked mortal damage.

Slowly, Luisa turned the key of the Pear to close it. Even that movement drew anguished cries from Maria's throat, odd sucking sounds coming from deep inside her. She gave a long cry as Luisa finally withdrew the Pear from her anus, bloodied and steaming. A short gush of blood splattered to the floor below her spread legs, and her body shuddered, as if the life was already ebbing.

Maria moaned.

"Ready her for execution," Luisa ordered her Dungeon Maids coldly.

Two Maids set about releasing the ropes that bound Maria to the table, taking them from her elbows but leaving her wrists tied behind her back. Her ankles were freed from their wide position against the table's legs; Maria could not resist, but gave another groan as the women hauled her upright by her pinioned arms. Fresh blood spilled down the insides of her legs.

Unable to stand on her own, Maria was carried over to the rope with its makeshift noose, and held upright as Luisa placed the loop over Maria's head and drew it snug around her neck. It was Luisa, too, who went to the winch that would wind the rope in.

"For your crimes of bewitchment and seduction," Luisa said casually, "I sentence you to death. May God have mercy on your soul."

With those words, Luisa turned the windlass. Solana watched from her cage, helpless, as the rope rose up and the noose cinched tight about her neck. Maria's head was drawn up by the rising

noose, her lips parting; her heels left the ground. The two Maids stepped away, and for half a minute, Maria teetered on tiptoes, arms behind her back, held aloft by the rope. Her eyes fluttered open. Solana could see that the girl, despite her injuries, was panicking with the pressure on her neck.

Luisa gave the windlass another half turn. Maria's small body was hauled off the floor by two inches and immediately began to slowly rotate. The noose crunched tight about Maria's slender neck, and her bare feet scrabbled in panic for the floor, her face quickly flushing red, her body twisting as she tried to free her hands from behind her back.

As the guards and Dungeon Maids watched from their posts, the raven-haired Jailer standing alongside Solana's cage with bare arms folded, Maria began to struggle, kicking for the floor, twisting and jerking her arms. She tried to scream: only an odd croaking and a string of drool came from her open mouth. Solana, gagged, bound and caged, could only watch in abject horror and grief, knowing that she could not save her friend.

Seconds became minutes.

Maria was strangling in the noose, but it was slow. Her torso twisted. More blood ran down the insides of her kicking legs from her ruined ass as her body spasmed. Slowly, her struggles became ever-more frantic. Her face was growing darker. Her toes searched endlessly for the floor.

Pee dribbled from the hairy tangle between her legs. Her swelling tongue emerged from between her plump, blue-tinted lips. The rope from which she hung shook and creaked. For an endless time, Maria kept struggling, while Luisa held her off the ground.

Over long minutes, though, as the witnesses in the room anticipated her death, Maria's efforts became jerkier, then gradually, weaker. Her legs jolted rather than kicked. Her arms were stilled, behind her back, bound hands resting at the curve of her buttocks as if in surrender.

After ten long minutes, Maria no longer seemed to be moving. She turned slowly on the end of the rope, her toes drooping just inches from the floor, wrists cinched together behind her back, head tilted above the noose. Her eyes were half open, her tongue poking from between her lips.

Luisa locked the windlass.

For a few moments the only sound was the slow creaking of the rope as Maria's corpse turned. To her women Luisa said, "Come. This is done, we have work elsewhere."

But for two male guards, Solana was left alone in the cage for the rest of the day. With her numb hands so tightly bound behind her back and the iron door locked, its key in Luisa's possession, she did not bother to test her imprisonment. She just endured the cold, the painful cramps, the gag still stretching her mouth.

For a long time she gazed sadly at the young corpse that still hung with arms bound behind its back on the long rope. Maria had been the only one to offer kindness amidst the horrors and cruelty of these dungeons. Warmth and innocence, and a laugh that Solana would forever cherish.

Killed by the malice and jealousy of Luisa.

I will avenge you, Maria.

Eleven - The Inquisitors

Solana was returned finally to her cell, her gag removed, once again shackled to the wall, the hasp around her waist. She did not resist. She did not care any more about the grip of iron about her wrists, having her arms held over her head for day upon night, week upon week, the aroma of her own sweat, the helplessness and solitude.

Solana did not see or hear again from Luisa Consuela, but the beautiful Chief Torturer's actions weighed upon Solana's mind heavily. The enigmatic visit in the night, her caresses and kisses, and then those questions. Bizarre beyond understanding.

Why? Why did she ask it?

Solana had rested her head against her arm and tried to comprehend Luisa's mind. The Chief Torturer had seemed to think agony became ecstasy, that pain became euphoria, and that the moment a mind was broken – when suffering overrode dignity, morality, and even self-preservation – was a greater release than any orgasm.

How was this happening? How was the Church, the bastion of all that was good, and pure, and right, condoning the actions of a madwoman who sought pleasure in others' suffering? How, even, had Luisa Consuela become so twisted that she found gratification in the insanity of agony?

Months passed.

Solana was woken by the opening of her cell door. The Dungeon Maids and Jailers' arrival was such a surprise, she barely had time to react as they followed the familiar routine of unfettering her hands, bending her forward and pulling her arms behind her back. Her wrists were tied together with bone-bruising severity, the rope creaking as it was pulled tight.

Solana already knew not to speak. Despite her silence, she was gagged. The familiar leather ball forced into her mouth, buckled tightly at the back of her head, her lips sealing around it and its pressure on her larynx stifling her voice. The hasp released from her waist, Solana was taken, via long corridors, and this time endless stairs.

Climbing up, up; through ever-grander halls and doors, to the great Hall of Justice, where they were joined by four armoured male guards as well.

For the first time in a year, Solana saw daylight. It came with blinding intensity through the high stained glass windows of the Hall, a beautiful blaze of radiance illuminating those images she had treasured all of her life: her God, her Jesus, her Mary. Her bare soles whispered on the chill mosaic floor.

"Bring her forward."

The voice of the Chief Inquisitor brought Solana back to reality. There were five men in robes at the long bench before her. There were male guards stationed along the cloisters. And there were people, ordinary people, in the gallery above, curious to see who might appear today, and perhaps eager for a view of the mysterious and beautiful Dungeon Maids, so brazenly bare-limbed.

Guided by the Maids, both of whom wore swords at their backs, Solana stepped forward, and was made to kneel. She did not care that her wrists were tied behind her; the bondage felt safe and secure. She did not care that she was naked; it felt more natural than clothing. She did not care that she was gagged so soundly; it meant she did not have to defend herself.

She knelt before the Inquisitors, the public, the guards and the Dungeon Maids.

A Clerk came to stand between Solana and the Inquisitors. "I present the Confessed Witch, Solana Degas. She was arrested twelve months ago, and underwent questioning."

The Chief Inquisitor leaned forward, inspecting the naked woman before him.

The Clerk: "The Torturer-In-Chief, Luisa Consuela, wishes to give her report."

The Chief Inquisitor gave permission with a nod.

"My Lord." For the first time in months, Solana saw the beautiful Chief Torturer, for once swathed in the robes of her office; a black, full-length cloak with hood drawn over her head, her face in its shadow. Only her bare toes peeped from below. Luisa bowed her head in deference. "I examined the

witch, and questioned her. She resisted one hundred lashes of the whip, and twenty hours upon the Cradle, even after weights were applied.

"In the end I was obliged to rack her, and she quickly gave full confession."

How could one simple sentence tell of such an ordeal so lightly? Every day of her imprisonment, Solana relived those endless hours of suffering, her head still reverberated to the awful sounds of her own limbs pulling apart at the joints.

The Chief Inquisitor looked at the naked woman before him. "Solana Degas, do you now ratify your confession? You may nod once."

Solana's eyes lifted to the great table. Gagged, she had not thought she would be faced with this humiliation. This was where the confessed surrendered their final dignity, and submitted themselves to the stake. As should she, a single nod affirming her confession and sealing her fate.

But with the Chief Inquisitor's invitation came an opportunity. Solana's chance to finally avenge her suffering, Maria's awful death, Luisa's treachery.

Solana shook her head slowly.

A murmur from the public gallery.

The Chief Inquisitor frowned. "I ask again, do you ratify your confession? It is a simple question, which you may nod to confirm."

Behind her back, Solana's hands were clammy. But the realisation dawned. She had endured the three sessions of torture allowed by the rules of Inquisition, and there could be no more. With growing confidence, her eyes on the Chief Inquisitor's, she shook her head again.

Chatter, now, from the gallery; Solana even heard a groan from Luisa .

"Silence!" the Chief Inquisitor roared up to the gallery. He looked to one of the Maids standing behind Solana's. "Remove the Witch's gag!"

The leather ball was unbuckled and removed, wet with saliva, from Solana's mouth.

"Speak!" the Inquisitor demanded. "Did you mean to say you do *not* ratify your confession?"

Solana's voice came strongly: "My Lords, I confessed only to end the pain. My body was pulled apart by the rack, and I could not bear it. My confession was false."

The murmuring of the crowd returned, the Chief Inquisitor's anger grew. "What insolence is this? You must ratify your confession!"

"I shall not ratify it!" Solana shouted back. Her arms, behind her back, were tense against the ropes that bound her wrists, heart pounding.

"Señora Consuela?" The Chief Inquisitor was astounded, his face red, and he rose from his chair, looking now to the Chief Torturer for answers.

"My Lords," Luisa stammered, for the first time lost for them.

"She's lying! She *is* a witch!"

A new voice – a woman's voice – from the gallery above. Solana's breath caught in her throat at its familiarity. All eyes turned to the gallery, and the woman who had addressed the court so boldly. Slender, strikingly beautiful, with straw-blonde hair, green eyes.

"And who are you?" the Chief Inquisitor demanded.

"I am Catalina Lacrosse, My Lord. I *know* Solana Degas to be a witch! She is dangerous, she speaks lies, and is in league with Satan!"

"No!" Solana shouted.

"Silence her!" roared the Chief Inquisitor.

A moment later, the two Dungeon Maids were grasping Solana's face and jaw, pushing the leather ball back into her mouth, forced all the way to her back teeth, its leather strap fastened behind her head. She retched, suddenly denied voice in the act of absolving herself. She tried to give protest, but no sound emerged. Tears of frustration welled quickly in her eyes.

"You know Solana Degas?" the Chief Inquisitor asked the woman in the gallery.

"I know her." *Catalina Lacrosse*. The woman whose accusations had led to Solana's arrest, her torture, her suffering. Catalina's voice was rich with malice, her eyes filled with gloating at the sight of Solana kneeling naked, bound, and gagged.

"And you maintain that she is a witch?"

"Oh, she is a witch indeed, my Lord."

Mute and helpless, Solana looked directly up into the cool green eyes. Catalina met the stare with pure delight, and gave a wicked smile. "You should rack her again," she said in a clear voice, her words falling into the listening chamber. "You should stretch her until she confesses."

Luisa finally found her voice. "My Lords, I do not know how this happened! I did not know she would recant, her confession is here, in writing!"

"We must confer." The Inquisitor and his fellows muttered in consultation. Solana's knees were sore, her twisted arms hurt, her jaw ached from the gag. Her earlier moment of hope had been shattered by a few cold words, and her head was spinning.

Now, the Chief Inquisitor looked up, addressing not the prisoner, but Luisa.

"There is still a question to settle. The Lacrosse girl is right. Rack Solana Degas again. Stretch her until she ratifies her confession."

Solana's face paled as the crowd broke into excited chatter. She suddenly felt weak, faint as if in a dream. Her bladder loosened without her realising, hot urine spurting to the mosaic floor from the hair between her thighs.

"My Lords?" Luisa was clearly uncertain. This decision broke the rules of Inquisition.

Another of the Inquisitors spoke: "It is not considered another torture session, merely resuming an earlier session not fully concluded. You may rack her as you please."

"Yes, My Lords." Luisa bowed deeply.

As the Dungeon Maids pulled her to her feet by her pinioned arms, Solana's eyes turned again to Catalina, up in the gallery. The blonde girl was laughing, her hands clasped in delight that Solana was to be stretched again.

Solana was taken by the two women, with two male guards and the Jailer as escort, and the scribe hurrying behind. She was still wet between her thighs from peeing in terror as they hurried a familiar route; passing down flights of stairs into the gloom and ghastly passages of the torture chamber. Solana stumbled, stubbing her toes on uneven flagstones, unaware even of her own bound wrists, propelled by the guards. Her palms and underarms were sweating, her heart hammered inside her ribcage. Muted so perfectly by the gag, she could not utter a sound in her fear.

Her nightmares had not let her forget the small doorway, the dim, rough-hewn cell with its slimy, glistening walls. Nor the dreadful machine that lay within, its smooth-polished wood, its tightly wound chains, its rollers and levers.

Twelve - Luisa's Revenge

At the third notch of the rack, Luisa had given her first true cry of pain. At the fifth notch, she had screamed. She had never imagined it would hurt so dreadfully, pain in her joints and the length of her limbs and torso. She had not tried to stifle her screams, but had given them full voice, letting tears spill.

Her screams had reduced to whimpering after a long time, although the pain was no less, her body clustered with fat droplets of sweat, her heart pounding: but its terrible shock had passed and allowed her more control. As her father's colleague had returned to the roller, she had implored him: "Wait, Uncle! Please!"

He had paused, his hands upon the lever.

"Uncle, look at me."

Her father's colleague had tried not to look, her body already stretched and shining with sweat upon the rack. But it was impossible not to admire her.

Her stretched limbs were strong and supple like a gymnast, her naked skin golden. Her waist was slender, her breasts full, plump and perfect with cinnamon nipples that looked so tender and vulnerable. Her pubic hair was thick but tidy, likewise the modest little tufts in her armpits. Between those straining arms, her face had a beauty beyond her years, her brown hair splashed out above her head upon the wood of the rack.

Despite her suffering, Luisa had gasped, "tell me, Uncle, do I make your cock hard?"

The colleague had looked away, blushing. "Young lady, that is not a question to ask."

She had persisted. "I don't mind if you take it out and touch it while you torture me."

"Enough!" The colleague's shame had turned to anger, as he realised how easily the young woman was manipulating him, even as she lay completely at his mercy upon the rack. He had seized the roller, suddenly intent on punishing her.

"No! Please don't stretch me more!" she had squealed, but a moment later new screams had exploded from her lungs as the roller turned and her body stretched.

He was aroused now, and it filled him with lust for her suffering. Her body, shining already with youthful sweat, was pliant and flexible, and it stretched so easily when he shifted the roller. Scream after scream was ripped from her shining throat, and her soft breasts shuddered with her panicked breaths as the rack slowly pulled her limbs.

Luisa had felt the moment her shoulders cracked from their sockets. Within another ten minutes it had been her hips, the rounded bone-ends pulling from their place noisily, sucking, popping. Her screams were so rewarding, full-throated roars of agony.

The pain had been beyond all comprehension and Luisa had screamed endlessly. She could feel her helplessness, wrists and ankles so inescapably tied. She could feel her vulnerability, naked and at her torturer's mercy. She could smell the wood and oil of the rack, she could smell her own armpits, ripe with the aromas of fear and pain.

Her father's colleague had cranked the roller again, and again. His lust for her suffering was fierce now, and Luisa was stretched until her elbow joints pulled apart. Her new screams were frantic, this pain was a hundred times worse, tearing her beyond being able to beg or plead, anything but screaming.

Then he had stretched her more, and her knees, too, had pulled apart. This pain had torn away her sanity. The pain, the helplessness, had made her shudder, made her eyes roll back, drawn cries from her lungs that she had no control over, that did not sound like her. It was the point at which her body and mind were no longer her own, but belonged to her torturer.

It had been awful, and wonderful beyond words.

Solana was shoved roughly to her knees on the cold, slimy floor, still half-choking on the leather gag that filled her mouth, her arms still twisted behind her.

"You!"

Luisa swept into the room, shrugging off the black cloak she had worn for the hearing. For an instant, Solana was shocked from her dread by a sight she had never thought she would witness:

Luisa was naked.

Her goddess' body, from her gleaming shoulders to her bare feet, wore not a shred of clothing. Her big, shining breasts with proud cinnamon nipples erect in the chill; her flat stomach with its downy ravine of muscle. Her broad hips and her soft, tidy oval of pubic hair. There was a fine gold chain with crucifix dangling at her sternum, a gold bracelet on one wrist and another slender chain at one ankle. She had not even tied her hair; its loose curls tumbled around her bare shoulders.

Even attending the hearing, Luisa had remained true to herself, observing convention by wearing the mandatory robes - but quite literally nothing more. Not expecting the Inquisitors' order to interrogate Solana again without delay, Luisa had no time to dress.

It made no difference. Luisa may have been naked, but she radiated authority. The Dungeon Maids, male guards and scribe did not falter, maintaining their posts and not daring to look at her, as Luisa snatched a fistful of Solana's tumbling hair, bending her head back so that her own face was inches from Solana's.

"You whore. You stupid, fucking *whore*. I am going to rack you until you shit yourself! You are going to confess, then you'll give up every woman who was ever dear to you."

Horror and dread stole the blood from Solana's face, but muted by her gag, she could not offer confession, could not beg mercy.

"Put this whore on the rack!"

Solana was desperate to avoid more torture, but she had no chance at all, thrown onto the rack by the two Maids. With wrists still roped behind her back, she could not fight as her legs were held apart, and Luisa herself, seemingly indifferent to being naked, locked the fetters about Solana's ankles.

With legs secured, the Jailer held Solana's hair, lifting her by it while her wrists were untied from behind her back. At once, Solana's thumbs and elbows were grasped by the two other Maids, and she was laid on her back, her arms pulled up towards the roller. Again, it was Luisa who shackled each wrist.

A moment later, Luisa had the roller's spokes in her hands and cranked it over. Steadily, the chain was wound in. Silenced by the gag in her mouth, Solana's breath shifted in panic through her nostrils as she felt her wrists being pulled towards the rack's head, her body being drawn upon the smooth bed, until her ankles were caught and stopped by the fetters about them.

The muscles shifting gracefully across her naked body, Luisa turned the roller more, drawing the chains fully taut. Another notch, and Solana's four limbs were pulled tight, her spine beginning to burn as it was drawn to its fullest stretch. One more notch, and the tension of the tightening chains lifted her arms from the wood.

Solana's face was terrified, mouth sealed around the leather ball, mucus already bubbling in her nose, eyes pleading for mercy as the sweat beaded on her face and in the armpits that now framed it. But Luisa had no mercy. She turned the roller again against the resistance of Solana's body; the rack groaned and creaked. The air jetted from Solana's nostrils as the pain exploded in her limbs and spine. She was stretched now beyond her limit.

Another notch, and limbs and joints popped loudly, ropes groaned, the pain grew exponentially. Gagged, Solana could not even form voice in her throat, let alone the scream that tried to burst from her lungs. The only noises in the cell's silence were of her own body being stretched on the rack.

Luisa paused, finally tying her loose hair into a top-knot. Solana lay, her limbs reaching to either end of the rack. Her breasts shuddered with each attempt to scream. Her ribs were in strong definition, every muscle of her body lengthened by the stretch. The only sounds were the creaking of the rack and the body upon it, the bubbling breath in Solana's nose.

Her naked body already gleaming with exertion, Luisa wrenched the roller around. One, two, three, four notches. Visibly Solana's body stretched, ankles moored while her wrists were pulled towards the roller. Loudly joints cracked, and the pain surged like a savage tide. It exploded through her

arms, down into her sides and back, through her hips and knees. But Solana could not scream, nor could she gasp, the agony of stretching compounded by the panic of failing breath.

Luisa watched Solana's suffering face. The oversized ball filling her mouth, the strong, square line of her open jaw, framed by her tightly upstretched arms, the matted hair in her hollowed and taut armpits; the striations and sinews of her stretching arms. Solana's curly mane splashed across the wood of the rack. The tendons in her neck stood out, her nipples jutted from her plump and quivering breasts, her ribcage was lifted by the strain. Her suffering was expressed as air and mucus forced from her nose, her belly lurching and heaving desperately.

"Can you feel it now?" Luisa spat. Naked, she was more terrifying than clothed. Lithe like a panther, lethal in her raw state. "I can do what I want to you, and I want you to feel as I pull every joint in your body apart." So saying, she took the handle and cranked the roller again two more notches.

In her mute nightmare, Solana heard the groan of the roller on its axle: the heavy 'clank' of the ratchet as it dropped each notch. But a thousand times worse, she heard the groans and creaks from her own armpits as her arms stretched, muscle and ligament and tendon rending: and then a distinctive *CRACK!* from her left shoulder as it pulled from its socket, a sound that echoed through the torture cell. Light flashed in Solana's head, fluid burst from her nose, the agony searing and utterly unbearable.

She sucked and blew air frantically from her nostrils, eyes wide, as her right armpit creaked and then gave its own distinctive *SNAP!* as the bone separated from its socket. Even as Solana's shoulders dislocated, the naked Luisa turned the roller again, pulling Solana's body visibly longer, rack and sinew creaking and groaning loudly in the small dungeon. Solana's spasming belly was hollowed with the tension of her stretching body.

Gone was Solana's will to defend her dignity and retract her confession. She was broken already, desperate to acquiesce and surrender completely, but Luisa did not care. She drew again on the handle and, groaning, the roller turned. Solana's hissing breath of agony and the leathery creaking of tendons and ligaments stretching were like music to Luisa; she forced another notch, hearing the sucking sound as Solana's shoulder joints were torn further, followed by the dull, reverberant *crack! crack!* of each hip dislocating.

Solana's nostrils bubbled, agonised beyond comprehension. No longer trying to beg. No longer able to think. The sweat sat heavily on her brown skin, droplets quivering, wetness streaking her flanks. The chains that ran from her wrists and ankles were creaking; with another turn of the roller, Solana's hands and feet were drawn further from each other and the pain grew.

Solana could feel every stretch of her body. Even as her shoulders and hips raged agony beyond all bearing, her tormenter kept stretching her. Every fibre in her body, every tearing nerve, her belly, her lungs, wanted to scream, and scream, in agony. But the gag filling her mouth prevented it; pressure without release that simply compounded and amplified the suffering ten times over.

As she stretched now, Solana could clearly hear her own elbows rip apart; roots of fire seemed to dance the length of her arms and turn even her fingers red hot. Only her bubbling, half-smothered breaths, heaving fast as her body struggled for air, betrayed her agony.

Causing the most terrible pain was Luisa's only care. Between her straining armpits, Solana's face was a mess of tears and snot, her mouth sealed by the gag, her screams denied, unable to bear the pain. Luisa stretched Solana more: with a wet tearing sound, her knees pulled apart, and the agony drove her to the edge of insanity. The explosions of excruciating horror that were beyond any comparison speared the length of her legs and up her spine as urine squirted again between her wide thighs.

Every joint in her body was now broken. The woman upon the rack was in hell.

This was the point at which Solana had lost her mind, Luisa remembered. When her knees had been dislocated, the agony had driven her to confession within minutes. But this time, Luisa racked Solana without mercy, turning the roller again, waiting for the new stretch to have its effect truly felt, for bones to shift and ligaments to rip, then stretching her again. As Solana's spine began to draw apart and each vertebra was straining to rip loose of its neighbour, the agony soared to a new level.

It had been less than an hour.

Luisa bent over her suffering prisoner, her full, naked breasts dangling above the rack, and loosened the buckle of Solana's gag. Luisa pulled the wet ball out of Solana's mouth, its leather pitted from the teeth that had clenched upon it in such agony.

For a few moments, Solana could not utter a sound, catching staccato breaths, every move of her ribcage worsening the agony through her shoulders and spine. The stretch in her body gave no capacity for her to scream, anyway. Held in unbearable suffering, she was mouthing the only words that she could find: "*Stop, stop it, stop, stop, stop ...*"

"Do you ratify your confession now, whore-witch?" Luisa snarled.

"Yes, yes, yes!" Solana's voice was a squeal.

"I don't care." Luisa pushed the gag back into Solana's mouth, ignoring the terrified expression as she fastened its buckle.

As Luisa returned to the roller, she glanced at the men present. Her nudity was neither planned, nor strategic: her ceremonial robes were simply too restrictive to work in, and she couldn't care less if they saw her. The male guards would just have to deal with it.

Dealing they were, in their own ways. Sweating, hands gripping sword hilts in silent desperation, eyes struggling to remain front, and every cock in the room at full attention. It didn't help that the beautiful woman on the rack, already so stretched, was about to stretch more.

No mercy. Completely uninhibited in her nudity, Luisa threw her strength behind the wheel of the rack and forced it to turn.

Solana blew more mucus from her nose as her body stretched, every dislocated joint extending minutely as her fingertips crept closer to the roller, her spine *cracking* and *popping* loudly. It did not seem possible that the agony engulfing every inch of her body could yet grow, but as Solana's joints pulled fractionally further apart and the sinew and fibre was torn, it grew.

Luisa knew the rack like no other tool of torture at her disposal. A fast racking on a healthy prisoner would result in the ends being torn off bones even before joints dislocated; but with ligaments and tendons already weak from being racked once before, Solana's body had broken exactly as Luisa wanted it to. Joint by joint, pulling ever further apart.

The next turn drew more cracking sounds from Solana's back, and a liquid mess spread from beneath her. Luisa's promise that Solana would shit herself.

Her palms on the rack, her full breasts freely hanging, Luisa finally leaned close again, studying the look on Solana's face. Solana's eyes seemed to be staring directly into Hell, the anguish that distorted her features clear, despite the wooden ball strapped inside her mouth.

"You belong to me, now," Luisa said as Solana lay stretched on her bed of agony. "Your body belongs to me. Your mind belongs to me. Your soul belongs to me. When I let you speak, any words you might shriek in your agony will belong to me. With this rack I have broken you, and I own you.

"You control nothing. I do not even allow you thoughts; your world is pain only. You will ratify your confession, you will admit each charge, and never again deny them. You will give me names. Everyone who is a known witch in your association. I want at least twenty.

"If you do not do this, I will rack you again, and again, and again, without end."

Solana had lost any sense of who she was, where she was, what was happening to her; only pain. She could not feel the iron on her wrists and ankles, just an unending, unbearable clamour of searing, tearing, excruciating pain that seemed to have turned her very bones to embers and packed every joint with burning coals.

Finally the beautiful, naked Chief Torturer extracted the gag from Solana's mouth again.

Words reached Solana over the creaking of her own broken body, and she replied desperately. Acquiescing, confessing, affirming whatever the voice asked of her. When she lost her way in the confusion of agony, she saw a double-vision of Luisa stepping to the wheel of the rack. Desperately she tried to beg and plead as the roller turned and somehow the agony grew still worse, she heard her own body stretching with a sound like tearing roots from the ground.

She confessed everything and anything.

Then she gave names. Nieces. Aunts. Friends. Everyone she loved. Solana betrayed and gave up every one of them. Then she gave up her own mother as a witch.

But Solana would not be given mercy just yet. Even as she still lay groaning and squealing, Luisa turned to the Jailer.

"Send for Inquisitor Perez. I wish to have a senior of the panel here to witness her confession."

"But Señora ..." The Jailer had been keeping her eyes from Luisa's magnificent breasts that shone as if with body oil. Now she had to gesture to them, blushing. "You are ... I mean ... "

Luisa glanced at her own bare breasts, put her hands on her naked hips in unabashed confidence. "Trust me, he will not care if he sees me unclothed. I am not his preferred gender. Now, go."

The Inquisitor came, at Luisa's request. In the low light of the cell, Solana's shining brown body stretched across the rack's wooden bed, the scribe read aloud the charges once again, and without prompting, Solana admitted to each.

When she seemed to fall into a stupor of agony, Luisa stepped to the roller and drew another notch; Solana's body stretched, and heightened pain wrenched her back to awareness.

In agony, she ratified her accusations against others. Every name confirmed, and the scribe took care to ask the address of each: in the night, they would all be brought in for torture and confession. Many witches would burn on the evidence Solana had given.

"What of the executed Chamber Slave, Maria Ortiz?" Luisa asked. Still naked, her arms folded under her breasts, her pubic triangle just two feet from Solana's face, she gazed down into the pain-glazed eyes of the prisoner.

Solana did not hesitate, gasping: *"Maria was a consort of the Devil, and I taught her magic spells. She enchanted the guards and Dungeon Maids ... she learned how to take on your form, Señora ... and seduce me. I allowed her to touch me ... pleasure me sexually ... we kissed as lovers."*

Luisa smiled at Solana's confession, vindicated for her actions against Maria.

When it was over, Inquisitor Perez and the scribe filed from the cell.

For a time, Luisa did not ease the tension of the rack. She stood naked alongside her broken prisoner, noting every bruise-coloured, distorted joint, every straining tendon, the clustered dewdrops of sweat, the eyes that were dark and empty with suffering. The wood creaked and ticked with the savage tension held on limbs and sinew, while stark ribs shifted in shallow, agonised breaths.

Luisa knew she had defeated Solana soundly.

Solana's recovery was slow this time. The first weeks were with wrists bound behind her back, and with more ropes about her elbows, thighs, and ankles, preventing her from any movement. She did not test the bonds, nor try to free herself.

When she could move her limbs again, albeit with difficulty, she was chained to the wall of her cell, and languished for months more. Eventually, Solana was brought before the Inquisitors one final time; she was made to kneel as she had before, and did so with head down, eyes dully fixed to the flagstones before her, the gag again sealing her mouth.

"Solana Degas, you have confessed to witchcraft, and the charges against you were ratified, by your own free will. Do again ratify your confession?"

Solana nodded.

"You freely admit today that you are a witch?"

Again, Solana nodded.

There were whispers from the gallery above. Solana knew that Catalina would be watching, gleeful at the sight of her kneeling, roped and naked, broken and admitting to witchcraft. Solana felt no shame, nor sorrow; only peace. Her heart did not pound with fear as it had before; she felt calm, the weight of denial lifted from her shoulders. The ropes tight about her elbows and wrists did not feel like imprisonment, but reassurance. The ball in her mouth was her protection against repeating her foolish denials of once before.

For an hour, while the scribe read aloud her confession, she knelt and admitted her crimes as a witch with silent nods. She affirmed her accusations against friends, cousins, girls in the village. And when the question of Maria was raised, she condemned the Chamber Slave's memory also, without a moment's hesitation.

There had been little deliberation before the sentence was read.

"For your crimes as a witch, you are sentenced to be burned alive."

Even the sentence, spoken aloud, did not disturb Solana's numbness. She rose as the two Dungeon Maids grasped her arms, and, hobbling on limbs still unsteady from the brutal racking months before, walked with them back to her cell.

Once again Solana was secured against the wall of her cell, and sat naked against the stone with arms held high over her head.

Her spirit had gone. The rack had been too terrible for words. Being allowed to confess had been a relief, she had gladly allowed Luisa to draw the words from her mouth, and she had been glad to affirm it before the Inquisitors.

Luisa's last visit came in the depths of night. The lamp gleamed on the Chief Torturer's bare limbs, her dark eyes shone in its glow as she crouched beside the chained Solana.

"Tomorrow, then," Luisa said.

It was a long while before Solana gave reply; she seldom spoke, now, and the words came slowly. "I am ready to die."

Luisa nodded. "May God have mercy upon your soul." The women were silent in each other's company for a time, before Luisa asked, "have you regrets, Solana Degas?"

Between her armpits, Solana's face lowered. "None, Señora, but I miss Maria."

"Ah." There was a hint of *mea culpa* in Luisa's acknowledgement. She changed position, kneeling beside Solana, hands smoothing her own bare thighs reflectively. "They say Jesus died for Man's sins. Maria died for much less; only the jealousy of a woman."

Solana lifted her gaze to Luisa's face, but Luisa did not meet it. She went on: "Witches confess, so a village can accept a failed crop, a mother accept her stillborn baby, a beauty her stolen pageant title." Finally, she looked to Solana. "Such conspiracies we invent, so we can believe God is not so cruel."

Solana let her head rest against the wall and closed her eyes. Though used to having her arms held high overhead, she was suddenly aware of her shoulders and back on the slimy stone, the hard grip of iron on her wrists and the weight of the hasp at her hips, the uneven flagstone beneath her buttocks. She breathed deeply, hearing a soft echo of her breath from the Chief Torturer beside her.

Luisa put her hand to Solana's head, caressing the thick wool of her hair. A few moments later, the cell door closed and was locked behind her.

Solana sat alone, chained in her cell as she had been for so many nights. But now she understood her purpose, her reason for dying. She did not fear execution; she could meet her death with dignity.

Thirteen - Justice

It was a little after seven in the morning, and Solana's bare feet ached as they crunched through a fall of snow from the night before. Her breath made clouds in the icy winter air.

She was stark naked, her brown skin stippled with goosebumps, her dark-chocolate nipples hard enough to burst. With wrists crossed and lashed tightly behind her back, she was marched between two male guards, two more in front, two more behind, towards the stone platform in the centre of the bustling Town Square.

All around, hundreds of merchants and vendors were setting up for a day of trading; colourful tents and canopies, wooden tables. Cooking fires smouldered and the aroma of food was on the air. Chickens and dogs scurried out of the guards' way as they brought their prisoner across the snow-dusted flagstones.

Solana did not try to free her hands, nor struggle or protest on her way to the stake. Although people parted for the guards and their escort, their calls of abuse were promise of what would happen if she fell into their hands.

"Suffer, witch!"

"Back to the Devil with you!"

"You will burn well today!"

Solana did not respond. Her jaw was tight. Butterflies churned in her stomach but she fought to hide her fear. Today was not something to dread, but something to embrace. As a confessed witch, this was her journey, and although there may be pain, she would bear it with fortitude.

Solana had seen the truly repentant die without crying out until the end; often they suffocated or fainted from heat even before the fire reached them. Theirs were merciful deaths. It was the proud and unrepentant, though, who made such spectacles of themselves by begging and screaming.

Solana had prayed to God for strength and dignity, knowing that in her confession she had found peace, and her purification to ascend heaven was part of God's plan.

Today, I will die with dignity.

The stone platform in the centre of the Town Square stood four feet high, enough to allow anybody a clear view of the executions and entertainments performed upon it. Piles of wood and straw waited around its base, but as yet, no stake stood and no pyre had been built. Solana bit her lip anxiously. Perhaps burning at the stake had been changed to a more merciful beheading?

"Up, Witch."

They had reached the worn stone steps that led to the platform. At its top, in his black robes, the Executioner stood waiting. It was only as she climbed the steps that Solana saw what awaited her, and she began to feel her heart pounding, her lip trembling.

It was not a stake, but a wooden cross, lying flat upon the platform, its base positioned near a deep post-hole in the stone. The upright of the cross was no more than nine feet, its crossbar five feet wide. There were iron rings fitted with shackles at either extent of the crossbar, another iron ring with shackles two feet from the base of the upright.

At once, Solana gave protest. "Please, what is this?" She was spilling tears from her eyes as they brought her to the cross. To be bound naked against the stake would be humiliation enough, *but this?*

"Set her down," the Executioner commanded.

"Sir, I was not to die like this!" Despite her protests, Solana did not resist, but lay as she was bid upon the upright of the cross. It was savagely cold against her naked back and buttocks, the wood rough. She did not want to show her fear, nor betray her dignity. She closed her eyes, clenched her teeth hard as, one at a time, her arms were stretched out wide across the freezing crossbar and her wrists were closed securely in the iron fetters.

The cold attacked every inch of her body, making her shiver violently and making the little hairs along her limbs stand on end; but she was sweating in her armpits and along her hairline as the

Executioner checked her wrists. Iron fetters were secured about her ankles, connecting them by a short chain to the ring several inches below her heels.

"Set her up – one, two, three!"

All seven men were at the cross, grasping its wood and lifting. Solana shrieked as the cross was raised upwards, her body sliding down until her wrists jammed hard in the shackles. Pain at once wrenched the length of her arms. As the cross rose up, its base slid into the post-hole; the entire cross rocked forward, slamming down into place, jolting Solana's full weight on her manacles. She gave a scream as the iron tore her wrists, unable to help herself, her voice echoing across the town square and drawing the attention of four hundred faces.

At once, Solana found herself hanging by her wrists with arms widely outstretched. Awful strain shot through her wrists, forearms, shoulders, her back and sides. She instantly tried to find anchorage with her manacled feet, but her heels rubbed uselessly against the wooden post, restricted by their chain from lifting more than a few inches. She cried out again. Her resolve to maintain her dignity was fast disappearing in her panic to escape pain. The Executioner was hammering iron wedges into the post-hole, around the base of the cross, to secure it in place. Every vibration of the hammer sent shock waves through Solana's stretched and straining arms, and she wailed again.

The cross was made secure, leaving Solana hanging freely on her arms from the crossbar shackles. It had taken less than five minutes. The weight of her own body pulled on her arms, sending hot tendrils through her armpits and elbow and wrists. After just moments on the cross she was hanging heavily, unable to fight her own suspension.

"Oh, dear God!" Solana found herself crying out. She still tried to get anchorage with her heels against the upright of the cross, but could not. Almost as cruel as the pain itself was the humiliation. Solana had resolved to keep her dignity, but nothing had prepared her for this. Suddenly she was hanging naked before hundreds of people, so many eyes upon her, smiles and amusement as she suffered and cried out, and it was unbearable.

Hanging heavily on the V of her arms, Solana was a vision of beauty to the spectators below. Even after more than a year in the dungeons of the Inquisition, her body showed no sign of torture, true to Luisa's promise. Her mahogany skin gleamed in the winter air. The graceful, strong musculature of her limbs, drawn taut upon the cross, gave her the look of a Nubian martyr. Her breasts, round and plump and proud atop her raised ribcage, shifted with each gasping breath, trails of sweat glistened down her sides from each dark-brushed armpit. Her long, curly mane hung down, its curls echoed in the tight bush between her thighs.

"Oh, God, please!"

Crucifixion was pain and humiliation, and Solana could not bear it. But the guards had gone, and she had been left up on her cross to suffer.

Even worse than hanging with arms straight up, this was a straining, stretching suspension that pulled at her shoulders and elbows and tore at her back and ribcage. The cruel ingenuity favoured by Ancient Rome created an unbearable pressure through the tendons and ligaments that ran from biceps to breastbone, reduced breathing to gasps. Her hands, in the manacles, seemed about to burst and split. Her legs shifted in a futile effort to relieve the pain, but all she succeeded in doing was tug on the chain that secured her ankles.

At times, Solana tried to catch her breath, but quickly wailed aloud in her pain and anguish. Clouds of frost still rode into the air as she hung panting on the cross; the day was bleak and cold and she was naked, but the sweat still streaked her brown skin.

The Town Square grew busier as the morning wore on. To Solana, suffering in her crucifixion, the scene before her felt like a dream through the urgent haze of her agony. People, buying and selling, trading, gossiping; while others simply stood and looked up at her, adding humiliation to her pain.

Beyond it all loomed the great Justice Hall that had been her prison for well over a year. Chained deep in its foul dungeons, Solana had hoped she would see daylight again: but this bleak day, hanging by her outstretched arms on a cross above the market, was one she would never have wished for.

After several hours, Solana had become a fixture in the market square, a living crucifix, both tragic and sexual, her body slung from the crossbeam, feminine and erotic in her suffering. In the low sun, her curly black hair caught the light and became a copper halo; even the tiny hairs that bristled in the cold on her naked skin softened the outline of her body.

Solana hung in her crucifixion through the late morning. The torture of strained and stretched muscles, ligaments and tendons grew worse, as was the cruelty of the cross. Dignity was forgotten; she cried aloud in her pain, called to be let down, pleaded for mercy. Her whole body shone with the heavy sweat of suffering and her head rocked restlessly up and down.

After five hours, Solana was depleted by her public torture upon the cross. Her naked body was still wet with sweat, her head drooping, her breasts quivering with each shuddering breath, a moan every few moments. Her eyes were half open, dull. She was in awful, unending pain, but not enough to escape the reality of her humiliation. Here she was, hung up by her wrists, flaunted to any who cared to study her, sweating heavily, without a shred of composure or dignity.

Solana had determined to maintain her innocence, and not confess to witchcraft. She had failed. She had determined to avenge the torture and death of the young Maria. She had failed. She had determined to meet her execution, this day, with dignity and grace. She had failed.

In the Town Square below, two people met.

The Executioner bowed his head politely to the pretty blonde who had taken him aside. Even on such a cold day, Catalina Lacrosse wore a dress that left her shoulders and cleavage bare.

From a purse, Catalina drew coins, and pressed them into the Executioner's palm. She glanced up towards the execution plinth with satisfaction, the dusky figure hanging naked from a cross. Solana Degas' humiliation and agony was Catalina's delight, and it was not over yet.

"You have done well, Sir," she praised the Executioner. "She has wronged many people, and I expect her suffering to last as long as you can make it."

"I will do as you ask."

"And Sir, I have one more favour to ask."

By mid afternoon, at the direction of the Executioner, the guards finally began piling wood and straw in a wide circle around the base of the cross below Solana's dangling toes. Dulled by suffering and her suspension, Solana did not register that the wood was sparse, far from enough to bring high flames or overwhelming heat.

When the Executioner stepped to the front of the stone platform and unravelled a scroll, the crowd began to gather. Solana hung unmoving as her long list of charges was read aloud, one after the other; the crimes of witchcraft, words of confession she had uttered in horror and agony upon the rack, again read aloud to all. At its conclusion, the Executioner said, "the sentence upon Solana Degas to be carried out here today, is death by fire, that her soul may be purified and returned to God's mercy."

The agony of crucifixion for nearly seven hours was horror enough; now the fire was to be lit. From somewhere below, Solana glimpsed the flutter of a flaming torch, and terror surged through her. The cruelty seemed beyond any rationale, but Solana was helpless.

"I asked them to only put a little wood, so you will burn more slowly," a gleeful voice rode the shouts of the crowd. Catalina, escorted by the Executioner carrying a burning taper, climbed the steps. "Tell me, Solana, how does it feel to hang upon the cross? They tell me it hurts awfully!"

"Catalina," Solana groaned. "I am sorry, please forgive me! Please, please, tell them to have mercy on me!" The shame of being so vulnerable before her former rival cut deeply, but she begged all the same, seeing no other hope to avoid the horrors that loomed.

Catalina came to stand barely two yards from the cross. She looked Solana from her shackled wrists and stretched arms, to her dangling toes, chewing on one finger to conceal her smile.

At the humiliation of hanging naked and helpless before the gloating Catalina, with the jeering crowd beyond, Solana burst fully into tears. "Please, Catalina! Please, I beg you, please, show mercy!"

Catalina's answer was to spit at Solana where she hung. The saliva slapped onto her bare thigh. "No, I want to watch you screaming." Catalina stepped back from the tinder, held out her hand, and the

Executioner passed her the flaming taper. She held it up, her eyes dark with joy, looking triumphantly up into Solana's face. "How it will hurt, to burn alive!"

"Please, Catalina, please!"

But Catalina crouched gracefully and touched the flame to straw at the cross' base, making sure that it caught alight. Sweet smoke curled up and flames quickly spread through the brush and sticks. Solana smelled its fragrance and gave a wail of horror. In front of Catalina, in front of the hundreds gathered to watch, hanging on the cross, Solana pissed herself. It ran down the insides of her thighs and dribbled from her dangling toes into the very wood that was catching fire below her. Catalina gave a laugh of delight.

"Oh my God, you filthy bitch!"

"Please," Solana called desperately, "stop the fire, put it out! Please, Catalina, please have mercy on me!" Her dignity was gone, as she gibbered and begged upon the cross.

Catalina just laughed and watched.

Over long minutes, the flames spread, crawling through straw and wood, crackling and ticking, tiny sparks drifting up. Solana's panic did not wane, and she called and begged, but was too exhausted from her hours upon the cross to struggle. She simply hung, unmoving, as she felt wafts of heat on her bare legs. The muscles in her shining and outstretched arms were defined by the strain of her bodyweight, armpits hollowed; her breasts shuddered with her wails.

The crowd, with Catalina at the very front to watch Solana burn, was devouring Solana's fear, taunting and jeering. The fire was growing, little twists and flamelets reaching for Solana's feet, and its heat was becoming fierce even as goosebumps stippled her arms and ribcage. The terror consumed Solana now, even the pain and humiliation of her crucifixion overwhelmed as the fire grew.

Embers rode the swirling smoke and stung Solana's naked body. She shrieked, and a cheer swept the crowd. There was a gust of wind; it drove a pirouette of flames that fluttered around Solana's bare *en pointe* feet. It felt as if she had been slashed with razor-sharp knives. "*Ohhhh! God, dear God!*"

There was a roar of delight from the crowd, Catalina thrust her arms into the air and cheered. Solana hung from the crossbar, her dangling feet reddened and steaming. Her whole body was wet with perspiration. Her mouth was a shapeless expression of agony, her scorched feet hurting beyond belief, overpowering even the torture of hanging on the cross. She begged Catalina for mercy again and again. Wisps of smoke mocked her.

A thatch of straw caught alight, flames again leaping around Solana's feet. They fluttered around and between her toes, playing her soles, sliding up her gleaming calves curling black smoke. Solana's screams of agony echoed through the town square, hanging helplessly from the crossbar as the fire burned her feet. She gave scream after dreadful scream, her hair glued to her face and neck by the running sweat on her body.

The crowd had grown quiet. Catalina was watching in delight. With her lower legs inside the fire, Solana's agonised screams went on and on over its crackling. Waves of heat made the air shimmer around her. Tiny blue flames skittered through the fine hairs on her thighs. Her screams became ever more frantic, her feet slowly burning to the bone.

Steam curled from the wet skin of her thighs, but the fire was well controlled, the flames rising no higher than her shins. Her shining wet torso, hanging heavily on her outstretched arms, shimmered in the rising waves of heat and her head rocked as she screamed.

The Executioner picked up sticks and straw, tossed handfuls into the flames that crackled around Solana's feet, keeping the fire high enough to ensure her agony, but not enough that she would die. Shimmering embers stung her face and arms and breasts, scorching her skin.

An hour, and her torture went on as the light veils of smoke drifted around her. Solana hung on outstretched arms, crying out on her cross. Her lower legs were ruined, her dangling feet blackened and smoking in the ankle fetters. From her thighs upwards her shining body looked untouched, although her brown skin was cruelly scorched and she was in agony beyond words, her lips blistered. But none of it was enough to bring her the mercy of death,

The Executioner was pleased. The witch was lasting a long time, and screamed well. The crowd was enjoying the spectacle; the longer they stayed, the more they would spend with the vendors and merchants, and they in turn would tip the Executioner well for the day's entertainment, adding to the generous bribe Catalina had given him. The pretty blonde especially seemed delighted with the show.

Eventually, though, Solana's head lolled between her shining and outstretched arms, her wails weakening as she hung on her cross above the shimmering fire. The Executioner knew she would not live much longer.

As spectators gathered again, the guards began gathering big bunches of sticks and straw and throwing them onto the bed of embers that still glowed below Solana's charred toes. Flames leaped quickly, and an updraft of sparks stung her scorched body and jolted her back to lucidity with a long cry. Her head lifted a little, eyes and nose streaming, but she hung helpless.

The fire took quickly this time, the flames hungry, jumping at Solana's bare legs, skittering up behind her back. As the fire jumped and flared around her, Solana's heart rallied, and she began to scream in agony once more.

More bales of straw, more bunches of sticks; the fire began to roar and crackle in tornados and serpents, surging higher. The orange light was reflected in the undersides of Solana's wet breasts and lurching belly. The bonfire engulfed her thighs. Solana was helpless to it, screaming. Her pubic hair finally caught alight, flaring and crackling loudly as it burned. Catalina was dancing, laughing, and the crowd cheered with her.

Flames clambered up Solana's belly, fluttered in the wet curve of her lower back. Fire clawed at her ribcage, wrapping around her bare breasts. The hairs on her arms and in her armpits flamed away, then her woolly mane of hair exploded, engulfing her head and face. In the fury of the fireball, the scream Solana gave was truly horrible; but when she drew breath again and scorching air seared her lungs, her voice was ripped away.

The crowd cheered as the witch went silent. But for her outstretched arms, Solana was completely surrounded by fire, just a dark outline hanging unmoving in the midst of an inferno.

The last face Solana Degas had seen was Catalina's, through a shimmering wall of heat. Bare shouldered and laughing, the pretty blonde girl had held eye contact with Solana, and her lip had curled in disdain.

A moment later, the fire had ripped through Solana's hair and she had lost her mind. She felt the whirlwind of fire suck the last of the air from her lungs, the pain seemed to fold into blackness as her eyes rolled back, feeling her body suspended in fire.

Luisa Consuela stood at the top of the Justice Hall's thirteen steps, the Jailer alongside her. The beautiful Chief Torturer wore her black robes, but her feet were bare upon the cold stone, telling the Jailer she wore nothing, beneath the cloak.

The black-haired Jailer had dared to venture outside bare-limbed in sleeveless bodice and thigh-length kilt in the chill afternoon, her beauty drawing glances from the male guards posted nearby.

Luisa cared little for executions, but for the last twenty minutes the two women had watched until the flames embraced Solana on her cross. Now For that witch, at least, the suffering was over.

"She would have been free," Luisa said at length.

The Jailer, her porcelain arms folded, kept her eyes on the rising column of smoke. "But they sent you back to rack her again."

"I was angry at them and their god," Luisa admitted. "I made sure she would not recant again, but she should have gone free."

"We do what we have to, Señora."

Luisa's scoffing breath carried a heavy cloud of white into the sky. Her eyes panned the market square, until she gave a nod in the direction of one woman whose charismatic beauty seemed to have drawn a group of admirers.

"The blonde one," Luisa told the Jailer. "Catalina Lacrosse. It was she who named Solana Degas as a witch, and sent her back to the rack."

The Jailer nodded. "It seems suspicious. I think she should be arrested directly, Señora."

"I will stretch her. I'm sure she will find a great deal to tell us," Luisa said. Almost as an after-thought, she added: "Detain her in Solana's cell, in chains."

The significance was not lost on the Jailer, and she smiled. "As she should be, Señora."

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