

Meditations of a Slave

Paula J. Marolewski

- EXCERPT -

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To Mom and Dad

Thank you for always loving, encouraging, and affirming me.

Part I

1.

I am a slave. My parents were slaves, and their parents. The debt is an old one, and I don't see any way of paying it back.

My master is rich, there's no doubt of that, but we who serve him rarely see any of his wealth. A few do, but I'd prefer not to talk about them. I do, however, take care of much of his buying in the marketplace. It gets me out of his sight, but it's little better. I have to get the best bargains possible—and that means using anything I can, legal or not. If I don't, my master invariably finds out, and I've faced the beating stone enough in the past to avoid it regularly now.

I used to enjoy the spice of the occasional theft, but now I resort most often to heavy-handed threatening. I'm not a wrestler, but I've got enough muscle to scare the usual hawker. So I keep it mostly legal, especially since I was up before the judge once when I was more foolish. My master didn't raise a finger to help me, and I bore a heavy whipping. Not the forty less one kind, either. But he expects the same use of his money, so I do what I can.

To say the least, there's a hierarchy in his house. Those unmentionables are at the top, then there are his pet favorites—you can usually tell them by their smiles. Some are actually innocent: every so often he picks a girl just into her womanhood, and she doesn't know his tastes. Most, though, you can tell. It's as if oil drips from their mouths as they give you this knowing look and sneer. They are the experts at what they do, and all they care about is the money that comes into their hands and the prestige he gives them. Until they make a mistake, or grow out of their looks, or get ousted by someone better. Then they're forced to the realization that they're still slaves, and they start from the bottom again.

I'm somewhere in the middle. I hold my own, and that's all I care about. I don't bother talking to anyone anymore—not about things that matter. It's too easy for someone to double cross you. I don't really want to move up, because I'd rather see as little of my master as possible. I'm close enough being over part of his purse.

He's not the sort of man you talk to. He's over you, and you know it, and he makes sure you know it. He'll talk to his favorites, but if they had eyes they'd see he was jeering at them all the time. The only times he talks to me are to give me orders or

to punish me. Fortunately, that last hasn't happened in a while. And that's the way I want to keep it.

I'm not sure why the ring on my finger is of blackened metal. It hardly matters, though. The favorites have gold rings and it means the same thing.

2.

I was in the marketplace today. The usual. The shops line the streets, the wares set out in wicker baskets, on tables, and hanging from poles. I had been sent by my master to get cloth for a new tunic and had already bought velvet, a rich deep blue, and was looking at the silk. Turning the bolts of cloth and ignoring the weaseling voice of the proprietor.

There was a rustle of linen beside me and I turned to see Laesha. She's a seamstress, and I always see her at the cloth stalls and with the ribbon, thread, and trimmings. I have talked to her occasionally. She's not quite plump, but isn't slender, and bears herself with a kind of caution that makes her seem soft.

"What are you buying for?" she asked. She ran a hand over the cloth I had just put aside.

"My lord. And you?" She hardly ever approached me, so her starting a conversation was surprising.

"Myself, today." She turned her eyes on me for a moment, then dropped them away just as quickly, looking at the silks. Her eyes were grey.

But I was surprised. "Yourself? How could you get the money?" I looked at her critically before I could catch myself, and she turned crimson.

"My master gave it to me. But not for what you thought!" She was deeply embarrassed, and hurt.

"I'm sorry," I said. "You know my master."

She paled now. "I knew him." She regained her composure. "My master gave it to me to buy what I wanted with it. I want to make myself a new skirt." She glanced at me shyly.

"Well, get a good bargain." I began picking at the silks again myself, but was more interested in watching her. She must have been to the stall before, because she was studying three bolts of cloth that had been set to one side, and the shopkeeper was coaxing her to select one.

She finally chose a demure pattern of pastels and grey, and I watched as the coins changed hands. "You can get a better price than that," I objected. The shopkeeper glared at me.

She turned her eyes on me. "It's a fair price. I know a fair price."

"You could still get better."

She shook her head. "I'm not interested in your kind of 'better.' But—but you should be." The color rose in her cheeks.

"Me! I haven't bought anything yet!"

She held her purchase against herself, and her lip seemed to tremble. "You should ask to be put for sale. See if you can't do better than your master. Your master is just like your bargains!"

I grew angry and clenched my fists. The shopkeeper, who had started to laugh, now began to retreat and to eye his wares with despair.

"As if your master is any different!"

“He is! My Master loves his servants—real love, and real care. Not like your master who orders you to steal and then doesn’t care what happens to you! I’ve even gone into my master’s garden! A beautiful garden, and he talked there with me! So why don’t you try?” She was backing up, frightened now, and aware that people had stopped to stare at us.

Several of them looked very unfriendly. I knew one of them, and made a curt gesture so that he walked abruptly on.

“I’ll think about it, Laesha,” I growled. I turned my back and could hear her footsteps fleeing. I flicked the cloth with my finger. “I’ll come back for one of these.” I stalked out wanting to wreak mayhem, but the cost wouldn’t be worth it. I’d visit another merchant and make a quick buy; I didn’t need any more hassle.

3.

I did a foolish thing. I spoke to my master of being sold.

I had no intention of doing so. I had every intention of letting Laesha's words rot like so many other words. But my master spoke first.

"This isn't all you bought today in the market," he snapped. I wouldn't have seen him at all, but there had been a message for me to report. That alone had chilled me.

"I don't buy what she said," I shot back. I should have known better.

My master's eyes narrowed. "A little less respectful than usual, aren't you? I can encourage you to regain that respect if you want."

"Forgive me, my master." I swallowed hard.

"Twenty lashes should be proper encouragement."

"No, my master! That is, it isn't necessary."

"Then what is? Do you want," and his voice took on infinite scorn, "to be put for sale?"

I let caution fly to the wind. "Yes." I glared at him, even though I couldn't penetrate behind his eyes. "I want to be put for sale. What the hell."

He threw back his head and laughed. "As if anyone would buy a rough-necked foul-mouthed thief like you! Oh, you've done your job for me quite well, quite well!" He leveled his eyes at me abruptly. "You are quite aware, I assume, of my punishment if you don't get bought?"

That made my throat go hard again. There were torments in the courtyard and torments in the dungeon, and I definitely preferred those in the courtyard if I had to choose. But I had the feeling that I'd get the worst if I refused at this point, regardless. "I'm aware. Do it anyway. Put me for sale."

"Sealed." He gave a wolf's smile. "You can always ask to be put up again after tomorrow, but I doubt you'd want to risk it." He dismissed me negligently, and I left. I had signed my own death warrant sometime in that room, and I didn't even know when or where.

4.

Today, true to his word, my master put me for sale. True to his unspoken word, he put me up in the dingiest part of town. It was a place of thieves, prostitutes, and beggars. The selling stand was nearly rotted through, and its proprietor showed black teeth when my master flipped him a gold coin for the use of his table.

"So we wait," said my master. He settled down, and I was forced to stand on the table, subject to the jeers of the passersby.

My body can take pressure, but after seven hours my calves were cramping and my head spinning. The sun baked the dust on the street, and my master gave me a warning look every time I shifted to ease any of my pains. I waited.

In my mind, I made a will, should I not survive my punishment. It consisted far more of words to people than of things, but oddly enough I had only a moment's sorrow for Laesha. No harshness, even though it had been her who had brought me to this place. I knew my master would wait for the moment of sunset, then bring me back. He appeared to take a perverse pleasure in the waiting.

It was late afternoon, and a man on foot came down the street. My master rose, his face ugly.

The gentleman, for his clothes were rich though not showy, looked at me with crystal clear eyes. He smiled, and my master met it with an uncompromising glare.

"He shall come with me." The words were a quiet promise, and he almost chuckled at my unbelieving stare.

My master spat. "I'll charge you a high price for him. He's a liar, a thief, and a braggart. I'm sure your people have been harassed by him before."

The man's face grew hard. "It is not for you to throw charges at him. I offer to take him, not judge him."

"Then give him your offer."

I didn't understand. My master would make it hard for me to be sold, but why was I at all concerned in the haggling? Then the gentleman turned to me.

"I don't need to buy you," he said, in gentle explanation. "Your slavery is not the way you understand it to be. Your family for generations has chosen not to be part of my household, and therein your slavery enters. You had to be part of someone's household, and truly, there are only two, though one of them has many faces." He sighed. "But slavery has its rules, and you were bound by your decision. A slave can leave a house only through his death, but by those same rules, a free life can ransom a bound one. I gave that life. Because I held claim upon you and all your family from the beginning, my free life is able to give release to all in slavery to this one," he gestured to my master, and the motion somehow indicated judgement. He paused. "I had the only free life to give. Even this one himself is under me, but he has left my house."

"I . . ." I was bewildered, and my face showed it. My bravado crumbled before the strangeness of this explanation. I had expected at best a better master. This was clearly the master Laesha belonged to.

He nodded and continued. "To be part of my house, you need only accept the ransom I have already paid for you; for all of you."

"But – " my master cut in, and his face was black with anger, " –he has not told you of the hot iron that shall sear your flesh, how his commands must hold sway in every area of your life, so that even your thoughts must be in keeping with his pleasure. Did I demand that? No, you could hate and think and take your pleasure how you liked. He does not give you simple tasks –no! He demands an absolute obedience!"

The gentleman bore the accusations without taking his gaze from my face. "Freedom, my son, must be found in the context of obedience. Love creates an obedience that transcends duty and becomes a way of life, freeing to you and in fellowship with me." He stopped.

I remembered now. This master had submitted to the life of a slave, and to my own master's maltreatment. And execution. But he was here now, and I faintly understood that it had to do with . . . the King. A person, if he could be called by such a lowly term, about whom I had heard very little. Except that he had all power. Suddenly I had the feeling that there were many things in my life, and in this city, of which I knew only the barest hints.

"So make your decision," my master rasped. "Sunset is drawing close."

The gentleman held up a hand to silence him.

I knew then that true power was dealt with quietly. So many things about this man were shown quietly, yet they vibrated through the air like music. He was trustworthy. He was honest. He truly did care.

"I will come with you," I said haltingly, afraid that I was using the wrong words.

But he smiled broadly. "Then come down. I will take you to your home."

And he lifted a hand for me to grasp as I jumped down. He actually offered it to me. And apparently he knew better than I that I needed it, for my knotted muscles protested the jolt and it was only his steady grip that kept me from falling.

I straightened, and looked at my former master.

"May you find your new life easy," he said sardonically, and gave a mocking bow.

But my Master shook his head in reproach. "You let your bitterness destroy you." He turned to me. "Come. We will go home."