There is nothing but a jagged line of splinters where Myint Thein’s teeth once stood – a painful reminder, he says, of the day he was beaten and sold on to a Thai fishing boat.

The tattooed Burmese fisherman, 29, bears a number of other “reminders” of his life at sea: two deep cuts on each arm, calloused fingers contorted like claws and facial muscles that twitch involuntarily from fear. For the past two years, Myint Thein has been forced to work 20-hour days as a slave on the high seas, enduring regular beatings from his Thai captain and eating little more than a plate of rice each day. But now that he’s been granted a rare chance to come back to port, he’s planning something special to mark the occasion: his escape.

Using a pair of rusty scissors, Myint Thein chops off his long, scraggly locks. He rinses himself down with a hose, slips on his only pair of trousers and, peering out at his surroundings, remembers not to open his mouth too wide. A man with no teeth is easy to remember.

Under the tinny roof of Songkhla’s commercial port, on Thailand’s south-east coast, the imperial-blue cargo boat that brought Myint Thein back to shore is unloading its catch, barrel by barrel. The day’s international fish trading has just begun, and buyers are milling about in bright yellow rubber boots, running slimy scales between their fingers, as hobbling cats nibble at the fishbones and guts strewn across the pavement.
Myint Thein doesn’t have much time to talk, so he tells us the basics. He paid a middleman two years ago to smuggle him across the border into Thailand and find him a job in a factory. After an arduous journey travelling through dense jungle, over bumpy roads and across rough waves, Myint Thein finally arrived in Kantang, a Thai port on its western, Andaman coast, where he discovered he’d been sold to a boat captain. “When I realised what had happened, I told them I wanted to go back,” he says hurriedly. “But they wouldn’t let me go. When I tried to escape, they beat me and smashed all my teeth.”

For the next 20 months, Myint Thein and three other Burmese men who were also sold to the boat trawled international waters, catching anything from squid and tuna to “trash fish”, also known as bycatch – inedible or infant species of fish later ground into fishmeal for Thailand’s multibillion-dollar farmed prawn industry. The supply chain runs from the slaves through the fishmeal to the prawns to UK and US retailers. The product of Myint Thein’s penniless labour might well have ended up on your dinner plate.

Thai ‘trash fish’ workers unload the catch at Songkhla port.

Despite public promises to clean up the industry, many Thai officials not only turn a blind eye to abuse, the Guardian found, they are often complicit in it, from local police through to high-ranking politicians and members of the judiciary – meaning that slaves often have nowhere to turn when they have the opportunity to run.

“One day I was stopped by the police and asked if I had a work permit,” says Ei Ei Lwin, 29, a Burmese migrant who was detained on the docks at Songkhla port. “They wanted a 10,000 baht (£180) bribe to release me. I didn’t have it, and I didn’t know anyone else who would, so they took me to a secluded area, handed me over to a broker, and sent me to work on a trawler.”

Brokers

Thailand produces roughly 4.2m tonnes of seafood every year, 90% of which is destined for export, official figures show. The US, UK and EU are prime buyers of this seafood – with Americans buying half of all Thailand’s seafood exports and the UK alone consuming nearly 7% of all Thailand’s prawn exports.

“The use of trafficked labour is systematic in the Thai fishing industry,” says Phil
Robertson, deputy director of Human Rights Watch’s Asia division, who describes a “predatory relationship” between these migrant workers and the captains who buy them.

“The industry would have a hard time operating in its current form without it.”

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a high-ranking broker explained to the Guardian how Thai boat owners phone him directly with their “order”: the quantity of men they need and the amount they’re willing to pay for them.

“Each guy costs about 25,000-35,000 baht [£450-£640] – we go find them,” explains the goateed broker, who operates out of the industrial fishing and prawn-processing hub of Samut Sakhon, just south of the capital, Bangkok.

“The boat owner finds the way to pay and then that debt goes to the labourers.”

At various points along the way, checkpoints are passed and officials bribed – with Thai border police often playing an integral role.

“Police and brokers – the way I see it – we’re business partners,” explains the broker, who claims to have trafficked thousands of migrants into Thailand over the past five years. “We have officers working on both sides of the Thai-Burmese border. If I can afford the bribe, I let the cop sit in the car and we take the main road.

“This is a big chain,” he adds. “You have to understand: everyone’s profiting from it. These are powerful people with powerful positions – politicians.”

The price captains pay for these men is extremely low even by historical standards. According to the anti-trafficking activist Kevin Bales, slaves cost 95%
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less than they did at the height of the 19th-century slave trade – meaning that they are not regarded as investments for important cash crops such as cotton or sugar, as they were historically, but as disposable commodities.

For the migrants who believed Thailand would bring them opportunity, the reality of being sent out to sea is devastating.

“They told me I was going to work in a pineapple factory,” recalls Kyaw, a broad-shouldered 21-year-old from rural Burma. “But when I saw the boats, I realised I’d been sold ... I was so depressed, I wanted to die.”

Chained

Life on a 15-metre trawler is brutal, violent and unpredictable. Many of the slaves interviewed by the Guardian recalled being fed just a plate of rice a day. Men would take fitful naps in sleeping quarters so cramped they would crawl to enter them, before being summoned back out to trawl fish at any hour. Those who were too ill to work were thrown overboard, some interviewees reported, while others said they were beaten if they so much as took a lavatory break.

Many of these slave ships stay out at sea for years at a time, trading slaves from one boat to another and being serviced by cargo boats, which travel out from Thai ports towards international borders to pick up the slave boats’ catch and drop off supplies.

The vessels catch fish and shellfish for domestic and international markets, including roughly 350,000 tonnes of trash fish, every year, according to the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). This trash fish is separated at sea and ferried back on cargo boats to shore, where it is ground down and turned into fishmeal for multinational companies such as CP Foods, which use it in animal feed for prawn, pig and chicken farming.

CP in turn supplies food retailers and giant international supermarkets including Walmart, Tesco, Carrefour, Costco, Morrisons, the Co-operative and Iceland, with frozen and fresh prawns, and ready-made meals.