



# THE SLAVE HOLD

By Adriane Russo

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**I**t was the wails of children and the swears and curses of the slavers that woke me. I glanced down the corridor toward the door by the guards' room. The light from there was muted, swallowed up by the darkness of the pens, but I could dimly make out the shadows of figures moving back and forth. I sighed. This kind of activity could mean only one thing—the raiders had just brought in a new group of kids. In over a year here, I could tell that much.

I slipped back from the bars, retreating to a shadowy corner of my cell and the nebulous protection that it offered. The stone floor was cold beneath the soles of my feet, and the rough wool of my shirt snagged unpleasantly as I crouched against the wall. The noise at the end of the corridor grew louder as the door by the guards' room swung open. The wailing and crying that had so abruptly roused me from my sleep ceased, only to be replaced with whimpers as the children beheld their new home. I smiled grimly in the shadows—the slave pens were not really all that pleasant.

It was dim here, with almost no light penetrating from the upper levels. Even the air was oppressive, and every breath seemed stale and sluggish. Light, when it came at all, was bright and sharp from the door at the end of the corridor, a stabbing beacon in the darkness that eddied around it. From beyond that door came the slavers and their newfound slaves. Only during an auction would buyers be allowed down here, and then perhaps a few of us would be let out.

The corridor stretched from my cell in both directions. The walls on either side were lined with bars which fronted the cells; their walls and back were stone, a little more than a foot thick. The cells themselves were small, barely long enough to stretch out in, and about as high. Every few cells, the wall extended beyond the bars and an iron hook protruded.

I looked out, squinting against the glare. This new group was fairly old; I would have guessed between ten and sixteen. Fewer boys than girls, but that was not unusual. When my village had been raided, almost all the boys older than fourteen had been killed. As a girl, the raiders had considered me no threat. That had been their great mistake.

There were perhaps a dozen newcomers in all, three boys and the rest girls. The guards were dividing up the group into different cells along the corridor. The girls were crying, most of them nearing hysterics. Usually, the genders were split, but we were months away from the auction's opening and the slavers did not appear too concerned about whom they put

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## The Slavehold (continued from page 17)

it was too late. My left arm flashed through the bars and caught the front of his jerkin, pulling him with stunning force into the bars of the cell. His eyes bulged as he recognized me, and his feet scabbled futilely on the floor. As poised as a dancer, I brought my right arm gracefully up and slid the dagger easily, ever so easily, between his ribs. He stiffened in my hand and toppled over to the floor. The dagger fell with him, standing out as a flag in his chest.

The guard by the door let out a shout as he saw Tallic fall. He ran down the corridor, his whip and a stout length of rope in his hands, and stopped dead when he saw Tallic's body. He looked slowly from the knife to me, then back to the knife. He sighed as he glanced back at me, but then, he had seen this happen before.

"Why are you doing this, Shea?" he asked. "One of these days, they are going to decide to have you executed."

I laughed softly in the darkness.

"They are not going to kill me, Tek," I told him. "Whip and starve me, yes, because they know I will survive. But kill me? No. I am Yissana, and my price on the block will far repay anything I do in these pens. You know why I do this, Tek, and I will not let you interfere."

"Fifteen lashes, then," he said grimly, "you have earned from this death." I nodded.

"As always," I said quietly.

The guard took a key from the brass ring at his waist and opened the door to my cell. Ever wary of me,



**Poised as a dancer, I raised  
my arm gracefully and slid  
the dagger between his ribs.**



he reached in with one arm and drew me out. I smiled at his expression. He knew as well as I did that, no matter what his precautions, if I wanted him dead, there would be little he could do to prevent it. He tied my wrists together with the rope he had brought, then hung them over the hook in the wall that divided our cell from the next.

"One!" he cried. The whip lashed across my back like liquid fire, cutting through the scars to the flesh beneath. Blood welled instantly and poured hotly down

my back. I screamed and began again to recite the words of the Creed to protect me from this new assault.

"Two!" His words were distant now, and the lash did not burn as it had before. I gasped, but did not stop my recitation.

"Three!" The voice was far off. The lash was no more than a prick at the edge of my awareness.

"Four!" The voice barely penetrated my ears. I felt nothing more as I slid into darkness.

I awoke later to more darkness, though this one not of my making. I lay on my stomach with the lashes stinging slightly beyond my mind's reach. The cell was warm, and I could smell my blood in the air.

"Shea?" Kven's voice came from the darkness.

"Yes?" I lifted my head from the floor, disregarding the pain it caused. I turned my face toward the voice. Kven was sitting with his back against the wall, watching me.

"Why did you do it?" he asked. "I mean, your Creed says that you do things only for yourself or your race. Why did you change your mind, when you knew what would happen to you?"

I lowered my head back to the floor, as images of my village flashed briefly in my mind. The faces and names of the raiders who had hurt my family. All of them were dead now, and last of all came Tallic.

I looked over at the boy who now shared my cell and smiled.

"Revenge," I told him.

Many months have passed now since Kven joined me in these pens. He is learning, slowly but surely, what it means to be one of the Yissana. I smile as I watch him complete the exercises that are essential to his training. I have taught him much, for he is a surprisingly adept student, grasping at the power apparent in the Creed as a thirsting man downs water.

There have been buyers here for the past week or so, looking us over. From what little the guards have let slip, we have gathered there is to be an auction sometime soon. Rumor has it that Kven and I will be sold as a pair and that bids have already been placed.

I smile to myself in the darkness. Neither Kven nor I are blind to this opportunity. Within a week we will be free. ★

