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JENNIFER L ARMSTRONG

CALEDONIA

BOOK THREE

LETITIA COYNE

AUTHOR OF BRITANNIA

The Story –

By AD83 the Romans in Caledonia held a line of glen-blocking forts, (now known as the Gask Ridge forts, from Glasgow to Perth) and the three active legions, XXth, IXth and IInd, were split along this defensive line.

Calgacus was one of a number of first century Pictish barons -- part of a landed class in northern Celt society with access to slaves, money, men and arms. He fixed on the plan to unify the Caledonian Celtic tribes against Rome, beginning with the tribes of the Forth-Clyde area. After a crushing defeat at a fort along the Roman line, Calgacus tried to bring together all the Pictish tribes and rallied an army of perhaps sixty thousand men (and women) for the Battle of Mons Graupius.

Once Calgacus' lover, Eirbrin has been sent north to her family lands on the Gleann Mor above Inbhir Nis. Fanatical dedication to the fight to free Caledonia from Rome has been her only way to deal with the deep and disabling shames of her past. When she meets Antony she believes she has found a mystic, a man of power who can help her to overcome the demons of guilt and shame.

He is a spy, a *Natione* -- native Britons conscripted to the Roman auxiliary army -- used extensively by Agricola in the Caledonian wars where the Celt's guerrilla tactics and harsh terrain made Roman success near to impossible. Everything about him should warn Brin of his deception, but her longing to atone, her need to be free of shame, and her growing desire for him allow her to deny or justify any doubts that come.

To him, she should be no more than an enemy, and with her ties to the leader of the Picts, a formidable source of information. But as they move through the Caledonian midlands toward the gathering battle, her beauty and courage, her innocence and the unfaltering faith she places in him draw him into an impossible situation.

Trapped between an irresistible love and an immovable duty, he must find a way to untangle his web of lies, or return to a life of service, to live or die alone.

CALEDONIA
Book Three.
Letitia Coyne

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CHAPTER ONE.

Ridge Forts, Caledonia, Autumn AD83

Motes danced in the rising heat of the fire and fled into thatched shadows high above. Mania shone from the skin and wide eyes of the gathered band of strangers, throwing firelight back across the room and filling the air with the rank odour of cold sweat and apprehension.

Calgacus knelt, sitting back onto his feet, and held the attention of everyone in the room with the quiet assurance of a man who had the courage to meet their convictions. “What hope do they have?” he asked. “We have the numbers, the heart and the balls.” A snigger ran through the assembly and there was a general nod as the truth of his words was acknowledged.

“The Ninth Legion! Britons have bested them before today. They’ve slunk back behind their walls and trenches. Rome has divided her numbers and spread herself too thin. And worse, they’ve considered us as weak as they are themselves. They’ve believed we have no heart to face the chill of our winter because they have none.”

Again a low murmur of agreement swept through the room and he slowly turned his head, scanning each face, meeting each eye. "They cling to the warmth of the coastal lowlands. They fear the wilds of our mountains and forests, but these are home to us and the spirits of our fathers and the blood of our ancestors are already on this land. The wilds of our island hold no such fears for us. We cannot help but be victorious tonight."

Brinnie pulled her attention from the leader and watched the mug she filled froth and spill over. There was no doubting him. There was sense in every word.

The men who'd gathered under this roof had come from far and wide and with each of them, a band of followers. They had no kin ties and no common land, only hatred of Rome, the invaders who would enslave them all. Talk had come down with them of the fleet of great vessels that had surveyed the shores and carried the might and terror of empire as far as her own mother's lands, as far as Craig Phadrig itself.

Against the wall, by the curtained doorway, her husband crouched, his eyes afire with the need upon them. His face was set in a mask of calm that lay between courage and acceptance, and in it she read his mortality.

The time for fear and caution had passed. Men from all over the Caledonian mountains had rallied to the call of a leader, and the clans had one purpose: to fight or die for their freedom. And tonight would be the beginning of the end for their foe. The Romans who slept in the glen below would die with the knowledge that this was a land they would never own.

Around her the noise of assent was rising as the leader roused the men with stirring words. Restlessness was churning in the flesh that packed in around the fire, and she had to concentrate on the next mug before her as it swished and waved, lifting her jug back to keep from spilling ale over the packed earth of the floor.

"So to it." The cry was sharp and she turned again to face the charismatic figure who held them all in his hand. "Tonight we have a full third of their number lying drunk with their necks extended. Those who want to sit with the old and the infirm; those who want to hide beneath the beds of their children; those who want to live to tell the story as if it was their own, stay behind. Those who want to rush their blood to the glory of our homeland, rally now. Now the time is right."

A hand touched hers and Brinnie yelped, spinning her attention to her jug, snatching her fingers from the contact as if she'd been stung.

She met the eyes of a priest or a mystic, pale and searching.

In the shadows his long hair was dark, but where the fire caught in its wild tufts and lightened the ragged curls of his beard, it showed as red as blood. Rich deep auburn showed beneath, but the tips had bleached to dark chestnut by lime or neglect.

An odorous fleece jerkin, its collar spreading into a wide cape down over his shoulders, added to the sense of fanatical disarray. There was a haunted look about him, the suggestion of madness born of too many months exposed to the elements.

In that he was not alone. Many of the men who'd rallied here had travelled, and few had access to warm beds or hearth fires. Just as they did, he wore a heavy woollen kilt over leather brecks, and his fur-lined boots laced from his toes to his knee.

But his eyes were his alone. In the moment that they held hers, she caught his sense of isolation. He was a man alone and self-contained, caught up as may be in the need that was upon the land, but somehow untouched. And yet he'd noticed her.

If she had done more than step up to refill his ale, if she had flung the jug out to douse the heat of his eyes or if she had found herself staring into the shadows that she sensed in the lunatic frankness of his gaze, there might be reason for her discomfort.

But she hadn't. And still her pulse pounded at her ears. And the fire had no bearing on the searing heat that rose in her cheeks. It was as if he'd looked at her, and found her

standing naked.

Thick lashes dropped over the aberrant fire in his eyes as he looked away, and the fingers that had burned hers hovered over the mouth of his cup. "No more," he breathed, and Brinnie stepped back, then back again.

Behind him, a stranger stood up, and with him, his double. The two men were as like as a cry and its echo, the same in every feature and detail, but one was a copy of the other, and Brinnie looked at them with a mingled sense of relief and regret. They were as solid as the mountain bears, their hair long and fair, braided in a thick cord down their backs. Their eyes were clear blue, their cheeks clean, and each wore a thick blonde moustache draped over his mouth.

Their movement had broken the spell cast by the man at her feet, and that thing broken was at once everything and nothing as she forced her study outward.

Men in the assembled mass now rose, and over their heads and through their jostling Brinnie caught a glimpse of her husband. She saw him past the fire, standing with the rest, stepping back from the rush and push as it washed through the doorway beside him.

Setting the jug at her feet, she moved across the press of rowdy men, shoving herself into their stream, intent on reaching her husband before he too, burst out into the waiting night and was swallowed by the rush to battle.

"Cam!" In the midst of the wash of warriors, of shepherds, smiths and stonemasons, she held her ground and even pushed a little way forward. Heads bobbed and shoulders pushed against her so her view was no more than the tunic or arm in front, but she kept up her forward momentum.

"Cam!" The rush of bodies carried her sideways and dropped her outside into darkness that nipped at her arms and cheeks, as cold as the stone of the peaks. There was no fighting the flow back to the arch of firelight that described the door behind her. And she was unsure if he'd made it out and was already moving with the rallying troops, or if he was still by the lintel, looking for her as she was for him.

"Cam!" Rush and babble covered her calls and she stepped back into shadows.

Men moved in front of her with purpose, their voices carrying every inflection from ecstasy to outrage, between courage and bravado. And through the grey that separates shadow and darkness, where movements were blurred and faces were little more than phantoms, she recognised his tunic. This time she ran, forcing herself through the tide.

When she caught the cloth at his back, he turned and lifted her into his embrace. "I thought I'd lost you. Will you be waiting for me?" he asked, his breath hot in the massed curls that flowed over her neck and shoulders.

"Yes. Will you come back to me?"

"You know I will. And then away home, Brinnie. There's been too much fighting and we'll starve over winter if we don't put something away. Tomorrow you and I will go back home. Spring will be soon enough to fight again. If we see spring."

"Stay safe," Brinnie whispered, clinging to the heat and strength in him, pushing her face into his hair. He was only muscle, sinew and determination, and only the gods could know who would stand and who would fall tonight. As he loosened his grip and her feet touched the ground, Brinnie felt at his throat for the knot of her hair she'd woven as a charm. "This'll ward you some, but I'd sooner be standing at your back than waiting on the hillside."

"And I'd sooner know you're up here, safe." He turned his fevered stare over her shoulder. "I've got to go. Be waiting for me."

When he turned away, she stood with empty arms as the shadows swallowed his

form and the cold air stole his warmth from her skin.

With casual ease, three forms broke from the stream of men and slipped off into the darkness of the tree line. Their horses were tethered back into the woods away from the general hubbub, and in the darkness they moved with increasing speed.

Of the twins, the second spoke with the sort of clipped abbreviation that only a brother might understand, and that in mumbled whispers. "North four leagues, south three. I say north."

"North," the first agreed. "South to Dalginross there'll be no one to respond but infantry. Up to Inchtuthil and the *alae*. Without cavalry there isn't anyone's got a chance to get back here in time."

"North." The ragged mystic threw himself up into the saddle and clenched his fingers down through the thick auburn of his beard. "And a bloodbath either way."

So it was agreed before the third man had mounted. The brothers moved in hunched silence down the hillside, then opened their horses to a full stretch, running for the lives of the sleeping soldiers of Rome's Ninth Hispanic Legion.

For eight months, the three brothers had lived in the turbulent surge of a nation gathering toward war. Not as they had for the years until now, from behind the walls and trenches of the Legionary defences. Not as soldiers of the auxiliary Roman cavalry. Not as part of the relentless, crushing, forward movement of the Roman Empire. This time they'd lived as men who'd slipped without a ripple into the pool.

For eight months they had lived as spies among their mother's people.

Tonight, the information gathering, which had saved lives and turned the course of many skirmishes in favour of Rome, would again prove its worth, but only if the riders could carry word to reinforcements from the Twentieth Legion. And only if those reinforcements made it back from Inchtuthil to the fort at Fendoch in time to support the victims of this unprecedented, fully coordinated attack.

In the months since Calgacus had risen as leader, he had grown increasingly wary of the men who answered his call to arms. There were spies among them and he knew it, but in a war where guerrilla tactics and ununified forces were all he could call, identifying spies was never going to be easy. He had opted for secrecy, advising few of his plans and trusting fewer.

It was a tactic expected, but it made the brother's work so much harder. When no one knew the strategies ahead of time, no one could be encouraged to slip. And with Agricola's three legions divided and spread the length of the defensive ridge, the Celts had a wide range of targets, all under strength and all separated from support by at least an hour's travel.

With the enemy mostly opting for small guerrilla attacks, the target could be warned and the battle fought and won in a matter of hours. But tonight the rules of engagement had changed. Sensing laxity in his foe and knowing the Roman tendency to wind down their momentum over the winter months, the Pictish leader had rallied his entire force and brought them here against the weakest part of the Roman line.

As the horses felt the solid rock of the road surface beneath their feet, all three riders lay forward over their necks and flailed the loose reins down their shoulders to push up every inch of pace.

“He was watching you all night.”

The voice at her shoulder shocked through her so the tray of empty mugs she carried almost overbalanced, and Brinnie turned to face the words. “He wasn’t. He didn’t,” she stammered, as that fierce heat rose once again into her cheeks. “I’ve never seen him before.”

Ula dropped her chin and slipped closer conspiratorially, cocking her full hips back, “Never seen him? Who are you talking about? I meant the leader, Calgacus. I wouldn’t mind him looking at me that way.”

Brinnie shushed annoyance and shoved away the image of lunatic intensity that had first come to mind, as she whispered, “Hush that rubbish. I’m a married woman, and so are you.” Looking quickly around the nearly empty hall, she tightened her grip on the tray and frowned. “The men are hardly down the hill and you’re gagging over who you’ll have next. You should be ashamed. Go and ask the gods for their safe return.”

“Safe return?” Ula laughed and tossed her beaded braids back over her shoulder. “If that man of mine has survived all these years of drinking and brawling and bellowing like an ox, there’s no fear a half-pissed Roman will end him.”

“Then spare a thought for the others and say a word for them.”

Ula shook off the criticism and rushed to follow as her friend strode up to the trestles with her load of empties. “But did you see him? What is it about him?” She picked up the platter Brinnie pointed out and followed to the wash troughs. “They say he’s *the best* in the sack, and there’s plenty who’d know. Where ever he goes women fawn on him. They say he just takes his pick.”

“Then he won’t have to worry about the Romans, either; it’ll be a husband who ends his reign.” Brinnie slammed the tray down and turned to face her friend again. “Or is it that after the battles these last two years, he can take his pick of the widows.”

Never one to be thrown from her purpose, Ula shoved her sleeves higher up her arms and slid a pile of greasy platters into the steaming water. “It’s power,” she confided. “That’s what makes him so attractive. I mean, his looks aren’t bad. And I hear he’s not called ‘Great Sword’ for nothing.” She grinned and Brinnie turned to go in search of other plates. “But it’s that charisma that makes him a leader. People are drawn to him. And with so much responsibility a man needs a soft place to lay his head, doesn’t he?”

The older women who worked to clear the meeting hall all moved with the same quiet purpose and the stiff bearing of those who were expecting bad news. They’d already seen too many funeral pyres. Brinnie moved away from Ula and her views, hoping the distance would encourage her silence or at least a change of subject, but a woman Eirbrin had never seen before leaned closer as she worked and said, “He did watch you tonight. If he calls for you, girl, you should go to him. There’re sacrifices we all need to make at times like this.”

Brinnie peered at the stranger in horror, feeling the burn of many other eyes fixing on her. “I’m married.”

“Aye lass,” the woman continued. “We all were, and now many of us are widows. He’s right when he talks about slavery and death. No one comes up from the south but that they speak of how the Romans live by starving, enslaving and conscripting the people they conquer.

“If they take our land, we’ll all be widows one way or another, and Calgacus is our only hope. He’s the only man who can pull all the clans together. What he needs, we all need. And if he wants you,” she fixed cold, fanatical eyes on Brinnie’s, “then you should go to him.”

The warm hall was suddenly shot through with icy drafts and chilly vapours. Cold dread warred with the heat flushing over her skin, as all the eyes in the room came to hers and settled on her like a judgement.

“No,” she said. She had meant it as a refusal, but it whined from her lips like a plea and there was no one standing near her who was interested in her pleading.

Alobragh, the wife of a chieftain, no less, stepped closer and put a single finger up near Brinnie’s lips to command silence. “When you’ve lived a few more years, my girl, you’ll know what all women know in the end. One man’s much as any other man.

“Do you think it’s for nothing our lands are passed down through our mother’s line? We know who our mothers are. Wife or not, no man has ever known for sure who fathered his children. Think on how quickly and easily it’s done. It’s no great cost to bear.”

“Stop it, all of you.” She scanned the room, backing toward a wall like a cornered mountain cat. “Our men are fighting now. As we speak, men are dying for our land and our safety. We should be thinking about hot food and dressings for the wounded. They’ll be needed by morning. Even if we win, by dawn Calgacus himself might be lying dead.”

“There are enough of us here to have hot stew and clean linen ready,” Alobragh answered calmly. “And Calgacus won’t risk himself in the fighting, he’s too important. He’ll be watching the battle with his chiefs from the tor above the Roman watchtower, and once it’s taken, from the tower itself.”

Ula rushed forward, wiping red hands on the coarse woven wool of her tunic. “If he does send for you,” she grinned, “I’ll come too.”

Behind the ditch defences and rampart of the fort at Inchtuthil, Agricola himself took the brothers’ intelligence report.

Inside an hour the auxiliary cavalry was mobilised, racing back along the moonlit road to the aid of the besieged Ninth Legion at Fendoch. Following at a jog, and drawing auxiliary infantry and supply wagons in their wake, the Twentieth Legion infantry moved with their commander to put down this latest uprising of the barbarous highland Celts.

Even at midnight, and with the bulk of the fighting men gone, the fort fairly bustled compared to the sparse life the brothers had shared in the past months. It was a city in itself, and under the wings of the army every kind of trade and commerce flourished.

Edan grinned as he stripped the saddle and gear from his horse. Beside him, Tav worked with the same tense efficiency, his movements a testament to a shared urgency. There was no need to speak for his twin’s benefit, but to their younger brother Edan called, “We’re heading for the knock shops. Are you coming?”

“No.” Antony forked lucerne into the feed trough and dropped to open the saddlebag at his feet.

Pushing his hand past the roll of a woollen tunic, he felt for the small tin of charcoal. His fingers traced its precious lines, but he left it out of sight. A gentle rattle told him there were few pieces left, but there would be enough to catch the image that played in his mind. While the face was fresh, he wanted to catch the bright innocence he’d seen; to draw something of the spirit and the passion he’d glimpsed in green eyes and swathes of red-gold ringlets.

While they were in the confines of the fort, it would be easy enough to find some

good hard sticks of charcoal. The smithy forge would yield far better than he could make at his own campfire. There'd be plenty of parchment, too, and maybe even ink, if he could track down a calligrapher. Settling the little tin snugly back into the folds of fabric, he stood and slung his saddlebag over his shoulder.

"You going to eat?" Stepping from his twin's shadow, Tavish blocked the path between stalls, forcing Antony to answer.

"Later."

Although he was as tall as his brothers, they each weighed easily half as much again, and standing side by side in front of him, they presented an immovable obstacle. Good-natured teasing glittered in the firelight reflected in their eyes. "Girls and food. In that order. What could be more important?"

He was not going to force his way past them, and he stepped back, crossing his arms in readiness to stand his ground. There was no good to be had in admitting he wanted to sketch the face he'd seen at the roundhouse. For all their qualities, they had no appreciation for the light in an eye or the smooth plains of a cheek or brow. "The bathhouse," he answered. "I'm going to soak the filth off my skin and try to buy a shave. Let me suggest you two do the same. First."

"It'd be a waste." Edan laughed. "The prostitutes out here aren't too fancy. We'll have to chip off a crust to get in. I'll clean up later; it'll drown the fleas and the crabs."

"Enjoy," Antony said, and let their enthusiasm take their attention as he stepped past and walked toward the stable door.

"Hey," Edan called after him. "Don't shave. We'll be going back out."

Antony stopped and the lead weight of fatigue settled from his shoulders to his knees. "Not now. We cut it too fine tonight. The Picts will know someone rode for support, and if we turn up without a scratch they're going to put the pieces together."

Tav carried the argument on his twin's behalf. "Calgacus said he's not pulling back over winter. He'll attack again, and we've got to be out there if we're going to find out what he's got planned."

"Have you got orders I haven't heard or are you guessing?" Antony knew the answer without turning. There'd been no humour in Edan's words, he was making a serious prediction and twenty years of army service had made his guesses good.

"I'm guessing. But this is the first time he's pulled so many men together in one concerted attack. And he picked a soft target. If it goes well for them tonight, I think he'll try again and again, right through the winter." Edan took his pack from his twin's hand and they walked to where Antony stood. "Unless our boys get down there in time and really trounce them. Then they'll slip back into the mountains and lick their wounds. It'll take him until spring to convince them to try again. They're guerrilla fighters; they don't like the idea of meeting us in tight formation, in close combat."

Antony bit back a sigh of exhaustion. "Well, I'm going to make a guess, too. I'm going to guess that our cavalry will be there by now. The Caledonians will be boxed up in the entrance to the fort, with the Ninth in front of them and our boys coming in strength from behind. I'm guessing tonight will be a bloodbath that will knock the gloss off their exalted leader." He turned and slapped Edan's shoulder. "And I'm going to shave."

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CHAPTER TWO.

Inbhir Nis, Caledonia, October AD84.

Winter had been hard.

With a crushing defeat at the fort at Fendoch fresh in his mind and all his assembled army fraying out across the mountains, Calgacus had thrown himself into a mood of bitter self-reproach. Black depression haunted his nights. His days were spent in fervent searching, roving back and forth along the foothills of the Roman line whenever despondency didn't bind him to the house and hearth.

Brinnie stayed beside him because she could do nothing else.

With his adoring hoards gone, he had clung to her from that first night, burying his rage and frustration in her flesh and wrapping his fears in her arms. And she stayed because she deserved no better. Any woman who'd lain in a lover's arms while her husband bled and died in the field below deserved no better.

She had refused the funeral pyre and forbidden herself the comfort of mourning the man she'd loved. She would not even say his name for fear her tongue somehow dirtied the memory of him. The shame was buried deep, and she moved through her days as if it wasn't there, setting her face in cold stone as if there was no poison worrying at her soul.

When spring came the Romans had moved. The great beast of conquest slowly dragged itself over the land, following the coast, crushing the people it covered and passed.

And the movement of his foe rekindled white-hot fires in the leader's blood. Through the spring he watched them rally and reinforce their line, and come the summer he launched himself into the manic search for men to stand again against the Roman invaders. As the numbers gathered and raised his hopes toward confidence, his need for Eirbrin lessened.

When he sent her away she was neither shocked nor saddened, only vaguely hopeful that there might be some lessening of the pain in her heart if she returned to her mother's lands. To Inbhir Nis. And that was where he sent her.

His reasoning was good.

"There's the port there, Brinnie. While they've got their vessels so deep into our land, they've got men to the north and behind us. I need someone who can watch their movements, someone I can trust." And the leader could trust her. The only thing she could do for the man she'd betrayed was serve the cause that had taken him from her.

"There are spies, Brin. Everywhere," Calgacus reminded her. It was his fascination: an endless round of analysis and reproach. They had failed to bring the Romans down because there were spies among them, and she could never forget it.

"I'll watch for spies," she'd whispered and touched her lips to his forehead.

So they parted and she spent the summer watching over a fold of shaggy kye in woods and pastures high above the Uisge Nis. The Romans were so close below she could smell them on the air. And when the troops, sailors and infantry alike, grew bored, she had seen them sack the villages around the port: the few that had not been abandoned or slaughtered, man, woman and child.

And tonight she would go down along the river, far along toward the loch and out to where the gathering warriors would meet. Every day more highlanders answered the call, swarming down from above the divide. Young men, boys, old men and women. Anyone who could hold a sword was moving into the war zone.

Tonight she would journey out to the crannog and see that they were fed. She would drink with them and send them down and on toward the east, to where the leader waited.

Under the cover of night, Antony moved in silence, caught in his own thoughts and paying little heed to the wash of the water beside him. There were no eyes to see him, and yet he'd trusted the niggling instinct that urged him to leave the city, not through the main gates and out onto the road, but down along the river bank, away from the docks. The going was rough, the scree was unstable on the sloping ground, but his old horse had trodden too many miles of mountain, under snow and heather, to be baffled by a stony path.

Although the Celts this far north and further tended to shave not only their beards but also their eyebrows, he had left the stubble on his chin to grow rough and he scratched thoughtfully at the promise of a beard.

The brothers had separated. The twins had moved up through the midland passes and travelled incognito all summer, while he had remained with Agricola's auxiliary infantry, fighting his way up the eastern coastal edge of the mountains. The Romans had secured marching stations and positioned forts for a strong supply line as far north as Devana, and from there he'd joined the supply fleet and sailed north and west, deep into the heart of the country, to Inbhir Nis.

He'd been in the captured city only two days, and now he was moving toward a rendezvous where he'd trade intelligence with his brothers. Somewhere along the river, between the firth and the open loch, was a stone causeway and crannog. It was all he knew of the district and he cast a half-interested eye over the rippling water as he rode.

There was movement on the track ahead, a shifting of the moonlight over tussocks and stone, and he hauled the horse up short.

When he'd lived a season in the wilds the summer before, his tongue had grown used to the Celtic accent he'd learned at his mother's knee. But a year back in camp had taught it to roll over Latin inflections again, and he schooled himself in the words and their sounds before he spoke aloud. "Who's there?"

His broadsword was drawn, its weight familiar in his hand, when the answer came.

"Who are you, yourself? I can see you, but you can't see me. Tell me who you are and what you're doing along this track tonight or you won't even see death coming."

It was a woman's voice, but that was no cause to doubt the truth of her promise. There was ice in her tone, the cold certainty of a soldier, and Antony slid the long blade flat across his lap as a sign of good faith. "There's a meeting place here somewhere. I'm to meet my brothers on the river, that's as much as I know."

Brinnie studied the rider and his horse in the spare light of the half-moon. The mount was too tall for a highland pony, but its coat was rough and the feathers at its fetlocks grizzled with mud. He was tall, well taller than most Romans, but that was not so much a guarantee. There was an odd accent, but that, too, was common in these days when men came in from the farthest edges of the land. "Where's your mother's clan?"

"Gallaibh," he answered. "She's Cornavii."

"You've travelled a long way."

In the moonlight he was as still as stone. Calm and tense as a drawn bow. He held himself still, even against the natural desire to fix his sight on the threat she represented, and that sent an uneasy shiver over Brinnie's shoulders. He was coiled, and she read competence in his readiness to strike.

“Further than you’d think,” he answered calmly, and she made her decision, letting her instinct guide her as she stepped up from amid the coarse brush and onto the track.

“I can take you to the meeting place,” she said. “But I’ll ride behind. If I decide I don’t like the look of you I can deal with it more easily at your back.”

“There’s an offer that’s hard to refuse,” the rider agreed, laughing quietly as he leaned to offer his hand.

Gathering her skirts high, Brin clasped his arm and threw her bare legs up over the horse’s back, settling herself over the blanket roll and saddle pack. As he slid the broad blade home in the sheath between them, she said, “You’d best pick up the pace a bit; there’s a way to go yet.”

The October air was biting and she leaned into the warmth that spread from the man in front. To ride was a mercy for her tired legs and she relaxed against him, watching the familiar riverside pass by. A thick fleece rode high on his shoulders, but around the familiar smell of damp wool her senses picked the perfume of his body. He smelled clean and the hair that feathered in the breezes was fine and unoiled.

“Have you been living rough?” She let herself rest forward as she leaned over his shoulder and the motion of an easy canter jogged her against the steady strength in his back and shoulders.

“Yes.”

“Comforts aren’t common around here. Tell me where you found enough hot water to bathe.” The words brought a well of envy to the surface as she spoke and Brinnie closed her eyes at the thought of sinking into a deep trough of steaming water, with perfumed tallow blocks to scrub her skin and egg yolk and cider vinegar to bring some shine back into her hair. But she had no tub or trough here now, and no cauldron bigger than her kettle to heat any water to fill it.

“I went into Inbhir Nis,” he said frankly. “They have a bathhouse.”

The tiny gold and silver dirk she strapped inside her wrist was free and pressed in hard against his ribs before she spoke. “Stop the horse.”

Antony made no move to slow the mount, and the sharp prick of her knife pushed him into a curl as his body involuntarily pulled itself away from the blade. “We’ve still a way to go,” he said over his shoulder. “Put that away, you don’t need it.”

“I can’t think of any good reason a Celt would survive a night in the city,” she said. “Give me a good reason now if you want to survive here.”

“The Romans think exactly the same thing you do. No one would believe an outsider would just walk into a captive city. And the bathhouse was the best place to sit quietly and listen.” For a moment he let himself consider how true that could be. Maybe Pictish spies *could* mingle at the taverns and bathhouses. The auxiliary troops: Batavians, Gauls, Britons, Tungrians, men levied from every tribe in the empire, were thrown together in a strange city. Cavalry, infantry and navy men, all strangers from one another and no way to know who was army and who was local to the captured city.

“And no one spoke to you?”

“I speak Latin.”

“How?”

“My father was a mercenary. I’ve lived all around the edges of the empire.”

“And are you a mercenary, too? And your brothers?”

“Aye.”

“Who’s paying you now?”

“No one.”

“Why are you here, then?”

“This is my mother’s land.” She was as sharp as the knife that still pricked at his

kidneys and he hoped the rapid questions had done something to convince her to pull the tip back out of his skin.

It wasn't reassurance that staid her hand in the end, though; it was no more than good fortune. The track they were following had veered away from the riverside, and as the answer left his lips, she sat back sharply and pulled the knife away. "Turn down here." Her knife hand moved out through the darkness and indicated a way down to the water's edge. Antony tasted the hint of smoke on the air, and as they moved slowly over the rise of the embankment and down toward the water, a stone causeway rose plainly from the moonlit wavelets. At the far end, out over the water, stood the squat thatched oval of a large crannog.

"You were walking all the way to here, tonight?" he asked.

"Aye, and now we're early."

As she spoke, a dark figure emerged from the rocky shoreline, reaching to take the horse's head, and the girl slipped down from behind, leaving a bright gap in the night where her warm body had kept the chill from his back. Moving quickly, she crossed the short causeway ahead of him, and she had drawn back the curtain and slipped inside before Antony saw more than the drab colours of the heavy wool she wore.

He stopped in the darkness outside the roundhouse. He kept to himself. He never invited conversations and justifications. Aside from his brothers, he'd welcomed no company in the years of this campaign.

Although his answers had been rehearsed, the words learned and the reasoning carefully considered, there was truth in the fact that his presence in this land was emotionally complex. It was his mother's homeland and one she missed every day of her life. Over the river to the north, and north again until there was nowhere further to go, that was from where his blood had sprung.

But there were as many lies in his answers as truths.

His father was a mercenary, a Caledonian warrior from south of Bodotria, but he'd long ago chosen the benefits of empire for his family. More than thirty years ago, his father had joined the Imperial Roman army and after him, his sons.

Antony had served eighteen years himself, the twins, twenty-one, and he no longer questioned the rights and wrongs of empire. Men fought and died for one king or another. Where ever men grouped together into villages, clans, countries or empires, some men would grow fat and others would fall into slavery. It had always been the same and would always be.

But here he was among true believers, people with a cause, with land and heritage to protect and blood to spill in its name. That in itself was not unusual, but here, too, he had drawn the attention of someone wary of his kind. It was unusual in this place where men from every clan came side by side with strangers every day. Caution, a small intuitive niggles, bid him watch this girl from by the river.

Shrugging uncomfortably under the damp weight of his cloak, he ducked the low lintel and entered the fire-warmed hut.

The crannog was falling to decay around them, but the hearthstones were sound and the roof was holding out the rain for now. One more winter might see the thatch fail and the palings around the walls fall in, but the hope was strong in all who came through that this would be the last season under attack.

From across the open space, Brinnie heard him enter and steadfastly held her attention on the packs of food that had been donated through the day. In what was here she would have to find enough to feed any who had been directed in, and there was no way to know how many she might meet.

As he walked past the fire, try as she might, she lost the sound of his footsteps in

the crackle of the kindling and the murmur of voices. Hairs on her nape bristled and the urge to turn and see him in the bright light rose to a compulsion. She'd have nothing to recognise him by once the hut filled and he joined the huddled masses around the fire.

She shook her head in irritation as she made herself concentrate on the task before her. There was food to heat and water to boil, and she fancied she could hear a lilt of his accent in a mumbled conversation to her right. Cramps tugged at her shoulder as she found herself straining toward the sound.

Times were hard and she had a job to do, that was the whole truth of it. Angrily she slapped a sack of heavy loaves onto the trestle. The only cause she had to notice this man over any other was that he'd happened to travel the same road she had. And he smelled better than most.

But there was something not quite right about the way he moved and spoke. He'd spent the night in the occupied city, and that was a claim that bore further investigation. As soon as she had all the volunteers at hand and she could safely leave the catering to others, she'd seek him out and try his answers over again.

She would have to recognise him. Before the room could fill, she had to fix him in her mind, his features or his clothes, anything to mark one man from a hundred others, from the thousands who had passed through this gateway to the war. Drawing the last of the doughy blocks onto a large tin plate, she rolled the burlap over her hands and dared to turn and face the room.

A dozen men moved in the dusty firelight and seven of them were local. Those plied the fire with logs, bringing the flames up hard under their only heavy boiling pot, or rolled the barrels of ale into position around the room.

The strangers among them had formed a loose collective, standing or squatting together, but facing out, each chewing his own thoughts and weighing the threats in the room.

Crushed onto his haunches with his back hard up against the near wall, his shoulders hunched and his face down, the rider watched the room from under his brow, silently assessing the men around him.

Brinnie had no doubt she was looking at the man she sought. Tatters of fleece rode high on his broad shoulders, gathering over his ears and hanging in ragged clusters by his cheeks. His hair was short and dark, tousled by the damp wind.

Cold nausea tightened over her stomach and she raised a hand to her throat, as if its warmth might help relieve the pressure building in her chest. A silent wail rose in the darkness behind her eyes, a cry of terrible pain that burned in the back of her throat, struggling to free itself from the depths of her awful past.

Caught in the glare of her own secrets, she froze, staring, as he turned with slow inevitability toward the burn of her eyes. As his gaze swept towards her, caught the rags of her tunic, the hands that fretted morbidly at the hessian sack, and then moved up to her face, rigor set into her elbows and knees.

There could be no mistake. The pale eyes of a prophet fastened onto hers and read her shame aloud. The same eyes that had held hers a year ago and known her disgrace before she had, held her fixed in their glow. And just as then, fires of humiliation rose under her skin and coloured her frosted cheeks.

Brinnie wanted to sob. The man who had read her soul and found her wanting the night she had betrayed her husband, once again laid his clear gaze upon her and knew her. The trembling in her hips and knees threatened to drop her to the hard boards at her feet, but the gaze of the mystic held her fast, like spikes of guilt and shame.

Antony lifted his study to the face of the girl from the riverbank. Recognition was instant, but confusion clouded his memory. He knew that face, knew it intimately at

some level, and yet he couldn't place the features in time or space.

He was staring, and that knowledge whined at the back of his consciousness, but he could not pull his gaze from her. Fundamental anxieties attached themselves to being recognised in this world, but no matter which way he turned his thoughts he couldn't put a name to the face before him.

Thick red curls and ringlets as wild and heavy as his mother's, green eyes, and skin as clear as moonlight. Where had he seen that face? And she knew him, that too, was plain. She'd seen him, she knew him, and she was terrified of what she saw.

Adrenaline surged up under his confusion and survival raged in his ears like a freezing wind. He had to identify the threat. If she'd seen him at some time, in a barracks or at the scene of a battle where he rode under the banner of Rome, he was dead where he sat. Or she was. Cursing under his breath, he pushed himself upright and walked to where she stood.

"Will you step outside with me?" he asked, watching as tears welled in her eyes, her nostrils flared and her throat worked frantically to swallow a lump of silence. She was near to hysteria. Her breath seemed to fail before it reached her chest, and a frown dimpled her forehead and her chin.

If she was going to scream accusations, now was her chance. Steering her to the door before she put her thoughts together was his best option. His only option. Setting a hand gently at her back, he stepped close and used his own body to shepherd her calmly to the opposite end of the hall. She moved stiffly, her face set in lines of pain but she moved, and he walked slowly beside her, shielding her as best he could from the curious gazes that followed them.

Brinnie felt herself moving, but her mind had flown down a long dark tunnel of grief. An unnatural distance separated her from her hands and feet, and ice as cold and hard as death itself had set around her heart. Against that frigid lump of shame, a point of heat and light burst out in ripples that rushed, burning, over her skin. Where his hand rested in the small of her back, every nerve that could respond, did. His touch burned on her skin like the flames of a pyre, throbbing with her hard pulse like an echoing accusation.

She stumbled as they stepped from the warm light into the cold darkness outside, and he caught her hand, turning her to face him. As if he was leading a dreaming dance, he moved her gently backwards until her back was to the water's edge and his to the causeway and anyone moving on it.

Forcing words past the horror of her memories, she lifted her eyes to his and asked, "How do you know me? Are you a priest?"

"No." His answer was whispered, and a dangerous light glittered in the depths of his eyes as he studied her. Under the dark shadows of stubble, a line of clan tattoos marked his cheekbone and a knotted circle of blue was just visible under the longer hair of his beard. With a hand that shook like she was in the grip of a fever, she raised her finger to the lines of woad.

"Then how did you know me?"

"I've seen you before."

Was that all he would say? Coughing away the memories before they could choke her, she tried again. "A year ago, the night of the attack on the Roman fort at Fendoch." The dirk strapped at her wrist caught the moonlight, shining dully against her skin, and he raised both his hands to her throat, slipping his fingers into her hair at her nape and his thumbs against her pulse. "Don't you remember? You were there and you knew me," she sobbed.

Footsteps crunched on gravel and crumbling rock as men moved along the

causeway toward them, but Brinnie had no interest in their approach. The hands at her throat slipped down onto her shoulders and she reached to grip his wrists, to hold them and to beg. "You saw me. What did you see that night? Tell me, are you a seer?"

"Don't touch me," he warned, pulling his wrists up to twist them out of her grip, and Brinnie stepped back, searching his face for reassurance. His expression was so cut and marked by shadows there was nothing clear to read. Nothing but relief.

"If you need a priest," he said, "the mountains are full of them. I'm a soldier. If I saw you," he turned away, then paused, "when I saw you, all I saw was a beautiful face." And he ducked under the curtain and stepped back into the hut.

Eirbrin sagged. The tension that had held her spine so rigid failed and she staggered to the rough palings of the wall. She leaned her weight against them as she lowered herself to the ground. The rocks of the causeway were cold and damp, and below her hanging feet the wavelets tossed and grumbled as they met the failing dam.

The confrontation had left her weak and empty, and in place of a head full of silent screams and a heart full of broken glass, she was left numb. She couldn't be wrong. Couldn't be. Whatever he said, she was as sure of this as she was of the air she breathed. In one moment all the memories she had pushed from her life had come bubbling up to meet him. There was power in this man or in his sight, and maybe it was power enough to take away her pain. Or to end it.

Antony sought out shadows, dropping into a squat against a wall and burying his face in his hand. The room was too open and still far too empty. The fire was too high and too bright and too near. The hand he pulled in hard against his belly trembled, and he clenched a fist until the muscle in his shoulder screamed.

A priest? A seer? She was crazy. What had he seen that night? Innocence. Beauty. A face that had moved him to try to snatch that spark of life from the air; to hold it in his hand; to make a poor copy of that one glimpse of perfection. A face full of passion and joy, and fire in her eyes that had caught in the light of her hair.

It was too long ago. Too many miles and too many battles had come in between. Her extraordinary grace was still there, but so transformed by hardship that it scarcely held its sway. And he'd held that life in his hands, felt it throb under his thumbs where the least pressure could have doused the spark.

Trembling still, he brought his hands up in front of his own eyes and stared at them as if they belonged to a stranger. There were more battles to come and she'd recognised him. Even if her memories were all caught up in some kind of grief or superstition, there would be others who weren't so blind.

"You off with the faeries again, lad?" Edan's voice reached him as a rough hand seized the shoulder of his tunic and hauled him to his feet. Great bear arms wrapped around him and he slapped the back of one, and then both of his brothers.

"It's good to see you both safe. How was the journey?"

"Fair to middlin', I'd say. Is there food here?"

Antony raised a hand toward the trestles, and all three moved to take a plate and bread, then to the fire where the boiling pot bubbled with stew. "And beer." He used his plate as a pointer to the ale, and again the three men moved to help themselves. Retreating to Antony's quiet patch of wall, the brothers huddled to share what they knew.

"We're moving west from the coast at Devana," Antony mumbled around bread and gravy, his frown shadowing his eyes. "They're moving east from here. It doesn't take a genius to know the two have to meet in the middle."

Edan flagged a hand dismissively and swallowed a deep draught of beer. "They haven't got the numbers. We've got twenty thousand men. They have to back down.

They'll concede. Every tribe in this island has conceded in the end."

"Iceni?" Tav added from outside the conversation.

"Did you live so long with Ma and you still don't know what one bad tempered red-head can do? Boudicca was the exception that proves the rule, and in the end we beat them, ten thousand men against her two hundred thousand." Edan laughed and turned back to Antony. "What are their numbers like up here?"

"Men, maybe thirty thousand. But they're lining up anyone who'll hold a sword. They'll push the total higher and they're going to read that as if they've got an overwhelming force. How many are coming up from the south and midlands?"

"Anyone who can move. Horses. Chariots. They're going to go all out and meet us head on. It's going to be ugly." The light of laughter that lit Edan's eyes cooled and dropped, replaced by what looked like regret. "We could try to talk them out of it."

A half-choked laugh broke the words as Antony responded, "Yeah, right. You talk, I'll watch."

Over his brothers' shoulders, he watched Brinnie walk back in to the tables, her face dressed in stiff resolve. As she pushed herself back into the work of organising the food, he studied her, and a sudden well of sadness rose in his gut and restarted the trembling in his hands.

The twins had a full season of travel tales to tell and as the room filled to crowded around them, Antony listened and laughed, but his attention stayed glued to the girl he had once drawn. He had to tell them about her; it was more than duty that compelled it. What she remembered could cost his brothers' lives as easily as his own, and when the conversation flagged, as men shuffled closer and gathered from a rabble into an audience, he spoke quietly to Edan. "The girl there," he fixed his gaze on her and let Edan find her from that, "she recognised me."

"Where from?" There was concern in his voice and cold focus. "Oh no. I've got it. The ridge forts. Last season. The night they attacked the Ninth at Fendoch. What was she doing all the way down there?"

"Same as she's doing here, by the looks. Serving food and beer to the men."

"You know what I mean. What's a girl from the middle of that campaign doing up in the middle of this one? You think she travelled a hundred miles to pour my beer? Kill her."

Antony had expected that reaction. Not two hours ago, he'd thought the same thing himself. "She's nothing, just a serving wench, a farmer's wife or daughter probably. She's half crazy, I think."

Edan fixed him with an icy stare. His moustache had grown long enough to veil the grim line of his mouth, but his determination was easy to read. "You want that I should do it?"

"No." No, he didn't want Edan or Tav anywhere near her. Even if she was half mad, the memory of her clear, eloquent innocence deserved so much better than any death they would offer.

"If she recognised you, she'll know us as well. Crazy or sane, I don't want her babbling about us to whoever is in charge up here. Take care of it or hand it to me to do."

"I'll take care of it."

An expectant hush was settling over the mass of assembled men, and with them the brothers waited to gather their latest intelligence report.

Several older men had taken up stools in front of the trestles. Like a vagary of beggar princes, they held a dignified line and waited for silence. When it came, Brinnie stepped forward and introduced the clan chieftains from the local area. Then she began

her oration on the war and strategy, on the threats they would face, the numbers involved and the leader's intention in the face of the enemy.

All those who would fight were to move forward to the main assembly camp in the reaches of the Grampian Mountains. By travelling east along the edge of the ranges they would meet with others and be given more specific directions as they went.

Calgacus was ordering an army of warriors, gathered from the free clans in the face of need, and cemented into one coherent unit by the will of the gods. Within the next few days, with the full moon, the unifying ceremony would be held. From there, the army would dig itself into the arena the leader had chosen and await the shuffling advance of the Romans.

Edan turned his cold stare on Antony. "Just a serving wench?"

Antony watched her stony efficiency, her grimly emotionless dissertation, and felt the wash of sadness and loss surging inside. He twisted his fingers absently in the matted cords of his fleece, and said, "I said I'll take care of it."

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CHAPTER THREE.

As she carried a jug of ale to the last small group of stragglers, Brinnie forced a smile of welcome over her mouth, prepared herself to speak the same words of reassurance and encouragement over again, and to move them toward the door.

The mystic had moved on earlier, along with the fair-haired giants who had shadowed him all night. And with him her hope of relief. The shame of her acts of betrayal would be hers to carry, now and forever. Just as every other man who had answered the call to war, the priest would take his searching sight eastward and maybe that was where it was most needed.

Calgacus was gathering Druids from all over the island. Every natural and supernatural force would be called up and harnessed for this battle. They dwelled in a world that was one of many, separated as they were by nothing more than mists and veils. And in other realms were multitudes: folk fair and wild and wise, gods and devils, and spirits without malice who did mischief in the lives of men for the simple fun of it.

Every god and ghost, every *Sidhe* and fair spirit, every single seer and oracle would be in thrall to the safety of the people of this land. And that is where the tall stranger, with his haunting gaze and his mother's family pride marked into his cheek, would go. Now he would be sleeping. By morning he would be gone.

"Eirbrin." The deep rumble startled her, as did the face that came to mind with the familiar voice. It was not a face she'd thought to ever see again.

"Euguein?" She spun to face the speaker, ducking her head in swift deference to the leader's first commander. "My lord, I had no idea you were here."

The man was a chieftain, one of the many landed barons whose clan boundaries had been invaded and lost. Along with Calgacus, he was a member of the elite group of warriors who led the resistance to Rome.

"No, that's how I want it. Are you well, Brin?"

"Aye sir, I am. Have you eaten? Will you take a drink?" War or no war, it seemed food was not a problem for the generals in this campaign. Beside the local chiefs, old men, gaunt for want of food and family, Euguein was heavy and falling to softness around the middle. His tunic was fine wool, clean and unmended. A rope of gold twisted at his neck.

Those who had stayed in the area around this northernmost edge of Rome's reach had seen their families flee or die. They had seen their farmlands laid low by theft or at the hands of their own people, who set the torch to the fields rather than leave the forage for the invaders. Homes and livestock were abandoned or gone. Their sons had answered the call to arms. Life was harsh and spare for the barons of the high end of Gleann Mor.

"An ale lass, no more. I won't stay long among strangers." Calgacus' obsession with spies was contagious. "I'm here to find intelligence on the strengths and weaknesses of the fort at Inbhir Nis. And to speak to you."

"Me, sir? I don't know any more than the men who are passing through here. What I hear I send on."

"It's not the Romans I want to talk to you about, Brinnie. And not here where there are other ears."

There was no other subject she could want to discuss. The cause they fought was the only thing that dragged her feet to the floor each morning; all that kept her moving when her knees were weak with hunger; all that she allowed her eyes to see or her mind to consider. "Sir," she acquiesced dutifully. The only other subject she and the general might have in common, she had tried to bury with her past.

"Where is your home?"

Brin moved her hand up slowly, marking the flow of the river north. "Craig Phadrig. My father's house is still standing, sir. I live there now, alone. Anyone local can point out the path."

"Good. Then I'll find you in the morning. Tonight I need to find men who can get in close to the fort."

"There was a man...." The cold stone in her chest shifted, its groaning weight stealing her breath and her words. "But he's gone."

"A man?"

"Tonight. A mercenary. He said he'd been inside the city itself." He said he was not a seer, but a soldier. And she had forgotten to question him further.

"How did he get in? Where has he gone?"

Forcing thoughts that wanted to fall inwards out, she lifted her face to the general and made herself focus. "He was with the men that gathered here tonight. He has brothers with him, but he met up with them here. While he was alone he entered the city and went to the bathhouse. That's all I know of him."

"Would you know him again?"

"Oh aye. I'd know him." He had known her, but he had gone. "But once they leave here, they move east. I never see any of them again. There's more chance you'll see him yourself than me."

The general looked uneasy. Firelight glittered in his eyes like a fever, and he swirled the mug of ale tensely and then tipped it back into his mouth. "If you see him again, I want to know." He dipped a nod and turned away. "Until tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," she echoed. There was nothing she wanted to discuss with the general tomorrow. Nothing. Neither the things of her past nor the man she had hoped might help mend her broken promises.

Few souls remained to clean up, but the work had been done for the most part, and Brinnie considered the miles she would walk to her home. Sooner begun, sooner finished. Picking her shawl from a bench by the wall, she called quiet farewells and moved into the cold midnight, pulling the rough wool in close around her face.

Where the riverside path divided, turning down through heavy brush to the causeway and crannog beyond, Antony sat in dark silence. What he'd learned tonight had to go immediately into the fort, and it was a long ride through the ice-misted air. Somewhere behind him to the south, his brothers were curled around a dry fire or drinking and sharing tall tales with fellow travellers.

Tomorrow they would be waiting at the wooded pass just east of the city. He could join them when he'd dealt with the girl and taken word into the fort itself.

The old horse shifted his weight stoically from one hip to the other and let a soft grunt slip from his sleep slack lips, while the rider pulled the heavy fleece cloak in tighter about his arms and yawned. She must be along this path soon.

Turning kinks of tension out of his neck and shoulders he considered his position and his conscience. Briefly he studied his hands, and his duty. Scars marked his knuckles and three fingers on his left hand had been broken and set crooked. In the cold air they were stiff and he flexed and extended them. Scars went with the job and some were more easily seen than others.

A small group of men moved up the path toward him, and he pulled the fleece and its shadows in closer to his face, grunting acknowledgement. His mount stepped back from the press, shaking himself awake and raising his head to the track as if he'd found their prize at last. A single figure moved up the rise ahead and turned her face silently to the pathway north. And about time.

Urging the old horse gently with his knees, he moved up the track behind her.

"There's a way to go yet," he said. "And its midnight already."

The girl turned, surprise written in bright moonlight on her pale cheeks. Surprise that ran into joy. There was no mistake; there was no fear or pain in her green eyes now. She smiled up at him with a look of utter thankfulness.

Brinnie felt the sound of his words rush into her blood, filling it with bubbles that burst in her heart. "Aye. A long way," she said with a smile.

"There are too many strange men along these tracks tonight, and your little fruit knife isn't much use if you're not close up behind."

A glint of amusement sparkled in his eyes and she stepped in closer to the horse's shoulder as she answered seriously. "It's small but it's sharp enough, and it's not hard to find a man's heart." The cold fogs curled in around her ankles and she shuffled her feet, blowing a warm breath into her cupped hands. He'd known she would need him to come back and he'd come.

"I'd guess that's true enough for you. One way or another, you have to keep moving. Do you want to ride or do you prefer to walk to keep yourself from freezing?"

There were times Eirbrin half-believed she had some sight herself, times when she felt an odd certainty or a warning chill. Perhaps that was what he saw in her. Whatever it was, he'd seen her need and he answered to it. She should have trusted that he would. The relief that knowledge brought raised a hard lump in her throat and she coughed to clear it away. "I'd rather ride." She shivered. "Much rather."

Before she could raise her hand for a lift, he swung his leg forward and slid to the ground beside her. A worn blanket lay over the horse's rump, and he quickly untied the thongs that held it fast and pulled it open. "Wrap up," he said simply, then threw himself up behind the saddle, leaning to help her climb into the seat.

From under the damp wool and lanolin perfume of his cloak, the heavenly scent of the rider filled up her senses. He smelled so clean.

Riding behind him had been easy; leaning forward into his warmth had seemed as natural as tucking her toes into the horse's belly. But sitting in front raised a painful

dilemma. To hold the reins, his long arms crossed her hips, raising a rash of prickling gooseflesh where his wrists touched her side. It was contact, warm contact. She longed to lean back, to relax for just a moment against his chest, to let his warmth and his breath and his arms wrap around her. She longed to rest.

It was so long since she had wanted to trust someone. It was a lifetime since she'd felt safe and warm, so long since she'd wanted to let someone else take charge, just for a moment. It was such a long time since a man had held her in his arms.

The thought shocked through her like a static charge, straightening her back and threatening to crack the stone mask she wore over her cheeks. Her face dropped, shielding her eyes from the cold, moving air. Her life was no more than service to the land and the cause they fought. She could rest when she was dead.

It was late, but the rider made no move to rush the horse's pace. They walked steadily along the stony paths, seeing only a short way ahead and listening to the murmuring of the river at their side.

Marshalling the courage she had long ago found to face her life, she asked stiffly, "Who are you?"

"I told you." His tone invited no communion.

"I know what you told me. I want to hear it all again. I may need you."

He moved behind her, a rough shudder that might have been a laugh without sound. "Oh aye?"

"Start with your name."

"Antony."

"A Roman name?"

"A Latin name."

Had the invader's tongue spread to the edges of the world? In a world where so many nations fought for their freedom, was it wise to name a son for the enemy? She had no energy and no patience for games. A rough shiver of her own ran through Brinnie's gut; there were things not right here. "A Latin name and one at home in Rome. And you say you entered the city here, unchallenged?"

"Yours?"

"Mine?"

"Your name?"

The question surprised her and the urge to turn and see his face burned bright in her mind. Slowly she unclenched the muscles that had tensed in her neck and shoulders.

"Eirbrin."

"No Latin there. Good solid Celt."

He was ridiculing her. If she'd been able to see his eyes, they'd be sparkling with a joke she couldn't share. "Everyone calls me Brinnie."

"They would."

"It was my mother's name," she said.

"Was?"

He didn't need many words to touch her pain. This man had seen her and known her before she fell. Now the seasons had turned a full circle and faces from the past had come together to bring her back. Once again the fates would bring her to face the choices she'd made, but this time the seer had broken the silence. He'd moved toward her and was giving her a chance to speak. And she felt such a need to speak. There could be no mistake in this.

The smell of him worked like a warming fire. Her mind wanted to slow, her body to rest. In all these silent, lonely months, she had never counted the fatigue that seemed to fill her up now. It weighed in her bones. It dragged on her heart.

Warm in the curl of his blanket and his arms, with the soft break of his breath on her cheek, she let some of the iron slip from her spine. "She's gone. So is my father. When I came home I found them dead."

"Home from the southern battles? When did you come back?"

"Just this summer. But I was too late. I should have come home last year. After," she couldn't finish the thought. She couldn't name her loss. Stumbling over the tears that rose, she said, "I should have come back after the last battle."

He rode on in silence and in that silence she longed to open her heart. Memories too long ignored had risen to the surface in the moment she'd first seen him. He'd appeared from her past and brought it all so vividly back to life. But the words themselves were too long put away. There were shames too big to easily form into syllables. "The Romans were already up here," she said. "The fleet had entered the firth, they'd taken Inbhir Nis. I'd heard word of their great ships, even down there, but I didn't know that one small fort could give them so much scope to kill and to steal and to destroy. None of us could guess."

It almost seemed his posture had softened, too. There was not so much stiffness in his back; his arms hung lower, less rigid and correct.

"Have you seen their fleet?" she asked. "Have they reached your mother's lands?"

"Aye, I've seen them," he answered in a bare whisper. His words were blood and breath and Brinnie ached to turn her face to his. She couldn't guess what a mercenary might see of Rome in his years of battle.

The heat of his chest was so close up behind her that the fine hairs on her shoulder blades ruffled with every step they took and the stresses in her back began to ache. She was just too tired to hold herself so still, and she let the tension slip from her hips. And her sides. And her shoulders. Carefully, with a dull sense of relief and resignation seeping into her flesh, she relaxed back against him and let his heat wrap itself around her.

Her hair smelled of thyme and it brought a smile to his lips. Her clothes were rags and lifting her to the saddle had been ridiculously easy. Under the rags he sensed skin and bone and just enough strength to get her through each day. And yet, even if finding enough to eat was a driving need, she was washing her hair, and maybe her clothes, in thyme oil. She had an aversion to lice.

If everything else in his life was a gamble, at least with the legion he had access to hot food and hot water. Yes he might ride into a sword tomorrow, but under her wings, Rome gave her children food and shelter and a hot bath on demand.

How the people of these far-flung, ice-clad mountains lived without heated floors and hot food and bathhouses he'd never know. Why they would fight the ready availability of these things was a greater mystery still. The notion of freedom attracted them more than the notion of comfort. Or medicine. Or education. Or roads. So be it.

She had rested back against him, too trusting, too gentle.

The moonlight picked a luminous line of skin from the depths of her fraying wool, and she shone like a pearl, like a spirit shedding tattered flesh. Her breathing had eased and slowed, and he wondered if she had actually taken the chance to eat at the meeting hall. Had she served and spoken and cleared away the mess without a thought for herself? What sort of fanatical zeal drove a woman to that kind of self-abnegation?

Thinking back over the evening's ride, he tried to recall more clearly the landscape he'd ridden through. The hills were rough with trees and brush, the ground rocky and unforgiving, and the paths were well used. A corpse left anywhere along these tracks would draw attention and soon.

"My mother's name is Aila," he whispered to the sigh of her breath on the air.

There was no point in sharing that knowledge. No point in drawing her into his life, but here in the frigid mists of the riverbank it seemed right to have some company in his thoughts. "And she hates Rome almost as much as you do."

The thought, and the fact of it, made him smile. The laugh in his throat spread, rippling through his chest and down his arms. There was no denying it, she did.

In all the years she'd stood beside the man she loved, she'd hated the choices he'd made. She'd hated her sons walking away from her hearth to join the army at fifteen. She'd hated a world where she lived in squalor while the aristocracy that governed her life ate peacock and pomegranate. She'd hated Rome and all it gave the world.

But she'd lived it. She'd accepted it. She just refused to speak Latin. Picturing her face made him laugh again.

"Almost?" Brinnie's question made him flinch. He'd thought her asleep. There was a slight movement as she snuggled closer, reassured by his disclosure.

"Aye, almost," he responded. Her body, for all its misfortunes, was soft and warm against his. Her tunic seemed so thin, her flesh so close to his, so fragile. The gentle movement of the horse rocked her in the cradle of his arms, as guileless and sweet as a child. And rising on the air between them was the soft perfume of her skin and hair.

"Don't go to sleep," he said. Don't be so damned trusting. "I don't know my way around here."

"No." The word seemed to signal a return to arms and she straightened a little in his embrace. Not enough to lift herself up, just enough to demonstrate her autonomy.

The heavy silence resettled and Antony was content to draw it close. There was nothing to gain in encouraging conversation. Lives and deaths were easier to ignore when they weren't crowded with personal details. The less he knew about her, and she about him, the better.

Until she said, "We have men watching the fort tonight. But we need information from inside. How did you get in?"

The question was not unexpected but the statement was a shock. He had to get through the gates of the fort with the information he'd gained at their meeting tonight, watchers or none. How could he answer? No one got through the gates without passwords and orders. "I rode in from the docks and said I was an auxiliary of the twentieth legion."

She laughed. Tipping her mass of curls back over his arm and turning her face up to his, she laughed into his eyes. "That's it? That's the secret of breaking the Roman lines? We just lie?"

It wasn't a lie. Not until now. "Aye. Just lie in Latin."

"The general will come to get that piece of information tomorrow. You can wait and tell him in person. He'll never believe me."

The cold of intuitive dread crept into Antony's gut, rising through his bowels and clutching at his stomach. Ice rode a steady line from the base of his spine, up his back, over his ribs and onto the nape of his neck. "You have watchers on the fort tonight and you have a general coming tomorrow to assess the access to the city."

"Aye. I said you'd gone. I should have known you'd come back."

"Should you?"

"Aye. I should have had more faith." She turned, bringing her dark lips and glacial cheeks up so close to his in the white air, he thought he might breathe her in on the mists. "He thinks you're a threat. He didn't say it, but I know he does. He doesn't know about your sight."

"What sight?"

"Your sight. It's all right. I understand the need for caution. I understand the need

for secrecy.”

Did she indeed? His need for caution and secrecy had nothing to do with oracles. The whole conversation had slipped too far from the real. There was senseless fear and speculation here and that didn’t have much value in keeping him or his brothers alive.

“You have an officer acting as courier for the information you gather? For the city surveillance?”

“He’s bringing me information, this time.” She twisted against him, the cold in the air around her moving into the spaces she left. “We need to find out the strengths and weaknesses of the fort. If you can walk in and out, you might be the eyes and ears we need. I’ll see him tomorrow.” She smiled. “And so will you.”

“I got in and out of a captured city once. There’s no guarantee I can do that again. Not even much of a possibility. And your general already thinks I’m a threat.” Which was only reasonable under the circumstances. “Why would I want to face a man who might decide to kill me on the spot?” Why would he want to be anywhere near the general by morning?

He had a duty to do and that was all. He would do what had to be done as soon as they reached her cottage. If they had watchers on the fort he could still get in. Getting back out would be harder. If he had to, he could leave by galley and dock again at Fachabair. A change of horse and clothes and he could be back along the coast in three days.

“He won’t kill you. Not while I hold you in good stead. He mightn’t trust you but he won’t kill you. You’re too useful.”

“Do you hold so much sway over the generals in this war?”

She was silent for a long while, picking motes from the cloth of her tunic and wrapping the blanket tighter against a shiver. “Enough,” she said.

Not just a farmer’s wife or serving wench. Not just a gatekeeper. The ice in his spine was setting firmer around his kidneys and it had nothing to do with the moist night air. “And you trust me enough to vouch for me?”

“No. I don’t trust you. But I need you.” Her voice was growing insubstantial, as if the icy air had frozen in her throat and words struggled to pass. The eyes she turned up to his were wide and dark in the ghostly light of her face. “You know that, don’t you? The city and the port aren’t so important to me. That isn’t what I need from you. I told you. I need to know what you saw in me. I need to understand.”

Tears were rising on the words, choking her and pooling in her eyes. Before she could drop her superstitious dread back onto his shoulders, he said, “And I told you, I’m no seer. I stare at people. It’s a bad habit, nothing more.”

She turned away, nodding silently and shivering as though his cold dread had found its way from deep inside him to rest on her skin.

“How much further is it?” His question was too sharp. Getting to the warmth of her house had suddenly become urgent and he kicked the horse up to a canter.

“There’s a way to go yet,” she said.

“Is anyone waiting for you there?”

“No.”

An empty house. Perfect. But a general would be seeking her out with specific information in the morning. And the Caledonian hierarchy bowed to her opinion. And they had watchers on the fort. Damn it all. He twisted sideways, smearing the cold sweat from his lip against his shoulder.

One more day. If he held off going into the fort tonight, he could take what he heard from the general back with him. She had some confused memory of him, but only from the night before the battle at Fendoch. Until she asked herself, or someone else

asked her, why he'd been down there and up here, he was safe enough.

He could give her one more day.

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CHAPTER FOUR.

The stock made restless murmurings and stamped irritably as Brinnie gathered an armload of firewood from beside the byre. Inside, Antony was setting kindling to the coals to coax a flame, and worms of uncertainty squirmed at the base of her spine with the knowledge that she was warming her home for a stranger.

The brands slipped from her trembling fingers and she cursed the cold that ran deeper than the night air. She was afraid. How could she have failed to consider the simple fact she would be alone here with a strange man? A wild, solitary man with fire in his eyes and a smell that drew painful longings into her flesh.

"One man's much as any other man," she reminded herself harshly. "It's no great cost to bear."

She would not have chosen to put herself in this position, but the fates had brought her to this place and her future was unfolding around her. If the cause could use his skill, and if he would speak of his vision of her, then whatever the cost she'd bear it in silence. If he could make her understand what it was he'd seen in her eyes that night, maybe she could put away forever the terrible pain and shame. The world had turned full circle and maybe now she had her chance to make it right.

When she stepped back through the threshold, he was squatting by the hearth, his face turned away, with the light of the fire dancing in his hair like a host of wraiths. It was mussed and spiked with the damp, much shorter than the local men wore theirs, unbleached and not dressed with oils or dyes.

The dark wool of his kilt spread across the floor at his heels, belted so low on his hips that the hard line of his spine dipped into the flare of the waistline, urging her eyes under the fabric. The rough, pale cloth of his tunic stretched over his back as he reached to prod the flames. When he turned to her for wood, the fear she had nurtured burst into her chest, gripping her, so the breath she held was forced from her mouth.

His eyes met hers and fled.

He covered their fire with a rush of dark lashes and turned back to the hearth. In the small room the flames lifted the perfume of his skin like a cloud of incense and she groaned. There were not many hours until morning and for that she gave thanks to the gods.

Letting her lungs fill on a long shuddering breath, she pulled her shoulders back and walked the firewood closer to her oracle. "Some of it is damp," she said. Then with her arms suddenly empty, she cast about the room for inspiration. "I'll fill the kettle. I have some wine. There's no food."

Caught between stepping nearer to him to lift the kettle and walking away to pour mugs of wine, she hovered uncertainly. Her limbs were unwilling or unable to move in opposite directions and before she could govern their reticence, he stood.

"I have food. Only pack rations, but there's bread and dried fruit if you want it."

Her eyes were level with his mouth, and her attention fixed onto his lips, watching each word form and leave on his breath. Heat rose from his chest and it coloured her cheeks like a blush, as if she was standing too close, as if she was too aware of him. The crackle of the fire and the soft brush of leather as he stepped sideways and walked past

her to the door were the only sounds.

When he stepped outside, the harsh drag of her breath filled the room. She'd been clutching at the air again. Was she no more than a whore that she couldn't muster some self-control? She dealt with men every day, hundreds of strange men, all far from home and family. All lonely and needy. Many afraid. Most willing, she was sure, to warm themselves at her hearth. None of them had had this effect.

She'd never been tempted, never once let herself consider the possibility that she might want to share any part of her life, of herself, again. And neither could she now. It wasn't thoughts of love that drew her to this stranger; it was a deeper need entirely. And the general, Euguein, would be here tomorrow to remind her that she had already traded herself to a great man. She had already made herself worthless to any other and betrayed the great love of an even greater man.

The heat of shame, which rose with the memories she had so carefully buried, softened and melted the flesh of her face until the hard mask of her resolution slipped. It wasn't the strength of his arms or the solace of lying against this man's chest that she wanted. It was his revelation. His vision. His understanding.

"Food."

She turned to the word as he lifted the saddlebag forward.

"Do you do a lot of this?" he asked, slinging the bag across to the table and stepping over the floor that lay between them. "Do you weep in fits and starts?"

"No," she rubbed the tears from her cheeks, took a deep breath and tried to smile. "I don't remember the last time I cried. Not even when I put my family's remains into the pyre. This is new. You caused this."

He stepped back, his hands coming up in surrender. "No I didn't. This has nothing to do with me."

"Yes," she insisted. "As soon as I saw you tonight all the tears I couldn't cry came to the surface. All the memories of that night and everything since. As soon as I saw you and I knew you recognised me."

"I didn't recognise you, not at first. I knew your face but not where I'd seen it. I don't know what you remember, but I promise you, I see the same things other men see. And the world makes no more sense to me than to any other man. And I understand less about people than most other men do." His frown was cut too deep, and the words were spoken with too much protest. The lunatic radiance was in his eyes, burning like a flare that would light up her soul.

"That isn't true," she insisted, stepping forward to seize his hands, to compel him to speak the truth she needed to hear. "I know you see these things. I know it."

"Then it's you that has the gift of sight, Brinnie. Not me."

He lifted his wrists, twisting his hands from her grasp and a vivid flash of recall burst behind her eyes, there and gone before she could set it clearly in her mind. His eyes held hers fast and her name was on his tongue. Desperate to hold onto this moment of clarity, she pleaded, "Tell me what you saw in me that night. What made you look at me like that, like you were appalled? What did you see that disgusted you so?"

"What?" He turned to stride away and she followed, reaching to stop him, crushing herself into him when he turned back suddenly. His hands came up to her shoulders and quickly moved her body away from his, glowering down into her eyes with all the cold passion or fury of confusion. "Disgusted? Appalled?"

"Please tell me." She forced the pleading from her tone and tried to make herself sound more reasonable. "You have to understand; I need to know. Was there a hex on me? Did you see death when you looked at me?"

"No!"

"Your touch, remember? Your touch burned my fingers. You didn't want me to touch you then. You still don't."

"This is insanity. You need to eat."

"Antony please," she dropped to her knees. "Please. Everything went wrong that night. Every choice I made was wrong; everything I did was wrong. Now it's all come full circle. You've come back to me. Euguein has come back. If there is something you know, something I can do, you have to help me. I died that night. Please tell me what you saw."

"You died?" He shook his head and stepped back, gripping the belt at his hips as if it was his only link to reality. "I have to go." He turned away. Turned back. "Brinnie whatever devils you're running away from, they're making you crazy. This is madness."

"Devils? You saw devils?"

"No!" Exasperation broke his voice and he stepped back to her, clasping her shoulders and dragging her up to her feet. "Beauty. I saw beauty. And life and passion and innocence. There. That's it. That's all. I hope it helps."

"Innocence?" The word seemed ridiculous. In all she'd considered, and all the possibilities and explanations she'd offered herself, this was the one word she would never have tried. Innocence. With what she had done? It was impossible.

"Naiveté. A bright, honest spirit."

"Stupidity?"

"No." His tone had softened and the words became gentler. "Light. In your eyes and in your hair. I thought you were lovely and I wanted to remember the details of your face. So I watched you."

There was sincerity in the depth of his frown and a darkness in his pale eyes that had not been there before. For a moment Brinnie glimpsed the guarded depths of this man and she knew, at least, that he was speaking the truth.

"You pushed my hand away. Why didn't you want me to touch you?" Even now, her fingertips burned with the memory of his touch.

A smile flashed over his mouth and was gone, the dark honesty in his eyes swallowing any hint of humour. "I don't like anyone touching me."

Fresh tears were building, the flood of grief and mourning dammed and denied for far too long, and she turned away, shuffling her numb body toward the poor comfort of her pallet. She could feel his stillness behind her, hear the silence as he held his place, and she knew his eyes were on her as she lowered herself onto her covers and began to sob.

Her oracle had spoken at last, and nothing he said matched the damning clarity of her memory. He didn't speak of murder or betrayal. He'd seen innocence and naiveté. A childish foolishness.

That was too hard to believe. It was too hard to slough away the dead weight of her own judgement, shame and guilt. And it was too much to understand. Thought drowned in a tide of unshed tears and a welling surge, years of grief, which could only end in sleep.

Antony pushed the frown out of his brow with an angry hand and moved to where his horse stood waiting. The eastern horizon hinted at dawn, but it would be another hour or more before the sky itself began to fade. Longer still until the sun rose out of the distant sea.

He picked his saddle from the rail, hefted it and then slammed it back down,

turning to kick a wooden pail against the wall.

He couldn't ride away. To go now to the fort he would need to be sure Brinnie had nothing to tell the general after he'd gone. He had to be sure she would say nothing again. To anyone.

The sobbing had stopped.

Rubbing stiff fingers down his thighs for warmth, he moved back to the house and stood watching her sleep. The ghosts that plagued her lovely face in her waking hours tormented her dreams as well.

They were moving through a war and everyone had ghosts. He had eighteen years of killing, but he'd made peace with his dead. They knew as well as he did that he'd join them soon enough. But Brinnie had joined the dead while there was life still in her veins and it was hard to know what could have pushed her to that place.

The fire was falling and he threw another log into the blaze. Taking a jug down from the larder, he sniffed the vinegary wine and sat at the table to drink as much as he could stomach.

In all her mad ramblings she had grasped one truth, that much he had to concede. A year ago he'd paid too much attention to her. He always kept to himself. Always. And yet, that night he'd been unable to tear his eyes from her. He should have followed his own rule, then.

But then, carrying the strains of too many months in the frigid wilds, with the frustration of being too slow with the word of the coming attack, and feeling a soul deep disgust with living inside his own rank skin, he'd yearned to hold onto her sweetness. He'd committed every line and shadow of her face to his memory, an affirmation that there was beauty in the world.

Then, he'd wanted to catch the essence of that innocence and to keep it for himself.

Now, he could see what that desire had cost her. Looking around the bare room, there was no sign of a man, not even her dead father. The stone walls were bare, the shutters loose. Her small bed had one cushion barely full enough to raise her face. Brinnie's dead had taken all that gave any colour to her life with them.

When her wine was all but drunk, he walked back to the door, watching the sky colour into dawn and listening to the small fold of shaggy highland cattle moving restlessly in their barn. They wanted to be away. He knew how they felt.

The last hour of free choice was upon him. The long skinning knife he favoured seemed warm against his calf. Its razor edge would have been cold to touch, but its presence burned on his skin. Eirbrin whimpered in her sleep and he watched the furrows that formed and eased under the fall of her hair.

Had he caused all this pain? Even unknowingly, had that one night when he brushed up against her life robbed her of the very thing he'd savoured?

Moving slowly, he slipped the knife from his boot and laid it onto the table. He gathered a bowl and the kettle, searching the larder shelf for oil and settling instead on a tub of clean lard. Then, pulling his tunic off over his head, he sat where he could brace his elbows on the table to steady his hands, slicked the curls of his beard heavily with the soft fat, and set the blade against his cheek to shave.

Brinnie woke to harsh words. She was uncomfortably warm and she threw back the blanket that covered her, peering out into the bright morning. An argument was going on outside the firelit house and she struggled to get her feet under herself.

Her eyes were puffed and raw, and her cheeks felt stiff and bruised as if she'd been brawling through the night. But there was a subtle lessening of the weight in her chest, and when she thought of her tears and the words that had brought them, she remembered why. "Honest beauty," she whispered to herself. "Bright innocence."

It might not be true, but it was what he'd seen. It was what the seer believed and that made it important.

It was Euguein's voice she heard as she ran to the doorway, but he was no longer shouting. The crisis had passed without her. Antony stood across the yard, his back to her and a long bladed knife held loosely at his side. The general faced him, another man a step behind with a broadsword drawn. When he saw her emerge, Euguein's face eased toward a smile and he turned his attention to her.

He spoke, but his words were carried away on the wind as it climbed the low slopes and on up into the tree line, leaving her to wonder what he'd had to say. She felt utterly drained and she crossed her arms against the chill. Exhaustion, weakness from her months of deprivation, and the night's emotional turmoil left her no heart to face the subject he had come to raise. Lifting a hand in deference, she turned back into the house and searched her bare shelves for any kind of hospitality.

There was nothing. Some cheese and honey, enough for one. The bread from Antony's saddlebag was on the table, but she could never feed three men. If Euguein had come to return her to the leader's side, it might be as good a time as any to go. The thought grated over the newly opened scars on her heart, throbbing like a bruise.

Except for the dull ache of loneliness, she would carry no need back to him. She felt nothing, neither desire nor revulsion, only a deep emptiness that his touch could never fill and a vague sense of duty. This was the sacrifice she had made, just as other men and women had made their sacrifices in the service of freedom.

They had all made sacrifices, and she stood amid the bare bones of her family's loss. Entirely alone, dressed in rags, and with no food to offer or eat. Everybody gave what service they could. When the two men ducked under her doorway, she turned to face her future.

Her shock at seeing the prophet took the smile from her welcome. He had scraped away years with the hair from his cheeks, leaving less of the haunted mystic and more of the professional soldier. A solid dark blue bar tattooed on his cheekbone underlined his left eye, marking the contrast between his pale skin and eyes and his thick dark lashes. His lips were full, the shadow of the stubble a dark foil to their soft curve.

And filling the hollow of his left cheek, two locked circles, sacred knots, and a path of vines or serpents that trailed down under his jawline near his ear.

Euguein spoke and she pulled her attention to him, dredging up a smile and enough courtesy to suffice. "We have no food here, general," she said bluntly. "I could kill the calf, but I'm sure you'll be gone before he's bled."

"I've got food enough for the journey, lass. Don't fret. And we don't have time to waste on civilities, anyway." He moved to take a stool at the table and Brinnie sat opposite, perched stiffly, unwilling to accept any comfort.

Antony stepped back against the wall by the door, the same air of poised competence she had sensed in him the night before evident in his stillness. His hands were loose at his sides and his face turned down, but she knew his attention was acutely focused on Euguein.

"This is the man you told me about? I've spoken to him, Brin. I see no reason to trust him." There was no time for civility, then. And no cause for courtesy. If the general had decided against him, Antony would not live to be offended by the frank discussion.

"I trust him," she said. "Do Romans carry their family name on their faces?"

"No, but there are Britons among the auxiliary ranks. *Nationes*. Traitors. He might have been in the city. Or he might be lying. If he is one of them, everything he says is a lie. Everything he hears will cost our lives."

The general fixed his gaze on Antony. "Calgacus would kill him. I don't doubt that for a second. I should do the same. This isn't a task we can trust to just anyone. If we could send someone inside the walls, it would be someone above reproach or we could never trust their word anyway."

"Why does it matter so much?" Brinnie called his attention back to herself. "It's only one small fort."

"They're working their fighting men towards it from Devana. We think they will sail another force in through the port here at Inbhir Nis and bring heavy reinforcements in from behind our lines. Their commander is moving a light force up from the east coast. Too light. And if they can't bring a legion in from the firth to reinforce them, we can stop them here, we can crush them in the mountains."

Again he turned an eye on Antony. To Brinnie, his actions read as a death sentence for the man who stood beside them. If he wasn't trusted to be useful, he wasn't trusted with what he'd just heard. They had no intention of letting him leave the room.

"And now to you, Brinnie. I want you to come back with me. Now."

"Why?" Why. There were other women. A thousand. Ten thousand.

"Times are hard. Calgacus needs someone he can trust. You understand that better than most. And he trusts no one. Come to where you're needed, lass. The cold dark season is coming. This war will be done and finished for good in a month or two." He reached a wind-chapped and callused hand across to take hers. "You have nothing here. We have good food and warm clothes. For yourself, Brin, come back. And if not for yourself, then remember your duty."

Her duty. Her sacrifice. Just as everyone else.

Antony hadn't moved or spoken. If anything he'd heard surprised him, she couldn't see it. If he understood the implications of his presence while these things were discussed, there was no sign of it. If he realised now there was no innocence in her for him to see, there was no sign of that either.

She studied his silence, watching the blood red glints in his dark hair, considering the hard blue lines that branded him a highlander. With his face turned down, there was no way to read his eyes for signs of his extraordinary vision. "What do you say, my friend?" she asked. "Where am I needed most?"

Antony kept his eyes down, steadying his breath. So, here was the esteem that put the lovely Brinnie on a par with the highest of Calgacus' generals. Antony wasn't the only man who had craved her goodness. The meeting was drawing to a close and they would soon try to kill him. He would have blood on his hands any minute now. How much of that blood would be his own, he couldn't yet tell. If he lived through this, she'd be dead. Duty was very seldom easy. But if he died here today, she should at least go to a place where she had food and warmth.

"I told you," he answered, turning a humourless smile up to her. He bore her no ill will and he hoped that somehow she realised that. "I see the same things in you that all men see. And when men can't stomach their own guilt, they need to find some innocence to hide behind. Go to him if he needs you. At least, with him you can eat."

"Do you think Calgacus is guilty of something?" Euguein asked coldly.

"We're soldiers. We all carry more guilt than we can stand."

What little colour she still had dropped from Brinnie's cheeks and she stared at Antony like he had thrown ice water over her. The tears he thought were finished rose and flooded silently down her cheeks. Oh god damn it. Not again. What had he said this

time?

She fixed her attention on him and he shifted uneasily, shrugging some of the tension out of his shoulders. The general still held her hand in his, and his eyes stayed glued to her. Outside the door, the single guard coughed and shuffled. He was bored and uninterested.

Before the superstitious babble and pleading he expected could start, she pulled herself straight, slipping her hands from the table to push her hair back from her face and to smear her eyes and nose. "But we need to know what is happening in this city, too," she said, her voice surprisingly clear, her chin jutting like a challenge. "If the leader trusts no one but me, I'll go into the fort and find out what the Romans are planning."

The urge to slump and groan burned hot in Antony's gut but he held himself still. He clamped his jaw over the words that filled his head, all obscene, and let the general voice his objections for him.

"No! Not a chance." Euguein's face reddened instantly and his hands formed hard fists against the table.

"It's a better-than-good chance, general." She pointed at Antony. "If he could walk in and out because it was unexpected, how much easier will it be for a woman?"

"Eirbrin." The general took the tone of a father, adamant he would be obeyed. "The only women left in the city are slaves and prostitutes. In the fort itself, you wouldn't live to long enough to look around once."

"Then I'll go in as a slave or prostitute."

"Over my dead body." The red in Euguein's cheeks had darkened to purple and his eyes gleamed like coals.

There was nothing left of the flood of tears that had threatened her. They had washed away her reserve and her temper flared behind them. "Calgacus is no more than sixty miles from here. Two good day's ride. I can go in there and out again and ride the information to him myself."

Euguein stood shaking his head, tempted to smile indulgently now. From where he stood, Antony could see the error in that path. "You won't get in. You certainly won't get back out. And there isn't a horse for you to ride."

Brin stood to meet him. "General, sir, I am not going to go with you today. If Calgacus needs me, let him come for me himself. Until then, I'll try for the intelligence we need from the city and the fort." Stepping closer to where Antony waited, she brought her face up before his, searing him with a glare. "This man will take me in."

Antony made one quick sound, "No," but the temptation to go on with the argument left swiftly.

Ducking with speed that rode a wave of pure adrenaline, she lifted the skinning knife from his boot and pressed enough weight onto it to let its tip skid over one rib and into the softness over his heart.

"As of now, you're a dead man anyway. He'll kill you if you I let him, and I'll kill you if you refuse me. Take me into the city and get me back out. Can you do that?"

The answer was on his lips, but reason wasn't bright in her eyes and she was standing too close for him to get it wrong. No, there was no chance he could get her in and out of the city. None. But he could get her in and then she'd be in for the shock of her life.

"Do you know what sort of risk you'd be taking?" he asked gently, hoping the change of tone would ease the tension that drew a small red shadow into the fabric of his tunic.

Laughter stuttered in her throat. "Yes. I understand exactly the sort of risk I'd be

taking. The same risk our soldiers take when they ride in to attack a fort. Death. And do you think I haven't considered rape?" Her eyes darkened briefly, turning in on a vision that was hers alone, then came back onto his. "I've considered that too."

"All right." He kept the words quiet as his hand flicked up to her wrist and twisted to push her knife hand back from his chest. She was too thin and there was no strength in her arm.

Brinnie pulled her hand free, rubbing at her wrist as she turned back to the general. "We're agreed then. I'll join you at the main camp before the full moon. If I'm not there by then, I'm dead."

That was true, one way or another, and Antony turned from that certainty to the next problem he had to resolve. He couldn't let Euguein return to the rebel's camp. This was one of the enemy's elite inner circle and Antony needed his scalp.

"One thing," he said, pulling the neck of his tunic open to glance down at the small, hot wound. "I'll try this for you. If I *can* get her in and out again, it might be worth the risk. But I have to get to the road east out of Inbhir Nis. My brothers are waiting there for me and I should have been with them last night. If you don't want them coming back up this way looking for me, let me ride down there now and tell them I'm staying."

The general laughed, the colour in his face shedding back to an unhealthy blotching. "And never see you again? This is turning into a farce."

"Send him with me." He nodded at the bored sentry, whose attention had at last been drawn to the ongoing argument. "I'll be gone an hour, two at most. You wait here; maybe you can talk her out of it."

In two hours he'd be back here with the crazy redhead and the twins could take care of the general's journey home.

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CHAPTER FIVE.

In the hours he was away, Brinnie could do little to ease the convulsive emotion that burned in her stomach and up into her throat. At times bitter tears threatened, but she'd had many months to learn the art of self-control, and somehow, she held the fractured parts of herself together.

Euguein argued endlessly, but he had no real authority over her or any other person outside his own lost lands, and she had no intention of changing her mind.

Antony might be an ally or an enemy. She had seen more in the silent depths of the man than he liked to show, and he'd already had more time to betray her than any man needed. But she couldn't know for sure and she didn't much care.

She trusted his vision, and she could choose to trust the man.

Without concern for protocols, she set out her small block of cheese, and with bread and honey, she ate the last crumbs of her food, washed down with her last half-cup of sour wine. It was all she needed for now. She had fuel enough to run on with the unbinding knots of anger, grief and bitterness. She had months of mourning still to find. And sorrow and regret. But the oracle had spoken for her, and shown her the way out from under the crushing weight of guilt.

He'd seen innocence because the guilt wasn't hers. She could never doubt it. Whether the man himself was worthy of trust or not, she had trusted his vision from the depths of her spirit, and that had proven true at last.

But it was easier to believe she could trust him while he was gone. When he stood in her empty house, with the grizzled fleece bulking over his shoulders and the plain leather-bound hilt of a broadsword at his back, confidence was harder to find.

"How are we going to do this?" she asked, tilting her head back to assure herself of her courage.

"You're giving the orders." His expression was as hard as the mask she'd chosen for herself and there was ice in his words. "Is it easier to make plans when you have a knife in your hand?"

The barbs of his sarcasm were nothing; the words and deeds that had caused her pain went harder and deeper than this. She turned away, a small wave of relief at the childish jibe buoying her heart. "Get over it," she said. He was only human; that made them equals. "He was going to kill you anyway, and you weren't likely to agree to take me without some kind of duress."

Ahead of her was uncertainty, and she had no way to know just how much she didn't know. But there was nothing in the room she wanted, and once the stock were released they would fend for themselves until someone found them wandering.

She spun to face him. "Why'd you come back? Why didn't you just keep going with your brothers?"

The question threw him. His mask wasn't as good as he liked to think. "Go where? On to the rallying point? And say what when Eugenein gets there, 'Sorry, I changed my mind'?" There was tension in the soft skin under his eyes that looked enough like confusion to be a mental backstep. Maybe they were more equally matched than she thought.

"Are you going to take me into the city?"

"Aye." Now there was caution in his voice.

"Then you are a spy."

"If that was true I'd have killed you by now. Even if I waited until Eugenein was gone, I have no reason to take you in with me. We're alone now. I've heard the general speak. Nothing a half-wit wouldn't have guessed. And..." He raised his hands palm up and a grin spread over his face. A challenge.

"Fair enough." She let her eyes slide down the rough weave of his tunic to where a bloodstain darkened the cloth over his heart. His shoulders carried more bulk than his chest; he was lean and hard, and where the tunic ended, his hips were narrow. Clean-shaven, he looked much more like the boys she had known growing up. Before all the horrors of empire came into their world. And before she had let the world take away her innocence. "I've no doubt you'll have other chances. But something tells me I can trust you for now." She met his grin with self-deprecation. "Let's call it a gift."

He stood with his empty hands still turned a little towards her, and she gambled on the shadows of compassion she had seen in the depths of his eyes. "I'm alone here, Antony. Completely alone. I've lost everyone I care about, and the people I trusted most have taken more than blood from me. If you are going to kill me, do it now and give me a clean death. Surely even I deserve that much."

He stood perfectly still, his focus fixed entirely on her, and the smile slid slowly from his lips. "You do," he said, but he made no move against her.

She took a deep breath. "So. How are we going to do this?"

He stepped back, focusing on the problem, leaving her to tackle her own fears while he found a way past sentries and bored soldiers. At least, that was what she imagined he examined. Maybe he was only trying to recall when he'd last sharpened the blade he'd use to cut her throat. But there was something in this idea that she had the sight. Watching him move, she couldn't help but think he was wrestling bigger issues

entirely.

This girl had heart, there was no doubting that. Her eyes lit with determination, and the curls in her hair fairly seethed with the passion in her blood. But for what? When she smiled at him from under the weight of the madness she carried, let any god help him, he wanted to laugh with her. She was mad. Insane. He couldn't safely get her into the city, let alone out again.

He could ride her to the gates and say 'Prisoner. Calgacus' lover. Take her,' but there was nothing they could press from her that would make a difference to the war. She'd been here in the wilds for at least a full summer. Agricola himself would know more about the Pict leader's movements than Brinnie did. But it wasn't what she knew that gave her worth.

She was a strange one. She could have gone with Euguein, into the arms of her man, to the best of the territory's food and clothes and comforts. And yet, here she was. Potentially the finest piece of espionage ever dreamed. And here in his hands.

Ah Brinnie. If he could get her into the city while he made his report, well and good. Not too great an effort. But if he could get her out again, still trusting him, maybe he could get her down to the camp of the leader himself. He could put Rome's eyes and ears into the bed of the Caledonian leader and feed like a leech on their secrets. If only he'd known about her sooner.

"I'm going to take you in as a whore," he announced.

"Okay." There was no hesitation in her agreement, and that ticked in the middle of his chest. A quake of conscience rose against the thought, but he quashed it and stood his idea forward in full. "Do you speak Latin?"

"None."

"Maybe some. A little I can draw on?"

"None. Not a syllable."

Good. That meant nothing she heard would matter. "I'm going to throw you over the saddle and call you a prize of war."

"Yes."

"That's how we'll do it." Not so hard after all.

"And then?"

Once they were past the sentries? Once he was in a position to enjoy the prize of war? Damn it, he needed somewhere to keep her ignorant while he went into the fort and traded secrets.

He looked at her, searching her features for an idea that would carry them both past the impossible. She was so thin. Even with the day's light softened by the dense shadows of this hut she was gaunt and underfed. Her clothes were rags, and apart from the scent of thyme oil there was no hint of cleanliness. Her skin smelled of musk and sweet femininity. She smelled good. She didn't smell clean. "Tell me what you want most of all."

"Food," she answered, grinning. "Roman food. Lots of it."

He'd have said a bath. There was no one would say he'd frequented, but he had visited, a brothel inside the city walls where the girls were clean and well fed. What would clothes and food and a good hot soak, cost? Not so much.

"Okay. Once we get in past the city wall and you're over the saddle," he motioned to show her just how uncomfortable that would be, "then, I'm going to take you in to a brothel. I'm going to tell them to scrub you and feed you, and I'm going to come back for my prize once that's done. How does that sound?"

"I'm going to hang over the saddle until I get a feed and a bath and clean clothes." She smiled. "I can live with that."

"It might not go well. You could be killed." There were so many imponderables. Even if she didn't understand what was said around her, there was too much chance that someone might recognise him. Welcome him. Too much chance another man might see the perfection he himself saw.

"You might kill me here," she said. "Tell me how I'm gambling more than that?"

"I'd rather we were doing this at night," he said, tense with the challenge he read in her smile. He was standing too close and he found himself searching her face for the light and life he'd once seen there so clearly.

"Would my blood be easier to spill in the dark?" One last time she dared him to move with his purpose.

And for the last time he refused. There was more here than just him. He had a duty. "I can't guarantee I can get myself into this city. Why are you so sure I can take you in?"

"What makes you think I'm sure? I'm not even sure I trust you. But in the end you're all I've got." She smiled. "We could both ride down to the leader and offer ourselves in the coming battle. Will two more swords turn the tide? Do you think that will be enough? Let's do this or die trying. Isn't it braver to try than to fail for not trying?"

"If you want to die, there are easier ways."

"I don't want to die, Antony. I want to live the life the gods gave me. I want a chance to mend my mistakes and make better choices. With your help I can do that."

Everyone had things they would do differently, he guessed. And nobody wanted to die. "Okay, let's do it. Once I leave you in the city there is nothing you can do or say until I come back for you. Agreed?"

"Agreed." She smiled. "What have I got to lose?"

He had moved back in the saddle, leaving her a little more room on his lap than over the hard leather horns of the pommel, but it was hardly enough for comfort. Neither hers nor his. Every time he moved to hold or lift or touch her, the extremes of her physical weakness screamed at him. And still the frail warmth in her blood lay over his thighs like a balm against the chill in the autumn air.

Ahead, the gates of the city stood open, their set guard standing with the obligatory deaf mute disinterest of the Roman sentry. Only two were visible, their features obscured by the wide cheekplate of their helmets, so he couldn't guess if he knew the men or not.

There would be others inside. The area around the city had been sacked and any resistance quashed, but it remained an isolated outstation and therefore at high risk of attack by guerrilla forces. A heavy guard would be close by.

As he neared the men, he pulled the horse back from a jog and prepared to play his role as close to Brinnie's understanding as he could. That way he'd be less inclined to expose himself to her as a fraud. Whether she really did understand any Latin or not, he did not intend to give her more cause for suspicion.

The men were in uniform, that made them Roman; a vexillation from one of Agricola's three legions active in Britannia. The auxiliary *alae* he was conscripted to were attached to the Twentieth Legion, but in the last three years men from all three legions, and all their battalions of auxiliaries, had been merged and positioned across Caledonia as tactical advancement dictated. There were infantrymen from the Ninth and navy men from the Second that he knew well enough, but the men who stood forward

now were not among them.

From deep in the fur-lined cavity of his boot, Antony slipped a small terracotta tile. No longer than his finger, the triangular motif showed on one side, stamped into the clay, LEGXX and the rampant boar motif of the Twentieth Legion. On the other, the simple ALFL of the Flavian cavalry *alae*. Concealed against his hand, he lifted the identifying marker to discreet view for the soldiers, but they showed little interest in his proof.

“Who’s that?” All the formal disinterest had melted from the guards. They circled the horse and moved closer to where Brinnie clutched at the fabric of Antony’s kilt, trying to lift her head.

“That’s mine,” he answered, clipping a sharp heel into the horse’s flank, sending its rump skittering sideways toward the men.

“I’ve just put a toll on the gate,” one guard called, laughing. “She should just about cover the cost if you want to drop her off here for me.”

“If I wanted your slops, I’d have picked up your partner there,” Antony answered. “I’ll let you know where I leave her when I’m finished.”

They were moving closer again, circling in toward her legs, and he pulled the mount’s head in to follow them around. As the road into the city came clear, he kicked on through the gates and leaned in to speak quietly to his passenger. “Are you all right?”

“No. How much longer ‘til I can get off?”

“Soon. Try not to attract so much attention to yourself. I’m looking for knock shops and we want an establishment that has a bit of style.”

Brinnie grunted and he chuckled at the mumbled complaints. “I did warn you,” he reminded her.

Thanks to the Romans there were forty names for a prostitute and nearly as many standards of service. In an empire where men were conscripted to the army from fifteen to forty and none allowed to marry while in service, there were few young husbands to be found. That left a vast number of young women, Roman and indigenous, with no money and time on their hands. And as many young men with money to spend.

Careful not to move too confidently, he meandered down through the market square, past buildings still showing signs of their violent capture, and into the red-light district. At the hastily remodelled Romanesque portico of one building, he slipped to the ground. Without giving her warning, he lifted Brin easily over his shoulder, slapping her loudly on the rump for good measure.

“It wouldn’t hurt the image if you were to struggle,” he jibed at her, smiling to himself, but the humour fell from the thought when she answered.

“I don’t think I could,” she said, her voice so racked with pain and weakness it was barely more than a hiss of breath. “I can maybe manage a black look.”

When he lowered her feet to the floor, Brinnie clung to the coarse weave of his tunic, steadying her weak knees and waiting for vertigo to ease. Light nausea rose with the bloodless dizziness and she rested her head forward to his shoulder, welcoming the arm that came gently around her.

After a few slow deep breaths she dared to open her eyes. The angular blue tattoo that dropped under his jawline filled her view. A heavy pulse beat under the close shaved skin and dark auburn hair curled under his ear, tumbling softly down his neck. When she turned her face up, the wild light of the mystic glowed too fiercely from his eyes and dark concern creased his brow.

“Can you stand?” he asked.

The room was full of soft orange light and a thick pall of incense clouded the air. Brinnie nodded.

The subtle support at her back didn't shift, but he turned his attention out to a mouse-like woman who had walked closer to join them. They spoke briefly, and Brinnie concentrated on breathing deeply while the sickness and spinning receded. The conversation was short and to the point, and she fixed on the few syllables she recognised. *Sex, nutrimens, solum mei*. Sex, food and his alone. How much more he told the woman she couldn't guess, but she whispered, "A bath," hard against his throat.

He added to his list of instructions, slipping his hand from behind her and reaching instead for a small pouch at his hip. Brin kept her face averted as he finalised the commercial aspects of their deal, but he caught her face in his hand, lifting her chin so her eyes came up to his. Speaking very softly and distinctly, he held her steady, a look somewhere between amusement and reproach shining at her.

He might have overestimated what she had understood. The only word she recognised as he gave his farewell instructions was *abluo*. He wanted her clean.

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CHAPTER SIX.

"Eirbrin? It is you. I thought it was when you came in."

Brinnie turned in confusion, struggling to place the familiar voice, shocked to hear her own language in a place where she had expected to be effectively deaf and mute.

She had been left sitting alone in a small dank room, a low straw pallet with a clean linen sheet and a small washbasin the only comforts. The face she saw shocked her further and surprise became joy.

"Ula. How did you come to be in this city? Why are you *here*?" Her tone, as she hugged her old friend, indicated the brothel.

"When they said you didn't speak any Latin," Ula answered, "they sent me in to help you. I have to get you some food and some clean clothes and take you to the bathing room. Boy, you fell on your feet with this one. Do you know what he's paid to have you cleaned up and fed?"

Brin shook her head not really caring for the details, anxious to get to the part with the food. And to hear her friend's story.

"They sailed us up here on the great ships. Have you seen them, Brinnie? It was amazing. The sailors are a rough lot, though. I was so glad to get away from them. When they let us come out of the galleys and into this house, it was like paradise." As she spoke, she led Brin quickly down dark hallways where the fog of incense began to choke and become overwhelming. Ula was as bright and cheerful as ever. Whatever had happened in the last year, she seemed to have taken the changes in her stride.

When she stepped through a doorway into a brightly lit dining hall the smell of roast meat and spices almost made Brin faint.

"The food's so good here. The madam is Roman, actually from Rome itself, and she hates the plain food we eat. Everything has sauces and spices that we've never even heard of. It's so good."

Brinnie could believe it. The smells alone were divine.

"Sit, sit. I'll get you a platter."

They weren't alone in the room, and Brin looked at the women who occupied the benches and couches around her as she lowered herself slowly to sit. There were only three of them, but they regarded her as if she was some kind of swamp creature, emerged to disrupt their genteel luncheon. Their faces were whitened with greasy chalk

paste, their eyebrows blacked into high arched curves. Heavy kohl lined their eyes and their lips were an outrageous scarlet. And they wore jewellery.

Before the war, Brin had loved the warm glow of gold against her own skin. She'd worn heavy gold clips at her ears and breast, an intricately carved torc twisted at her throat, and numerous linked tiles of gold and silver, each with its own precious cabochon, fastened at her wrists.

And around their shoulders they wore furs. They were too small to be practical, but they were soft and lovely. Those, too, she had once owned in abundance: thick warm bearskins over her floor and bed, heavy woollen capes and cloaks with soft wolf pelts at the collar. All long gone with the life she had known.

"I know that's how they make us obedient, but there's nothing left outside. It isn't so bad here, compared to that."

Ula's statement made no sense, and Eirbrin reached anxiously for her plate of food, swallowing feverishly as she salivated.

"Is that why you came in?" Ula's face was a study of concern, watching Brin as she started to eat. "Just look at you. When did you last get some decent food?"

"There *is* nothing left out there. I still had a few cattle, but we only slaughtered one when a new flux of men came through from the north. The Romans left nothing for us. What farms they didn't sack, the men who left them burned." It was hard to talk and chew and swallow all at once.

"Then he found you?"

Brin looked up into the questioning eyes, almost ready to explain the intricacies of her situation, but the derisive glares from the girls around her kept her quiet.

"You know who he is, right?"

"Auxiliary cavalry?" Brin answered, forcing herself to recall the fiction Antony had given her. "Something to do with the Twentieth Legion."

"Yes. So you know? That's okay then. You came willingly?"

Again she fell back to the fiction. "No. But I need food and somewhere warm. Just for a little while." Dropping to a whisper, she said, "And until I can get out of here, I'm trying to find out all I can about the Roman campaign."

"You're spying?" Ula's eyes were wide and a delighted smile spread over her mouth. "You're going to escape?"

"I think so," Brin pushed a light pastry into a sop of fragrant sauce and filled her mouth with flavour.

"Well if he keeps paying like he has, you'll be as warm and well fed as you could want to be. And if you aren't out working with the customers, they're mostly officers we see here, then I can be your eyes and ears, can't I? What do we have to find out? Wow, this is great." Ula pressed her hands together, trembling with excitement like a small child. "What's he like? I wish one that looked like that would want to keep me for a pet."

It wasn't the first time Ula had wished their roles were reversed, and a sharp jab of untempered pain burst into Brin's chest. It cast her back onto the rocks of the life she'd lost, before she had betrayed the man she loved for the sake of a cause. "Why are you here, like this, now?" she asked, thankful for a goblet of sweet wine.

Ula answered, "I got caught in a raid down behind their lines, south of the ridge forts. After my husband was killed, I joined up with a band who kept up the rear pressure. We made lightning attacks and smuggled supplies and weapons up from the south.

"I thought the Romans were the cruellest men I ever saw. I didn't know how these people could be so hard and so brutal. But it's how they work, you see? If you go down

into the parts of the country they've already conquered, the people who toe the line don't just get less violence, they're rewarded with luxuries.

"After a little while you start to think it isn't so bad. You don't want to go back to getting beaten, and you don't want to give up the fringe benefits they hand out. It gets harder to maintain the rage, I guess.

"There aren't too many reasons for them to treat women well, though. If they put you in a slave stall or a brothel at one of the taverns, life can be unbearable. But out here? It's not so bad. They're not too rough. The faces stay the same so we even get to know some of them a little." Her smile seemed to soften. "They're not even soldiers, then. Not Romans or Gauls or Batavians. Just lonely men a long way from home."

"And one man's much as any other," Brin heard herself say, and she turned her attention back to the meal. As soon as she had eaten she could go and bathe. She would lie in a tub of scalding water until the skin sloughed off her and carried away all the harshness of the past. Just as soon as she'd worked her way through another platter of food.

Antony stood impatiently at the stable.

The word he had on Calgacus' battle plan; the rebel concern over the use of this port as a bridgehead; the ambush and probable death of Euguein; and Brinnie's potential as a mole, had been laid before the officer in charge over two hours earlier.

He had done his duty, so far as that went. And back at the brothel, Brinnie was alone and unprotected.

Maybe she didn't need too much protection. She was a strong woman. Or she would have been, in a world where she had access to good food and an escape from the rigours of war. She could think on her feet, and he was as sure as he could be that his money was good enough to buy her some reprieve. But he didn't like the idea of leaving her there alone for too long.

Damn it. This was why he kept to himself. It was hard enough to stay one step ahead and to keep himself alive, without having to worry about someone else.

But it was that niggling sense of concern for her that had stayed his tongue when he'd given his report. The one detail he had failed to clarify was that she was here in the city with him, now. So far as his superiors knew, Calgacus' lover was still loose in the hills around the fort.

It seemed an odd thing to him. If the leader of the rebels had sent his woman back to the safety of secure territory where she'd be protected, it might have made some sense. But to send her to this grim place, to put her in daily peril from the Roman stronghold below while she organised the movement of troops through hostile territory, seemed unnecessarily risky.

For the generals in the south and east access to food and clothing was not a problem, and yet he'd made no provision to feed or warm his lover. And strangest of all, when she had been offered the chance to go back to his side, to find all that warmth and love and comfort, she'd chosen instead to ride into what must have seemed certain death.

She had asked him where she was needed and then ignored his advice and chosen this place. He was no great seer after all. It appeared that what he thought the leader needed from her, she was no longer willing to give. When he told her what he saw, she rejected his vision. Maybe hardship made her doubt the light and purity he'd described. And maybe she just needed to claim back some of that innocence for herself.

The horse beside him was too distinctive for him to be mistaken. The glossy black with its high-crested neck and barrel chest belonged to his brother, and he had no idea where the twins could be, or why they would be back in this city today. They would meet the same three basic needs they always met when they got back into a fort. They'd eat, bathe and screw. Not necessarily in that order. And, as luck would have it, not likely in the same places he would have chosen for himself.

He unrolled the spare set of clothes from his saddlebag, intending to take them to the laundry. First, he'd try the bathhouse. There were only two hot rooms and a public baths. If they were there, he'd find them quickly.

After that, the taverns along the river front. Again, if they were there, the boys were not hard to pick in a crowd. But after that? Anybody's guess.

And meanwhile, Brinnie was alone.

Brinnie soaked in the fragrant water while fresh egg yolks clagged in her hair. When it was clean, Ula would braid and bead it for her just as they had in years gone by. On the bar beside her hung a long linen *tunica*, finely cut and beaded at the neckline but impractical outside of the fire-warmed house. That was probably intended.

Lying in the comforting warmth led her again to memories of life before the war, when she'd shared their deep stone trough with Cam; when she'd lay in his arms watching the steam curl endlessly into the cold air around them.

It was the first time she'd allowed herself to speak his name, even in the silence of her own heart, and tears burned into her eyes at the thought. Her gentle Cam. A farmer whose touch and quiet words had soothed frightened creatures and brought trees to bud and grass to grain. Her wonderful man, who'd asked and taken nothing from her, and who'd given up everything, even his own life, to keep her safe.

"Have we given enough yet, Cam?" she asked him.

Not yet, she answered herself. There was this one last thing they needed from her, and then the war could go on without her.

Antony stepped out of his clothes, taking the bath cloth from the hands of an overtly pretty boy. The lad smiled with mock coyness and accepted the single coin from his hand. "Take both lots to the laundry. I'll need it all back in an hour, so make sure they get it clean and dry. Got it?"

The boy ducked his head and turned dark eyes up from under soft bangs. "Right now? You don't want some company?"

"No. Just clean clothes."

"I'll be back in two shakes." The lad was not to be easily put off. "You won't forget my face, will you?"

"No, I won't. I'll be looking for you, with my clothes, in an hour."

Around the public bath the air was unheated but the water was warm. Steam wraiths moved over the surface and he dropped the towel by the steps as he walked down into the blissful heat of the water. Aches he had not noticed in his muscles and joints eased as the heat seeped deeper into his flesh. The tight breath he had been hoarding since he'd first seen Edan's horse slipped away on a sigh, and he rested his head back against the stone of the side. "How did it go?"

Edan's unbound mass of thick fair hair spread around his head like the halo of an

angelic colossus as he lay back into the warm water, apparently asleep. "To plan," he answered simply.

"So why are you here?"

"Tav's hurt."

"Bad?"

"Ha. He'd need a broadsword in one ear and out the other to do him much harm."

"It was bad enough for you to bring him back here."

"He's lost some fingers. His right hand, too."

Antony cursed. Any sword took some holding in the heat and sweat of battle. The broadswords that the Celtic soldiers on both sides of the line preferred were heavy and took skill and strength to balance. Without five fingers on a sword hand, the task would be nearly impossible.

He shied away from taking the conversation further. Edan and Tavish were inseparable. Either Tav would carry on with his conscription and find a way to make allowances for his loss. Or he would be moved back into a non-combat role, and Edan would be left like a man with only half a soul.

"Why are you still here?" Edan asked.

"Still? I've only been here one watch. But I'm out again as soon as I can."

"Looks like another winter in the hills for you, lad." Edan coughed a laugh, guessing at his brother's temptation to stay where there was some civilisation and comfort. "They sending you anywhere in particular?"

"Back east to find the main rallying point. They want final numbers."

"What happened with the girl?"

Antony ducked his head beneath the water, raking his fingers hard against his scalp and using the diversion to avoid the question.

Tav surely wasn't going back out this season, but Rome had no compulsions about family ties. Edan would have to continue moving through this campaign alone, unless he could think of a reason to be grounded. Or unless he kept moving with Antony himself. The tribune might not know Brinnie from any other maiden of the mountains, but Edan would. And he wouldn't approve.

Best to tell him straight up. "Got any money?"

"Some."

"I need it."

"So do I."

"Euguein's gold?"

"That's salvage. Compensation for Tav's hand." Edan chuckled. "What do you need it for?"

"The girl's here. I've got her here in the city."

"You idiot." None of the conversation so far had elicited any physical response from the big man, but at this, he dropped his feet to the tiles below and faced his brother. "Are you paying to keep her somewhere?"

"Aye."

Edan struggled. The anger and disbelief in his face had no words. "Are you going to give me a good reason?"

"She's got access to Calgacus. I want to take her back to him."

"What does the tribune say about that?"

"He's sending men from here out after her. Back up to Craig Phadrig."

Edan gripped his forehead in a mammoth hand. "He doesn't know you've got her here?"

"No."

“But he wants her dead.”

“He wants her found.”

“And you don’t think you might be blurring the lines between being pedantic and insubordination?”

“I don’t think he’d find her if she was there. I don’t see how it matters whether he can’t find her here, or can’t find her there.”

“Of course they’ll find her here. I want no part of this. Why can’t you just pick up a local lass like anyone else?”

“That’s not it.”

“Bollocks. You watched her all night the first time you saw her. If you didn’t want to kill her yourself, I would have. You think too damn much. Toughen up.”

“Yeah, about the money. I need it.”

“Where is she?”

“That’s all right, brother. You can just give it to me.” There was nothing he underestimated about his big brother’s anger, but he had more to ask and the mood wasn’t likely to improve. “I want to take her out of here with me and I have to leave soon. I need a horse and Tav won’t be needing his.”

“No. Bigger off.” Edan turned and strode through the water, drawing waves in his wake. “I’m going in for a massage and a shave. You be at the stable in an hour and I’ll give you what money we’ve got, and damn you to Hades.”

Brinnie slept through the soporific haze left after her meal and long hot soak, and she woke as the air around her darkened. The fine fabric of her tunic was soft against her skin. Its pale colour, almost translucent, matched her skin tone and made her look, and feel, almost naked. The clothes she’d worn for the last year had fitted once, but as her flesh fell away the coarse wool had been left to bag and chafe around her.

Now, as evening approached, she began to fret over the choice she had made. From inside the cocoon of this house, she had no idea where Antony was or what fate he’d met in the city outside. As long as his money held out she’d be safe enough, she guessed. After that....

Ula had beaded and braided the hair back from her temples then left her to sleep. She was alone again. And the bare room began to feel like a cell.

When it came, the sharp rap at the door shoved back the fear of being alone and woke the fear of company. The woman Antony had left her with pushed her way into the room and cast her cool assessment over the finished product. Brinnie clean and fed didn’t impress her much. Reaching summarily to pinch colour into Brin’s cheeks, she grumbled something unintelligible and stood back to allow Antony into the room. He thanked her quietly and stood leaning back against the door as it closed.

He was shaking his head, staring. “Well,” was all he could manage.

“She didn’t seem impressed.” Brin smiled self-consciously, feeling the heat of his gaze too intensely on her skin. The linen she wore was too filmy and insubstantial. His eyes carried a spreading warmth up into her cheeks and down over her figure from her shoulders to her ankles.

“She thinks you should have worn more make-up. Or did you already know that’s what she said?”

“No.” As soon as she tried to speak, another blush of heated blood rushed up under her skin and she turned her face away. “I told you I don’t understand Latin.”

He didn’t commit himself one way or another on that. “She was wrong.”

The room was so small and so obviously intended for bed play that she felt the walls closing in on her, and she scanned them all urgently for any sign of movement. "Let me speak plainly," she said as clearly as the fears in her chest would allow. "Do you intend to take your money's worth, here, now?"

His eyebrows lifted and a smile touched his lips, turning the corners so the soft skin puckered and a crease ran down through the artwork on his cheek. "That is plain speech. The money isn't mine it's borrowed, so it's not me you owe."

"Right. Good." Trying to believe she was unafraid, Brinnie stepped forward and moved nervously to the far corner and back again. "Did you have any trouble today? Did you hear anything useful? Where did you go?"

He'd been to the bathhouse, that much she could tell. The warm clean smell of him filled her lungs, and she would have breathed deeper if only her ribs had deigned to let her hold the air. The tunic that caught on the fullness of his shoulders and draped over the slim lines of his belly shone as near to pure white as any working man might hope. And again he'd belted the heavy kilt low on his hips. He still wore dark leather breeches and high boots, and she wondered if he had somewhere warm to sleep the night, or if he was dressed for the cold of the open air.

"I had no trouble today. Yes, I heard some interesting things. And I went to the bathhouse and to the tavern. Which reminds me, I'm having food brought here in a little while. You have to eat if you're going to travel far."

"Thank you." Some of the blank terror ran away down her spine, loosening the hard knots of nervous tension from her shoulders and warming the small of her back. When she looked directly at him, it seemed he was looking down, his dark lashes hiding more than a flash of blue or a dark sideways glance. But when she turned her face away, she felt the warm touch of his gaze on her cheeks, felt it skim over her lips and down her throat.

"What did you find out? Do we know if they're bringing troops in?" She almost fancied his eyes had settled over the beaded intricacies of her bodice, and her breasts tightened suddenly, pushing the hard pearls of her nipples up into the delicate cloth. A thoughtless hand leapt up to cover her chest. The terror that had begun to recede surged hard through her veins, driving her heart beat up into the soft skin of her throat, and embarrassment at her own reaction washed scarlet into her cheeks.

Whatever he read in her movement, it darkened his eyes and he let their shadowed intensity touch hers briefly, then he turned, searching the walls and his own thoughts. "I can give Euguein numbers on who is here, now. We can't confirm the talk about a legion coming into port in strength. It's no more than conjecture."

Moving with almost painful slowness, he walked to the pallet and turned to sit. He rested his elbows onto his knees and hung his head, studying the floor between his feet.

"We should wait until we know that for sure," she said. "Can we do that? Is it safe?"

"No Brinnie." A deep frown had set over his brow and he seemed to plead, or to reprimand her for unknown crimes. "It isn't safe."

The second knock came, and without a pause to answer, the door opened. Ula stood grinning shamelessly, a platter of food and a jug of honeyed red wine held up like a prize. "Food," she explained needlessly. "And wine. Where do you want it?" Her Latin was thick and flawed, but she seemed not to notice this shortcoming. She stood before Antony, her voluptuous curves tilted to their best advantage and her eyes sparkling.

"Here," he said sharply, lifting the tray from her hands and setting it down on the hard bed beside him. "Goodbye."

There was no offence in the good-natured wink and wave Ula gave her as she turned to leave. But the interruption had given Brin time to master herself and to wrestle the rising sense of doom that hung in the unlit air.

"So it's not safe?" She wanted to say that she'd known there would be dangers, but something in the clipped movements of his hands gave her pause.

"Eat. Here. Before it gets any darker. I don't see any candles or lamps in here."

The poor light seeped deeper into the shadows under his brows, darkening his eyes further and washing away their manic gleam.

"No. There's no light. Tell me what the danger is."

He hesitated again, rubbing his thumb along each finger in turn, pressing invisible stains out of his skin. "There's talk. About you. About your links to Calgacus. I think they know where you were and they're looking for you. You won't be safe in this city."

"Me? Why would they look for me inside the walls?" Carefully she took a seat, with the tray of food, now unappetizing, taking the small space between them. "Well." She swallowed a lump of dread. "I'm safe enough, aren't I? They won't think to look here."

"There would have been eyes on us, even if they didn't know who you were. You're safe here while I'm paying more than someone else might pay for information. It's the way of this world." When he brought his face up to hers and met her eyes squarely, Brin almost let a moan slip from her tongue. The same soul-searing heat she had seen in him on that first night reached through her eyes to read her heart. "If I can get you a horse, we can find a way out of the city tonight. We can take what we've already heard and go hard for Calgacus' camp."

She had thought herself prepared for this time, but it had come so much more quickly than she could have imagined. Panic rose in her chest, throwing her heart against her ribs, and the reality of the dangerous situation around her shook in her hands and knees. "No," she whispered.

"You don't want to go?"

She closed her eyes as fear and memories rose and shudders set into her bones. Go back to Calgacus' arms? Back to her shame? No, she didn't want to go.

"If he calls for you, girl, you should go to him. There're sacrifices we all need to make at times like this. It's no great cost to bear."

Words and memories churned together in a sickening whirl. She had no real sense of herself outside the awful pain of her memories and the breathless fear her decision brought. She had heard those words in her head a million times. In dreams she screamed out 'No!'

"No," she breathed.

"Calgacus is our only hope. What he needs, we all need. And if he wants you, then you should go to him. If they take our land we'll all be widows, one way or another."

From somewhere deep inside she found the courage to hold to her convictions and she shook her head at the phantoms. Forcing her eyes to open, she fixed them on the eyes of the mystic, and whispered, "I'm already a widow."

Antony stared at her, as if he was trying to make sense of the terrible voices jeering in her head.

"He saw what you saw," she explained. "It wasn't my guilt."

He was struggling and she reached over the food, slipping her hand up to his face to make sure he heard and to be certain he understood. "Do you understand? You were right all along."

He turned so slightly it was only the tips of her fingers that registered the movement, and the warmth of his cheek filled her palm. "No. I don't understand. You

don't want to go?"

Sobs of relief rose in her chest, and she tried hard to smile them away. "No."

He would understand, given time. He had seen her innocence and knew Calgacus had traded on it, on her fear and her helplessness. There had never been any real doubt in her mind. He had a sight so much deeper than other men. When he looked at her she could feel the depth of its searching light. And because he had shown her the truth, she had a chance to choose again. To make a better choice.

She let herself face the peril of that new chance and continued on a sigh. "If it's dangerous to stay then I already accepted that when I asked you to bring me here." There was roughness on the smooth cheek that lay under her hand, and she slipped her fingers forward until their tips brushed the dark dye in his skin. "You don't have to stay," she assured him. "You see, there's a girl here, the girl who brought the food, I know her. She can help me get out if you have to leave."

He shook his head and she let her fingers fall from his face.

Shadows had filled all the spaces around them and he stood, walking slowly toward the wall and standing facing the corner, hanging his hands from his hips. The night hid all but the ghost of his form and the sound of his hard breathing echoing off the cold stone walls.

"Eat," he said, turning abruptly and walking back to take his seat beside the tray. "I have to go to meet someone soon. And you have to eat."

Brinnie made herself release the breath she'd been holding. Listening to him in the dark had been compelling beyond even her own need for air, and she scoured the night for a clearer vision of his face.

Did he understand? He'd explained it himself; the guilt was never hers. But did he understand? At least he'd asked no further sacrifice of her.

Lost love and loneliness, and terror at the danger she had come here to face, made her long to reach for him again. Terror that ached to be held and warm. But he was self-contained and aloof. He would have no interest in her touch.

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CHAPTER SEVEN.

Black dust stained deep into the whorls of his fingers, and he gripped the charcoal hard enough to crack it down its length, letting chips and debris fall onto the work. With irritation cut deep into his forehead, he blew the fabric clean and flicked the useless pieces from his fingers, sorting through his tin for another, better piece.

A square of linen was tacked tight over a board, held at each corner by a small nail, but the coarse grain ate away the soft carbon with every line.

Ignoring the frustrations, Antony pulled long strokes over the surface, catching the sweep of her hair and the high line of her cheekbone. But where the shadows claimed her eyes and mouth, he crouched closer to the cloth, urgently trying to work the play of light and shade into form.

For long minutes he wrestled with the image in his head trying to force it into being, but there was something gone, something he could not reproduce. There was fire hidden deep in the shadows of her face that flared from her eyes at unexpected moments. He'd repeatedly tried to capture that heat but its true nature escaped him.

Standing sharply, he threw the board to the ground and paced out unwanted tension. It was madness he saw. Flashes of insanity. But every time he tried to draw that

sickness into her face, the attempt fell to dust.

He turned and lifted the canvas back into better light. He'd missed it again. The lines and light and shadow were all as they should be, but not the tight focus of her gaze. He'd loaned her the wild inward look of someone searching the litter of a separate reality. And it was wrong.

Tearing the soft cloth from its pegs, he walked it to the fire and threw his failure into the flames.

Tav sat at a long trestle, his bound hand held protectively up against his chest, a large mug of frothing ale at his lips. "Shouldn't you be collecting on our investment tonight, boy?" He grinned around the lip of the mug.

"He told you?" There wasn't much point in asking. It sometimes seemed the twins had no need to tell each other details.

"How long is she there for?"

"Until I can convince her to move on."

"We're leaving tomorrow. You want us to take her east?"

That might solve two problems.

Brinnie would be moving out of this hotspot, for one. But she didn't want to go, and he couldn't send her with the brothers she knew had no business being in the city – and who didn't want her alive.

And the other....

"You can't go anywhere." Antony knew his brother would be heavily dosed with opiate, but there was still a tightness near his mouth that spoke of serious pain. "You need to stay put for a week or two."

"No. Our orders don't come from here, they come from the base at Inchtuthil and that's where we have to go. I'm not giving the tribune here a chance to press his authority. If I go now with Edan, we can move back to the coast and down, keep an ear out as we go, and end up at the fort, comfortably behind our own lines for the off season. If we stay here, Edan will be sent out alone with new orders."

"Or with me."

"And I'll be left here with nothing to do. No. We're going before they realise they can stop us."

"The Picts have got watchers on the fort. They'll already know you came in and they'll have you marked. And while you're hurt you can't risk getting into a fight on the way out."

Tav weighed that knowledge, unused to being the one making the choices. "We'll go along the coast on a galley to Fachabair or Devana."

That might work, and Antony nodded. They were going to take any course that kept them together. It came as no surprise. They could take their orders to return to Inchtuthil and use them to travel by sea all the way back to the marching camp at Devana. And if they did that, they wouldn't be needing their horses. Good. "Where's Edan now?"

"He traded a watch-duty on the wall for some information."

"What information?" There wasn't much they could learn in this camp that they didn't already know. They were the spies. They brought the information in.

"He wants to know where you're keeping our little friend."

Antony stiffened, clenching his jaw and narrowing his eyes. "He could have asked me that, if it mattered so much."

“Aye, but he knows you know where you put her. He’s worried about who else knows where she is.”

What remained of the bag of coin Edan had given him dropped heavily to the table. “Here.” Antony stood and turned away. “Drink this. I don’t need it after all.”

Brinnie woke with a hand pressed over her mouth and screams stopped before they were even drawn back. The door of her room was open no more than a crack, but the contrasting light swept in carrying incense smoke and terror with it.

“Don’t scream.” The words were warm against her frigid cheek and the relief they brought made her weak.

He lifted his hand from her lips, his movements slow, his face so near she could feel the heat of his cheek against her trembling lips. The weak light caught fire in his eyes as they fixed on hers, and he hung there over her, silent and still.

His breath was deliberately slow, and the strain of keeping the movement steady sounded in the air. He stared, unblinking, into her confusion. As gently as the warm air that moved across her lips, his fingertips brushed over her hair and Brinnie found her own breath short, her heartbeat rising like panic.

“What ...?” she whispered, as if he was a dreamer and she afraid to wake him.

The ball of his thumb grazed her lips; his fingers curled softly down her cheek. “Shhh. No one knows I’m here.” The words were hot air moving over her ear, and heat rose into her belly.

His eyes had not left hers.

“What’s happened?” Her lips moved like a kiss against his thumb and he pulled it away, the enchantment broken.

He stood, pressed the door closed so only threads of light survived, and sat onto the pallet at her side, sighing heavily. “Nothing yet.”

His words were so quiet she rose to sit beside him, daring to bring her face close to his.

“An ounce of prevention” he mumbled, and Brinnie began to wonder if he was drunk or somehow confused. She kept her silence, peering into the darkness in an effort to read his face as he continued. “The other girl. What’s her name?”

“Ula.”

He hunched over a tense silence, and she lifted a hand to his shoulder. “Tell me what you’re thinking. If it’s my safety at stake, let me make my own choices.”

A rough laugh answered, and she felt him nodding.

She was right enough, and Antony tried to find a line through the complex web of fiction. Given the whole truth, he had no doubt she could make her own choices. She couldn’t have the whole truth. He had lies and half-truths to give her and nothing more. First the lie. “I can’t stay in the city any longer.”

The warmth of her hand pressed onto his shoulder and tension grew in the muscle underneath. His habit of isolation and the voice of reason warred in his flesh with the rising desire to turn into the heat of her touch.

She had made it clear she didn’t trust him, and she was wise in that choice.

He had lied and manipulated her for the sake of his duty, and she should have been no more to him than an enemy soldier. But Edan was right. He had made choices based on a fascination he didn’t understand, and even now he could feel that obsession clouding his judgement. She was too near, too vulnerable. Too tempting.

“And I don’t know how I can get you out.” The truth to sweeten the lies.

"Then leave me here," she said plainly. "I'm not a child. Ula said the men who come here are mostly officers. The girls are not treated so badly."

A hot lump of revulsion rose in his gorge and he turned in the darkness to face her. The thought of her as he'd seen her that evening, so pale and elegant, so slim and graceful, trading herself as a whore, made him sick. He wanted to catch the fire in those wide green eyes for himself, and the memory of the light and love and passion he'd once glimpsed stuck in his heart like a knife.

"Don't look so shocked," she went on. "I'll stay here until I know for certain whether troops are coming in through this port."

"You won't be able to get out of the city when you have your information. That's the point. There's one gate in and out, and no one gets out without orders."

"Orders?"

"Soldiers or civilians. No one goes through the gates without a reason."

"Then how did you get out last time?" There was a flash of interest in her tone. It called up every doubt she couldn't voice.

"I went through the docks at night." His life had depended on lies for too long to be caught so easily. But her silence called his bluff. He pulled his shoulder away from her hand, twisting in irritation. "It won't be that easy for a woman."

"No." She moved back, taking the sweet scent of her hair with her. "If I need orders to get out, I need to win over an officer. And that's who I'll be seeing here. I'll find a way. Or I'll stay."

"You can't stay here, though." Something cold was gnawing at his gut and it was only habitual caution that kept him from standing to pace or raising his voice to cover the clamour of his rising heartbeat. "If I'm right, if they're watching me, and they'll be looking for you. Here, where I bought you."

Her whisper became a hiss. "So I'll find somewhere else can I go." His defeatism was frustrating her and it coloured her tone. "And what does Ula have to do with it?"

He dropped his head into his hands and tried to recall the best of the bad ideas he'd worked through before he came. "I want to talk to her, to see what she knows about the city that might help. She might know of somewhere else you can hide."

"I can talk to her, myself."

Was she so determined to stay here as a whore? "Aye, you can."

"Is that all?"

"No. I was going to take her out into the city, let her be seen with me, so if there was any talk about who I'd come in with there'd be some confusion at least." And if worst came to worst, he might have given her up to the commanders in Brinnie's place. But it was obvious now there'd be no need for that. She wanted to stay and meet her own future.

"That would have pleased her, at least." There was more than irritation crushed into her words and he tried to fix a clearer image of her face as she spoke. "She's happy in her work."

"Is she? And you think you will be too, it seems."

"You have a better idea?"

"That's why I came. I thought any idea was a better idea. I thought your safety mattered."

"I told you." When she brought her face up hard into his, her eyes had found some light, enough to shine with purpose. "I don't want to die. If you have to leave, go. And I will do whatever I have to do." She was trembling with the strain of holding on so tight to courage.

The lips she would give to any other man were close, and the eyes that haunted his

waking hours were shining before him. There was no doubting her determination, her obstinacy. He wanted to plead. "And if there is a way out?"

"Is there?"

"I had hoped you'd try. When I came in there was no one in the front room. I thought we might make it out of here without being seen. There's not much hope of that, now. And I thought the other girl might help. She doesn't know how to get out of the city or she'd be gone herself. But she might know something."

"You don't have to bother with her; she wants to stay. If it's too dangerous for you to stay in the city, leave. I'll talk to Ula about how to get out when the time comes."

"Why would she want to stay? Do you think this life is so good?"

"There's nothing left out there for us. And I guess she realises one man is much the same as any other."

That was too far. Shoving himself to his feet, he strode across the tiny space, coming too quickly to the wall and turning with acid on his tongue. "Is that right? Let me tell you about some of the men I've known and what they do for fun."

The door burst in and the diminutive madam stood framed in orange light, holding a lamp up before her. Her darting eyes took in Antony and the girl and her lips tightened like she'd eaten lemon, but she nodded once. Before she could step back, he snatched the lamp from her fingers and pushed her into the hallway.

As he closed the door an awful reality was dawning, and it choked him on its transparency. Brinnie shaded her eyes from the sudden glare of the lamp, sitting back into the corner of her pallet, and he watched her draw her knees up.

"You don't want to get out of here alive. Or at least you don't care if you don't. I didn't realise you were bent on martyrdom." Why hadn't he seen it when her madness first seized on this idea? She could have gone on to her lover in safety, but she chose to try the impossible.

"Yes I do!" She was adamant, but the facts didn't add up.

"Then what? You'd try anything rather than go back to your lover?"

Her pupils had retracted in the lamplight leaving her clear green eyes unshadowed, and he thought they would fill again with tears, but she tightened her lips and said, "I told you I didn't want to go back. I thought you understood. I will go to him. If I can. But only when this is done."

"I came here now to tell you it's not going to work. You have to leave tonight if you want to stay alive."

"No, that's not what you said. You said you had to go and you couldn't get me back out of the city, and I told you I was prepared for that when I came in.

"By all the great goddesses, Antony, I don't know who you are or where you came from. I don't even know if you'll be sleeping soundly in the barracks out there tonight. Whether you are with us or against us, I was fairly sure you could get me in here. After that"

They'd had this conversation before, when she'd pleaded for his help or for a clean death. He studied her face now for signs of the madness that took her. She was alone, she'd said then. "What did they do to you?" he asked. These people she'd trusted most.

She didn't answer, refused to meet his eyes.

"Who was it, Brinnie?"

"I don't need to tell you. You already know." Her face stayed downcast, her eyes on the sheet at her feet.

"I know you're crazy if you think I've had some kind of vision of what you've been through. I don't."

She closed her eyes, resigned to his denials. "Okay, so you keep saying. But you

understood what had happened better than I did. And you helped me see that the guilt wasn't mine. I'm not crazy. I just have a lot of grieving to do. I really thought you understood."

Grief? That's what was driving her? And with it, anger and desperation. No wonder he hadn't named the light in her eyes.

"Well I don't understand." He walked back to the pallet and sat the small lamp on the floor at his feet so the light rose past her and left her in soft shadow. "But you can't stay here. If you do want to stay alive, we have to find somewhere else for you to hide. Can we agree on that, at least?"

"Then we're back to where we started. Where else can I go?"

"We'll ask your friend. You're wrong about her wanting to stay here. And you're wrong about there being nothing left out there for you." So wrong. War was hard. Hard for everyone. But there were miles of free land, inside and outside of the empire.

"Is that an oracle?"

He caught the mockery in her tense half-smile and shrugged. "No. But I've known more men than you have. And I've seen more of the world. My sight's the same as yours, only the perspective is different."

"I want to be the one to talk to Ula. Can I?"

He shrugged, unwilling to argue a foregone conclusion. Feeding her lies, even this tissue of half-lies and reassurances, had worn him out. "I'll tell her you need to see her on my way out."

As the door closed Brinnie dived for the small lamp and raised the flame as high as it would go. She needed the light, wanted all the shadows and darkness of doubt pushed away from her skin. The room was warm enough, with the under-floor cavity heated by the air from a furnace, but she wrapped her arms tight around the cold grip of fear.

He was gone. And he was leaving her alone.

A sad smile ticked at the corners of her mouth. He was a soldier and not a seer. He had no oracles for her. Perhaps he was right after all. But if it was only a matter of perspective, then as many men who'd seen the things he'd seen and done what he'd done and been where he'd been had come back without his gift for understanding. No other man she'd ever met saw life as clearly as he did.

No, it was a gift. But he was gone. And now she was alone. The time to face these choices had come so very quickly.

There couldn't be many more days. The numbers rallying in the mountains were growing daily, and no matter how well equipped and provisioned the leader had made his force, no great army could stand for long without consuming everything around. And once the ceremony of unification was complete, the men would want to burst forward on the fires of passion and confidence.

So, no matter if the Romans found her before she could make a report, or if she managed to stay hidden until she could escape, it couldn't be many more days. If she survived or if she died trying, she would have given all she could to this fight, and no one, *no one*, could ask more of her than she had already given.

Dropping back onto the pallet, she pulled the light sheet up around her shoulders and tucked her bare feet in under herself. She hadn't said goodbye.

Peering blankly at the white stone wall, Brinnie touched her thumb to the fingertips that had stroked the roughness of his cheek. She hadn't said goodbye, and that knowledge brought the urge to brush those fingers over the softness of his lips. What if

she had just been bold enough to reach for him? Or to raise her lips to his?

He wouldn't have thanked her. He was a soldier. He'd told her that himself. Not a gentle farmer caught in the winds of a war he hated as Cam had been, but a hard man with blood on his hands and no real home.

Remembering his searching stare, hanging in the darkness so close above her lips, she couldn't help but wonder if he longed for a time when he could share more of himself. Did he ever dream of a day when he could touch someone, hold someone, and know they would still be there when he woke and waiting when he came home?

But she'd recognised his isolation the very first time she'd seen him, and there was wisdom in his choice. It was wisdom she herself should take to heart. He'd gone. Tonight and forever, and she hadn't said goodbye. Maybe that was for the best.

At least she could still rely on Ula.

The madam warmed to him a little more once there was extra cash in her hand, but Ula was engaged and he had to wait. Or come back. That suited him well. He hadn't heard the hour sounded from the fort, but it had to be drawing near to the midnight curfew in the city. He needed the time to go and have his orders changed: to clear him to move the spare horses out with him.

The duty officer would know the twins were leaving; it only remained to convince the man they had agreed to let him take their horses over land while they travelled by sea. And hope they were drunk or asleep somewhere other than the stables. It was a problem that went with the job. Everyone had their place in an army camp, except for irregulars. Spies had no set bed in any *castrum*. And being cavalry meant they usually ended up in the stables.

When he finally returned to the brothel, he was shown straight through.

Ula's smile was warm indeed, but the incense had failed to clear the scent of her most recent liaison from the air. "This is a surprise," she enthused, as she loosened the lace that gathered the neckline of her *tunica*. Her full figure moved to take up the slack as the fabric relaxed. Extending a hand to his, she led Antony to the pallet. "Sit down, relax."

"I will, but you sit, too. I've got to talk to you and I don't have a lot of time."

The girl was wary, glancing at the door before she slowly sat beside him, her hands pulled together in her lap. In the best of circumstances he'd have had time to win her confidence, to try and bring her to an agreement. But there was no time.

"How do you know Brin?" he asked directly.

"I lived in the same village as her husband. South of here. He and I grew up together, then I met her when she came down to live with him."

How long ago, he wondered. Brinnie had said she was a widow. It didn't matter for now, he had to stick to the important details. "Do you want to go home?"

"This is some kind of trick, isn't it? You're trying to dig for information. I have nothing to tell you that you can't find out from your own officers. I was brought up here as a prisoner of war. I'm a slave, nothing more."

"It's not a trick. And I don't have time for games. I'll tell you what I need, and you decide if you want to go home or not. If not, tell me as soon as you decide because I'll have to make other plans. Got it?"

She was reserved; her single sputtering candle reflected her uncertainty.

"Brinnie came in here for information on troop movements. She wants to take that information back to Calgacus. But the Romans suspect she's here. It isn't safe for her to

stay, and she doesn't want to leave without the details she came for. There's going to be a major battle, soon, in the next few days, and none of us have the time to wait here. She has to get back to Calgacus."

Ula's eyes moved sharply back and forth, focused on a shadowed patch of wall, and her brow furrowed with the depth of her concentration. But she said nothing.

"I can take her to him. I've got a horse ready to go, now, but she won't leave with me. I need you to convince her. If you can't convince her to go with you, lie. She doesn't want to leave, but she might follow if she thinks you're taking her to another safe house. Have you got any idea how I can get her out of the city? Ever heard anything, any rumour that might give us a way out?"

Ula shook her head silently, still obviously weighing the truth of what she heard.

"Okay. The only idea I have is the main drain under the wall. Get her to the outlet pipe for the bathhouse waste water before dawn. I'll be waiting outside the wall with the horses."

Her eyes had moved to his and she was visibly shaking.

"If you can do that, I'll have a second horse with me. It's yours. I'll take you back to Calgacus' main camp with me."

"Why?" She could hardly breathe and her throat was hoarse. "Why are you helping her? Or me? She said you kidnapped her."

"That was what we'd planned to say. General Euguein sent us in here, but he wants Brin back with the leader."

"Wait." A new light filled her eyes and a hopeful smile started on her lips. "You're not with her? You're just, what, like a bodyguard?"

"That's close."

"And she's going back to him?"

He nodded and stood. "Are you in? And can you get both of you out of here tonight?" Rough fists clawed at his gut. He had no way to know how competent or trustworthy this girl was. And if Brin refused....

"I'll do my best." She rose beside him, her manner suddenly all crisp efficiency. "We'll need blankets." She lifted the fine fabric of her skirt. "They don't give us anything warm to wear; it keeps us in by the fire. And I'll need a knife."

There was no pause in the young woman's attitude now. She was confident, at least. Antony lifted the skinning knife from its sheath on his calf, and said, "If you're not there before sunrise I have to go on without you. If you're late, there's no point in trying. I'll be gone."

"I understand." She reached for his hand and smiled a bright invitation. "It's a long time 'til sunrise. You want to stay a while?"

He returned a tight smile and jerked his hand from hers. "I have to get the horses out before curfew. You can hide in shadows, I can't. I told Brinnie I'd send you in to her. I'll see you on the outside."

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CHAPTER EIGHT.

For the third and final time that night, Brinnie heard her door open. This time, though, there was no chance she would be woken. Dread churned in her gut, and sweats boiled up under her skin, hot then cold, as she waited for the night to unfold.

Ula had a wide smile, but blood had spattered the skirts of her *tunica*. "Time to

move, Brinnie. Let's go. Are you ready?"

This was not as she had planned, but Ula had moved to take her hand and was pulling her to her feet as she spoke. "Stop. Tell me what you're doing. Where are we going?"

"I wish I had to time to explain, Brin. Or to argue with you. The fact is, I just killed a man to buy us a chance to get out of here, and it won't be too long until someone finds him." She took the time to grin. "These men don't spend a lot of time at their pleasures."

Already she had moved to crack the door open, peering through the break into the hallway beyond. "Down to the dining room and out through the kitchen. Hurry. If you stop or turn back, you're dead. If you put my life at risk in this, love you as I do, Brinnie, I'll kill you myself. Now, let's go."

Although she was silent in the hallway, in the warmth of the empty kitchen Ula braved one more word of advice. "It's cold out there. There's a curfew and the guards won't ask questions, they'll kill us both. Stay in the shadows, stay behind me, and don't stop moving until we get to where we're going."

Brinnie grabbed her arm. "Wait. Or I will stop. And you will have to kill me. Tell me now, where are we going?"

"I'm taking you to a safe place. Your Roman came. He said he wanted you kept safe, and that's what we're doing. Except, standing here is not safe. Move now or I'll go on without you." Shoving Brin through the door into the festering alleyway behind, Ula gathered her skirts and started to jog along the rear of the building.

In bare feet and the filmy linen garment she'd been given to wear, Brin hit cold as solid as a wall. It broke around her, sending shards and splinters deep into her flesh. It seized her by the ankles and shook her, rushing up into her nose and mouth and filling her skull with pain.

Movement was her only hope and it seemed an impossibility. Fixing her rattling hopes on the blur of movement ahead, she forced her legs to carry her, even as her feet turned numb.

Down brushy paths and alleyways, across footpaths and garbage piles, often in the shadow of the wall with sentries moving above, she followed in an ever increasing fugue. All she saw of the city were shadows and garbage, all piled against the city wall or filling narrow chutes and alleyways. But she had no interest in the dark filth. She was cold and afraid and she had to keep moving.

Stopping suddenly, Ula pulled her back against a dark wall, and she nearly fainted with relief as she pressed herself hard against the heated stonework of the bathhouse. The furnace inside, which heated the water and forced hot air through the floor space and into the vented hotrooms, made itself known even here in the frigid alleyway.

Ula tapped her shoulder, pointing up at the city wall above them where silent shadows moved through the watch. The waxing moon was past half-full and thin cloud did little to cover its silver light. Where there was cloud, they would have to use it. Pushing her icy lips up against Brinnie's ear, she whispered, "We're going through the waste pipe and it's going to be wet. As soon as the shadows form, okay?"

Brin grabbed her arm. "Through the wall? We're going out?" Cold made her words a feeble hiss, but there was no doubting the fury behind them.

As she looked up, the cloud shadow stole the moonlight from Brinnie's skin, and Ula didn't bother to argue. "Go, now, ahead of me. Hurry." And pressed her from the shadow of the wall, down the slippery mud of the waste gully, and into the frigid pools.

The clay pipe was wide enough to crouch through, but its walls were covered in rank slime, and the water around their feet had begun to ice over. Burning cast away

numbness and her feet ached as if each step carried her over a fire pit. The cold ate into her ankles and then her knees, as the putrid dark finally gave way to broken moonlight.

She stopped, hauled to a halt by a solid weight clinging to the back of her *tunica*.

"If you've got a goddess, pray now," Ula advised. "Get down low, onto your belly, and try to stay under shrubs or bushes until we get closer to the bay."

"How far does this gully run?" Brinnie forced the words out, but her shuddering made them hard to hear. Her teeth clattered hard on her tongue and the taste of blood warred with the stench of stale water.

"How should I know? I had to guess where the outlet pipe was. There's a moon shadow. Go. He's out here somewhere."

Brinnie crouched down into the mud at the lip of the pipe. She had no desire to move further. The blood that tried to flow in her veins had thickened and slowed to a stop, and she needed to stop, too. She needed to sleep, to roll herself up against the relentless aching cold and let the fogs fill her head with morphia.

She turned her face up the wall, the quaking in her neck making her nod repeatedly, as she searched for any sign of movement above. The moon showed its face again, lighting a shallow gully where piles of rotting rushes and grass had recently been shovelled aside to clear the drain. Somewhere ahead she could hear the rippling movement of the water in the bay, and the smell of the sea carried to her on fitful breezes.

Trees had been cleared well back all around the wall, but as they crouched from one boggy pile to the next, the bank rose slightly around them and large stones stood clear of the earthworks. When at last they cleared the gully and emerged onto the stony foreshore, Ula clutched at her arm and, bent double, pulled them both into a stumbling run.

The cold was unbearable. It had moved itself into her head, her arms and her legs. Every breath pulled more into her chest, and her panting dragged and whistled as her throat tried to close it out. Under the cover of rocks, where the shrubby brush had tried to re-establish itself, Ula dropped into a ball, hissing curses, and Brinnie let her legs fold, too.

"Where is he," Ula stuttered. "This is what I get for trusting a Roman. We'll freeze out here."

Brin had no strength to argue Antony's case, and she rolled tighter around her legs and closed her eyes. He'd lied to her about leaving her in the city, but she had no doubt he would be here somewhere. "And what I get," she said, "for trusting you."

Ula made a strangled groan, and tried to push herself upright. "It's about time. Brinnie, get up."

A blanket fell around Brin's shoulders and she opened her eyes as Antony dropped to a squat in front of her. "You can't stop, yet. We've got to get back to the tree line and further if you want a fire. On your feet."

He reached to help her stand and she pulled herself against him, wrapping herself around him, leeching the heat from his body into her own. She pressed her face hard under his arm, breathing the warm air from his skin as she stumbled blindly where ever he led.

Brin was frozen. Holding her tight against his side, Antony felt just how completely the cold had invaded her muscle and bone. She shivered and stumbled weakly in his arms as he guided them back to the trees and to the waiting horses.

Beside him, Ula huddled under her blanket, her step erratic, the chattering of her teeth easily heard. Leaning to pull her closer, he tucked her in under his free arm and spread his fleece cloak over them all.

Men stepped forward from beside the horses, and Antony froze, his ability to respond reduced by the need of the women he held. The moon found chinks in the dense cover of the trees, forcing a shaft or two of moving light down onto the attackers. Not enough to give a clear outline. Not for him or for them. And his sword belt hung over his saddle, far from his reach. With the girls tucked in under his arms, he presented a difficult target to read effectively. But the light gave him one valuable piece of reassurance. The men were Celts. Nowhere was there the scratch or shine of armour.

"Stand apart," a voice demanded and Antony tightened his grip on the squirm at his side.

Ula moved against him again, but not as he'd thought, to separate. She twisted, ducking a little and her movements resulted in the cold hard length of his dagger pressed secretively onto the soft flesh of his belly. Swiftly, he slid his arm from over her shoulder, and with her pressed in tight against his back, he took the blade from her fingers.

"Are you Euguein's guards," he asked the shadows ahead. There was a good chance these were part of the surveillance team the general had come west to set in place. And if they were just hungry men travelling to the war zone and living off forage, the general's name might give them pause.

"Shut up. You were seen riding out of the Roman city. That makes you an enemy."

"You think Romans climb out of the drains?" Ula snapped from between her clacking teeth. "That makes you idiots. Get us horses. I've got to get to a fire."

Giving the last of her strength up to the sound, Brinnie groaned and slid down to her knees, clinging weakly to Antony's thigh. "Neirin," she said. "It's me."

The man she addressed stepped forward as if he'd been kicked. He leapt to take her by the shoulders, raising her to her feet, then just as swiftly lifting her into his arms. "By the gods, Brinnie, we heard you went in. Are you all right? You're frozen."

"Do we look all right?" Still holding herself barely upright by gripping Antony's heavy woollen overshirt, Ula took a half step forward and he caught her.

Sweeping her into his arms, Antony strode past the man who held Brinnie to where the second guard stood gaping. "Get onto the horse. I'll hand her up," he ordered, waiting while the man found his mount and climbed into his saddle.

With Ula in the warm embrace of the horseman, Antony threw himself onto his own horse and glared expectantly at the man who held Brin. "I'll take her," he said.

"You're the mercenary. There's been talk about you."

"Good. Hand her up, now, and get us back to where ever you have a fire."

"We have to move quickly," Ula called weakly. "There's a dead centurion in my bed. He'll be found by now and they'll start scouring the area. Let's go."

With reluctance stemming from obvious mistrust, and dislike growing on his face like mould, the guard handed Brin up and moved to mount. Leaving the free man to catch and lead the spare horses, Antony turned to face the second guard. "Now," he repeated loudly, making sure no one was going to argue any further. "Take us to where ever you have a fire."

Brinnie tucked her arms in tighter, pulling the rough wool close around her shoulders and arms. If there'd been a time when she was reluctant to settle onto the hard warmth of his chest, the fears she had named for herself then no longer held sway. Her forehead pressed into the hollow of his shoulder and she breathed him deep into her, letting the soothing smell fill her body. The heat in his blood carried comfort from the tips of her fingers, to her feet and bare burning toes.

The strength of his arm around her held her fears at bay, and the even balance of his motion as he rode rubbed gently at her skin, calling her own blood up to meet his.

Shivers still coursed through her in hard spasms, shaking her against him, but she had that core of heat to hold and it was enough for the moment.

Opening her eyes, she turned her face up to his. He frowned, concentrating on the murky darkness ahead, leaning his own face down over hers when branches hung low over the track. When he met her eyes, she bunched what she had of her returning strength into a fist and slammed it into his chest. "Lying bastard," she stuttered at him.

Shock rushed fire into his eyes, then he chuckled. "I'm sorry, I thought keeping you alive was more important than the truth."

"My choice," she said into his shoulder and he nodded and shrugged slightly.

"You can always go back in." They moved along the dark track for a moment as he let her consider that option, then he rested his cheek against her hair and laughed quietly at her silence.

What had once been a small village lay as bleak as bones beneath the silver light. Piles of rubble still reeked of the fires that had consumed the houses they'd been. The thick smell of carrion and old smoke hung on the air like the ghost of the lives that had gone. Moving between the ruined buildings, the riders came to a small hut; it might once have been a stable or storage silo, but the guards had cleared the space inside and set a small fire on the cobbles.

Antony let Brinnie slide to her feet, her grip tight on the horse's mane until he slipped down to support her. Without his heat against her, the cold night rushed at her and she huddled under her blanket, waiting. As soon as he stood beside her, she turned back to him and walked into the hut under his arm.

The fire had fallen to coals and he lowered her to the floor, slipping out past the others as they entered, searching the ruins for wood.

The cobbles were cold under her and Brinnie shuffled to her knees, pushing her blanket under herself, then huddled down into her own misery. As soon as the fire came up, she'd be able to drive out the ragged tremors that seized her flesh and find something warm to eat. Staring feebly from under the cowl of blanket, she looked at the faces around her.

Neirin was there, the son of a local clan chieftain. A strong boy, but not bright. The only help the old man had now, and he'd soon be moving east.

Across the fire was Peren, and the sight of him caught on Brin's top lip, curling in the soft skin like he was a bad smell. His feral smile, dark with greasy stubble, revealed a slimy red tongue that moved over his lips incessantly. In better days she would never have had to deal with his like, but in these times, all men who would fight together became brothers, of a sort. She hadn't seen him until now. If he'd ridden out to capture them he'd hung back, keeping his distance.

And at the door, holding to the shadows and keeping Antony in sight, was a third man Brinnie couldn't place. He was the rider who'd carried Ula back to the hut, but she hadn't heard his name or heard him utter a sound. Now he kept up his sullen silence, not aiding in the collection of firewood, but not willing to allow Antony to disappear into the darkness.

Ula had moved forward onto her knees, too, blowing at the coals and embers and holding her hands out over the fire pit.

When Antony strode back into the small space, all the eyes in the room went to him. He dropped to one knee with the bundle of kindling and logs, handing a flat piece of board to Ula. As he carefully piled twigs over the coals, Ula fanned the embers into life and soon the small fire crackled and rose.

With brushwood burning bright, he laid the larger logs over the mound, raising his eyes but not his face to watch Brin over the flames.

Firelight suited his face. Shadows crowded close about his shoulders and his skin shone golden; the weight of his fringe hung forward in a ragged curtain, bright with reflected lights. When her study rose to his eyes, she kept her gaze steady and felt the warm awareness of him tickle through her heart. He met her stare and held it just as surely as if he'd reached to take her hand.

The fire's heat crept up into her cheeks and her pulse rose with it. A primitive cognizance warned her now was the time to look away. Her body's silent senses read the dragging moments of eye contact, knowing this was a science every creature understood.

"We make a good team." Ula smiled and tossed her board onto the flames. "I didn't say 'hot food', but I'm going to trust you were one step ahead of me?"

Antony turned his attention to her, a tiny frown skipping over his brow before he returned her smile and shook his head. "Not hot yet. And, there's this dead Roman in your bed. We need to start moving as soon as you feel like you can." Again his gaze shifted to Brinnie and she felt it as acutely as a touch.

She turned her study inwards, feeling out her physical condition. "I'm all right. Warmer." Her feet were still bright red and burning. "I need a hot drink. And shoes."

Their hosts had made no move to meet any need for comfort. Neiren might not have thought to offer. Peren had all the hospitality of an imbecilic grinning weasel. And the silent stranger by the door looked like a man who would kill for the food in his own mother's hand. Brin shook off a shiver and looked expectantly at Antony.

"No shoes," he said. "No cloaks, furs or warm tunics." He stood, and her eyes climbed his lean lines. "Warm wine. That's going to have to do, unless these men have food they want to offer?"

Neirin scoffed. "We've got no food. The only reason we didn't steal yours is because we thought we'd kill you first." He looked at Antony like the idea still held some charm, but when he turned down to Brin he smiled apologetically. "I didn't know you were there, Brinnie."

She caught the warning look Antony threw her as he moved through the door to collect what they needed from the horses. A quick glance at Ula showed the same understanding already present in her eyes. "That's okay, Neirin." She smiled. "The general knew we'd be coming out tonight. I don't know why he didn't warn you to expect us."

Her lies stirred the interest of the silent watcher, but only briefly. He was too intent on his dark vigil, and his patience was rewarded. Antony returned with the food pack and wine, but thrown over his shoulder was the sword belt that had hung from his saddle. He set a small crock of wine at the edge of the flames to heat, then carefully handed his long dagger to Ula. For Brin, he had a smaller blade, and he tore bread from a loaf and handed both to her.

As he stood to shrug the cape from his shoulders, Antony made a new assessment of their hosts. And his companions. With the long knife hidden the folds of her blanket, Ula had moved a little way back from the fire. Her position was now just behind and beside the hawkish man with dark shifting eyes and bloodless lips. There was no doubt in Antony's mind, or evidently Ula's, that their cause was best served by his blood on the floor.

Eirbrin had set her small knife onto the stones beside her while she ate, but the man nearest her seemed to pose little threat to her safety. If anything, he was smitten by her, and that was no surprise.

The cold had perfected the ivory smoothness of her skin, leaving her eyes to shine vivid green from amid the shadows of fatigue. Her curls warred with the neat rows of

braiding at her temple, rolling into long ringlets that fell over her shoulders and floating in single strands down her cheek and brow. In the warmth of the fire she had let the blanket slip back from her shoulders, and the nearly transparent fabric of her *tunica*, beaded to catch the light and the eye, was visible at her throat.

By the gods, did she not see herself as others saw her?

The urge consumed him to have her stand, to hold her up to a great mirror and let her see the reality he saw. She should recognise the exquisite grace that was so evident to him and to all men who saw her. But it was a reality that fuelled greed: a rare presence that made a man want to hold her for himself. And that included the brawny youth at her side.

Antony lowered the heavy sheath of his broadsword back over his shoulder, reaching behind his hip to catch the clip near its point and fasten the sword belt across his chest. The weight of the sword was some consolation, but in the cramped space of the watchers' hut, the threats he saw were better answered by swifter and more subtle preventative action.

"We shouldn't keep you men from your patrol," he said to the fire, squatting to lift the seething pot of wine away from the heat. "There's talk of men coming in to the port. Dawn isn't far off and the ships come in on the morning tide."

Neirin started to stand. "There're men coming in on the ships today?"

"No." Peren the rodent spoke, his thin lip curling his smile into a sneer. "He just wants us gone. He wants both these women for himself."

An image of this man, his greasy throat opened to the night air, flashed behind Antony's eyes as he dipped a tin beaker into the wine and handed it to Ula. A half-smile moved her features as she drank and handed the cup on to Brinnie, then Ula's eyes moved to the night above where he knelt. She was following the movement of the third man, behind him, and he watched her face for a warning.

She reached nonchalantly to take the bread and wine from Brin, but kept her face turned up to the silent stranger behind him. "How safe are the roads along the coast?"

"They're not safe."

His answer was thick with an accent and came from closer than was comfortable. He'd made no sound in his approach, and Antony cast off any semblance of ignorance, preferring to meet his menace squarely. He stood, turning as he did. "We need at least an hour's hard ride along that road before sunrise. What's the danger?" he asked.

"There're multitudes of them." The man grinned.

Ula dipped a wad of crust into the wine and shoved it all into her mouth, dusting her hands as she handed the cup back to Brinnie. "What's your name, darling? Neirin is it?" she mumbled around her food. "Will you show Brinnie where the horses are? Help her wrap up."

Panic lit Eirbrin's eyes as she realised they were moving, and quickly. She tipped as much of the hot wine into her mouth as she could, clutching at her blanket to keep it from falling and struggling to stand. She snatched up her knife and ducked around the fire, gathering the food pack and wine skin, bundling everything roughly into her arms.

Antony stepped closer to the man he'd singled out, pushing him back so Brin could reach the door from behind the cover of his back. In the bright firelight, Ula had turned to face the wall. As she bent to split the side-seams of her long straight *tunica*, the rounded curves of her hips and the shadows of her bare buttocks showed clearly through the fine linen, and the two remaining guards turned to watch. Her blanket was in her hand, and she made a quick slit a third of its length from one corner, and dropped it over her head like a cape.

Her alterations done, she passed the knife from one hand to the other and turned to

face the room.

The seated rodent noticed his disadvantage, glancing furtively from Antony to Ula, but before he could push to his feet, Antony motioned for her to follow Brin into the night. Intent on her own plan of action, however, Ula stepped behind the rat-man, seized the hair on the crown of his head and sliced a new and gaping smile across his throat.

Antony swore and stepped out through the door, drawing the broad blade as he cleared himself the space to wield it. She might only have precipitated the inevitable, but as a general rule, he preferred to move without leaving a trail of corpses. Including his own.

The man he faced was no farmer.

The swords he drew were ornately etched with curling filigree on the guards, and he held one in each hand. His back was to the fire, light from the doorway framing his wide shoulders, his eyes dark unreadable shadows.

Ula was not a girl Antony would have turned his back on, but through the door he saw her, engrossed for the moment in fighting the heavy woollen tunic from rat-man's body. She had her own priorities.

Carefully, he moved his own fight backwards so he stood more in the shadows, and his opponent more clearly in the light. Watchful, ready, he saw the first slash coming and stepped into the fray.

Brinnie clutched her blanket tight, watching while Neirin tied the saddle pack back into place. "I need shoes." She shivered. "Are you sure you don't have anything I could use? Where are all your clothes and food?"

"At home," he said apologetically. "You should come home with me. It isn't time to go to the battle yet, but it isn't too long away. It's only a few days to the full moon. Come back to my father's house. Get some warm clothes. I don't trust that man, and neither does anyone else who's seen him." He finished his work at the side of the horse and turned. "He's got a crazy look about him."

"He has." She smiled to herself. "I trust him, though. He won't harm me. He's had chance enough to do it and chance enough to leave me to the Romans. Now he's helped Ula escape from a whorehouse, too."

The big youth moved his fingers slowly to her hand where it held the blanket together at her chest. "I haven't ever seen you wear anything like this before, Brinnie. Is this what Roman prostitutes wear? None of the girls here have anything this pretty any more. The girls who are still alive, that is, and not gone, to the war or back up into the mountains." His thick fingers moved to loosen her grip on the rough wool, and she stepped away from him.

Antony emerged from the hut behind her, and Neirin's interest in her bodice died. "I told you," he hissed, and ran toward the clash of swords.

Ula pulled Peren's tunic free and threw it to the side. She moved with frantic speed, ignoring the fight at the doorway above as she dragged her blanket over her head, replaced it with the bloodstained woollen tunic, and dropped down to unlace the knee-high boots her victim wore.

They smelled foul and the fleece lining was greasy with filth and neglect, but compared to chilblains and frostbite, enduring it was a small price to pay. His slack disinterest in her efforts did nothing to help her struggle. More than once she nearly toppled backwards into the fire.

In more time than it should have taken, she had both his boots off and she shoved her chafed red toes into their depths. Her fingers shook, clumsy with her haste as she dragged the laces up and tried to tie them tight. Balling the extra length of thonging and shoving it down the inside of her calf, she launched herself to her feet and ran to the

doorway.

Antony now held two attackers back, one a skilful fighter with two swords and the sense to wait and watch and time his movements, waiting for a gap or weakness. The other was the young man, big and full of fury, barging into the action with wild swinging blows that endangered his ally as much as his opponent.

With a knife less than half the reach of the swordsman's dual weapons, she had no interest in meeting him face to face. She tried instead to catch Antony's eye. If he saw her waiting and could turn the fight, she could come out from behind.

In the frigid night, sweat streaked his face gluing hair across his brow, and cold clutched the breath from his lips in thick clouds. His sword moved like it was an extension of his own flesh, blocking and throwing back the furious efforts of the youth, and she might have smiled, enjoying the sight of his skill and exertion.

When he did see her, there was no sign of a smile on his mouth. His nostrils flared and his mouth set a grim line. For all that the boy lacked skill, he was as strong as an ox and determination carried him far. It would not be long before the second man was left an opening. He wouldn't need a second chance.

Fatigue showed in Antony's swing, but he took two steps to the side, leaning in to force the youth back against the waiting man. And unknowingly obliging, the swordsman stepped across Ula's range. Her knife was in to the hilt over his kidneys before he knew his danger.

The blade jammed tight, its slick handle slipping from her fingers as he twisted to the ground. Beside her Neirin thrashed and belted at his foe, and she stepped away from the dying man, unarmed, and screamed, "Hey you!" as loud as the cold air allowed.

The youth turned, and Antony took the only chance he needed. The heavy razor sharp blade hit the young man's shoulder from above and sank through muscle and bone, raising a fountain of arterial blood. He dropped to his knees, then down to the ground, clutching the wound with a look of pained surprise drawn over his face.

Antony leaned on his sword, dragging air over his dry tongue, watching both men for signs of life.

Ula laughed, adrenaline and success surging ecstatically through her veins. "I told you we made a good team." She grinned, and turned her attention up to Brinnie.

"Come in here girl before you freeze again," she called. "Which of them has the better boots?"

Antony hung his head. The muscles in his arms ached like they'd been skewered with burning staves, his abdomen clenched over every breath and he hawked and spat woolly dryness from his mouth. Every day of every campaign season for the last eighteen years he'd done two hours, twice a day in weapons training. And it never equalled a third of the exertion of ten minutes of hard combat. There was a weird law of physics or magic that governed such things, and he was too tired to question it now.

Feeling the need to limp, he moved slowly into the hut and reached for the half-empty pan of wine. The heat had gone out of it, and he tipped it back into his mouth thankfully. Behind him, Ula was already busy stripping the warm clothes from the corpses and he turned to make certain Brinnie was unhurt.

She knelt at the silent stranger's feet, one boot off. Ula had hefted his swords, feeling for herself how well weighted and balanced they were in her hand. She too, looked down at Brinnie and said, "Hey Roman. Look what she found."

In Brin's pale hand was a small dark tile. The salt glazed surface she raised was marked with the letters, LEG IX HIS and the open mouthed stamp of a lynx head. The Ninth Hispanic Legion. When she flipped it, it showed COH III HI. Third Hispanic Cohort, auxiliary infantry.

“Well,” she said as she looked up to him. “This explains how the Romans knew I was there.”

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CHAPTER NINE.

Small stones were plentiful and Antony made a decent cairn for the dead, working quietly while the girls warmed themselves and changed into the practical but unflattering garments left by their hosts. When they emerged, Ula applied her usual direct approach to the travelling arrangements. “I’ll take the black,” she said, striding toward the animal in the lightening air of the dawn.

“He won’t be easy to ride,” Antony told her. “He takes some holding.”

“So do I.” She winked and pulled herself up into the saddle.

He threw his leg over his own mount and turned.

Brin stood apart, her face holding the grey morning light like a sickness. “I can’t,” she whispered. One foot was forward, but she hadn’t completed her step. Her determination to follow had deserted her half way.

The risk she’d taken in entering the city, the danger and the cost she expected to bear for that, had been her tithe. Now she was out, the terror of facing death or torture was gone and with it her pledge and her payment.

He’d saved her life. She didn’t doubt that. But now as she looked up at Antony’s confusion, the knowledge that they were riding back to the leader’s camp sat in her stomach, as cold as the memory of betrayal.

“I’m sorry. I can’t go back.” A day’s ride. Two. Three days until the full moon and the ceremony of unification. It was too soon and she couldn’t face the cost.

Antony tapped his horse’s side, but Ula moved forward faster. She crossed the gap and leaned down to meet Brinnie’s dread. “You can’t go back into the city. You can’t stay here. The Romans were already looking for you and now they’re looking for both of us. I killed a man to get us out and now there are three more corpses in this village. Including a spy.” For a moment or two she sat in silence, letting Eirbrin hear just how deeply they were enmeshed in the events unfolding around them.

“Nothing you had here will be left after today. Do you understand that? They are looking for you. Anyone they find alive in these hills will be dead tomorrow. And if they know the Roman here got you out, he’s a dead man, too.”

The deaths of everyone too weak to flee were to be piled on her head as well. And the war, and the freezing dawn, and the last two people in the world she had trusted all conspired to carry her back to her shame.

She looked up, trying to see clearly past the bulk of Ula’s horse and the irritation glaring down at her, to where Antony waited. His face was down, his eyes shadowed, and a deep furrow ran over his brow. Even over the distance between them, she could see a complex map of emotion in his expression, but the elements that came together defied her.

“I have to go, Brin. We have to go.” Ula pointed to Antony and back. “You can stay here and die. Or you can come back with us to where you’re needed and do what you can to help.”

“They don’t need me,” she said almost to herself.

Antony dropped to the ground and led her horse closer. His soft mouth had set hard; the glints of madness or prophecy were bright in his eyes. “Maybe not,” he

answered. "But if you want food and somewhere safe and warm to wait out this storm, you might need them."

He was right. Again. All the people, all the food, all the comfort from all over these high frozen peaks had been gathered together in the glens to the east. If they wanted to survive the winter, they had to go to them. Swallowing the rising tide of her sadness, she let her face set into the familiar lines of denial and nodded. Her fates were going to carry her back, no matter how she tried to free herself from the circle. But she would find better answers. This time, she would find a better way.

He stepped closer, and Brinnie began to turn, ready enough to accept his help to mount. But his hand came up to her shoulder, bringing her face gently back to his. Words were in his mouth and his eyes fixed on her lips as if he were judging the answers she might give, but for what seemed an age he didn't speak.

Where his fingertips had brushed her arm her skin buzzed, the nerves humming like a hive in response to his touch. Her chest held the cold air, and small muscles near her eye ticked and threatened to break the set of her features.

His gaze flicked up and he met her eyes with the extraordinary searching intensity that marked him, then away. When he spoke it was a whisper and its intimacy drew her closer, into the warmth of his solitude. "I wish I understood this fear." The words brushed over her cheek. "I don't. But I know we have at least ten leagues to ride today. The horses are fit but it's a hard ride. You have to want to get there or you won't make it. You're our guide; I don't know this country."

He paused and looked again from her lips to her eyes. "Maybe by tonight you'll have found a better solution, something that doesn't cost so much. But for now, I need your knowledge of the place and the people."

Another need to meet. "You could find your way. You don't need me."

A smile flashed into his eyes and vanished, staying only long enough to soften the grim set of his lips. "Okay, so I don't need you. But leaving you here to die would cost more than I'm willing to pay."

Brinnie couldn't share his smile. She didn't know the area they were going into any better than he did, only that they should follow the trade roads north east, along the coastal edge of the mountains. And she knew what she'd told a thousand itinerant warriors about finding the guides along the way.

She couldn't make herself want to get to their goal. She could endure the hardship of the ride, as she'd endured all those hardships that had come. She could do it without complaint. But she was moving toward a future she didn't want and leaving behind the pitiful remains of all her life had once been.

Beside the hut, the burial cairns spoke volumes about what their world had become. The strong went off to kill and die, and the weak of heart or mind or conscience were left behind as lords. And even here in the burned remains, the deceivers they all feared had their nests.

Again she nodded slightly, watching the stillness of his mouth as she spoke. "We have to go. All right. And if I'm the guide, I choose to leave here by the southern road, not along the coast."

He gave a single sharp nod. "Okay."

"You'll trust my judgement on that? What do you see? Give me an oracle. Tell me my future."

"I'm not a seer," he repeated, the flash of his smile ready again.

"Humour me."

"All right." He stepped back, watching his feet and considering the problem as the daylight strengthened enough to light his vision. The question moved over his features

and when he lifted his face, he shrugged and looked directly into her eyes. "You won't be alone."

Laughter that struggled between joy and despair rose into her mouth and tears blurred her sight. "That's the best hope I've had for a long time. It'll have to do."

Turning to the horse, she wiped her eyes and waited for help to mount.

Antony held to the back as they cantered up the pitted and puddled turf road, watching for signs of fatigue in his companions. The soft surface made the going a little harder for the horses and easier on their riders, but neither of the girls had been readied for the hard physical slog of a long ride.

Ula rode ahead, occasionally spouting opinions that grew from an unassailable good humour. Brinnie wrapped her blanket tight around her arms, even though the clothes she wore were heavy and the autumn day was too warm for this exertion. She smiled at Ula's tasteless jokes and commented now and then on their direction or the countryside, but in essence she had removed herself, drawn herself into a cocoon of tense silence, and kept her attention grimly fixed on the horizon.

As the view ahead fell from the foothills, rolling through rough forest to the long open grassflats that lipped a river below, Antony called a halt. The horses could spell and graze below while they did the same.

He laid the fire and Brinnie kept her thoughts wrapped in her blanket, her gaze slowly wandering the length of watercourse before of them. He set water to simmer and dropped in a chunk of salted pork, then moved to sit beside her on the log she'd chosen. Before he could speak, she said, "You borrowed money. Obviously borrowed horses. And now I see you borrowed food as well. You know some generous people."

He looked down at his hands and out across the wide green flat, finding a course as close as he could to the truth. "I met some careless people. And some drunks. The food I bought with their money."

"I don't think you tell me the whole truth," she said, letting the wind take the words and turning her face away as though she didn't want to hear his answer.

"One day I'll trade you secrets." He smiled.

"That would be a day for brave souls." Ula stepped over the log and took a seat between them. "In the meantime, you'd better tell me your story. If I keep calling you Roman, we'll all be killed."

As much as possible he dodged the same rapid-fire questions he'd already answered for Brin and painted his fictional portrait of a Pictish mercenary. Saying as little as he could, he steered the conversation back to Ula, herself.

Slapping a hand down onto Brin's shoulder, she said, "Brinnie and I are widows, did she tell you?"

Brin looked sharply away, and he longed to stop the words in Ula's mouth. Her rough pronouncements had no place among the scars and sadness of Brinnie's past. If she had stories that needed telling, he would rather have heard them from her own lips.

But Ula had no qualms about sharing her history. Or Brin's. "We lost our husbands on the same night, nearly a full year ago. There's a line of Roman forts down south of here. We launched an attack on one and it should have been a walkover, but the Romans got word of the plan, and our men were caught between two legions. They didn't have a chance."

Cold dread rose up the back of his neck and froze over his cheeks. "You were there?" Had she seen him? He closed his eyes and waited for an answer. Brinnie might have failed to make a connection, but this girl was another case altogether.

"Yes, but only the men went in." She looked at him, turning her face up with a strange vehemence whitening her lips, and said pointedly, "We stayed behind to keep

food hot and beds ready. Or I did. Brin had other things to do.”

Eirbrin stood suddenly, rushing back to the fire in a crouch as if she’d ducked a blow. He watched her, trying to force his attention back to the important issue of Ula’s memory of that night, but Brin’s pain had sunk a hook deep into his flesh and it pulled his eyes back to her.

“After that,” Ula snagged at his attention, “I joined a raiding party and we kept up the attacks over winter. But I got caught and brought up here. And that’s where you come in.”

Antony watched his fingers as the need to make a call on her life or death raised the levels of fight in his system. Without conscious effort, his chest relaxed against the desire to tighten and speed his breathing to match his heartbeat. “That’s where I come in.” There was no clear line of caution. “How did you know Brin was at the brothel?” He had the uncomfortable feeling he was being drawn out, opening his back to the flail.

“I saw you bring her in. I recognised her.”

The question hung, unasked, ‘Did you recognise me?’ but Ula had taken control of the conversation. “I thought you were a Roman soldier, or a *Natione*, being there in the city like that. It didn’t surprise me that you brought Brin in, though. Or when you wanted to get her out. You wouldn’t be the first man to give up everything for her.”

Relief trickled into his system. Not a lot, but enough to ease the strain of his breathing. “And what do you think now?” he asked, as the tightness in his shoulders slipped. This was not a girl he’d turn his back on. Or close his eyes, if he could help it.

She slid her hand from low on his back up to his shoulder. “I think you’re taking her back to her lover. And it’s time we changed the water on that pork. Brin has the fire too high.” And she stood to go back to the pot.

She smiled over her shoulder, swinging her hips as she walked away, and he turned back to the view of the water ahead, thinking ‘Don’t touch me.’

Brin searched the food packs, laying bread and cheese and some heavily spiced fruit out onto a cloth. They had made fair time, maybe four leagues and it was only late morning, but it had brought them to the limit of her personal knowledge of the district. They had reached the Uisge Eireann, and if they continued south-east along the main trade road of the Caledonian midlands, they would reach another long valley running back to the north-east. From there, she understood, a series of villages trooped the inland stock routes, through the high passes and summer pastures, down along the sheltered glens, running always deeper into the mountain wilds.

How many people would be left in any of the villages could not be guessed, but the houses would still be standing. In areas the invaders had not managed to breach or gain a foothold, there would be no need for the destruction that she’d seen along the coast. Where there were crops or beasts, and the very young or old left to tend them, they’d find some food and shelter.

Antony sat with his back to her, with Ula pressed so close up beside him there was no daylight showing between them. What Ula had to say Brin didn’t have the heart to consider, but he wasn’t pushing her away. His pack was at her feet, its food disgorged and a roll of clothes, a light tunic and heavy woollen kilt, the only things left visible.

Her own clothes turned her stomach. Her senses had grown accustomed to the stale sweat and the reek of old blood, but the back of her tunic had stiffened, spreading its sticky black burden over her ribs. The dead man’s kilt she’d gathered and pleated, boring new pinholes halfway along the belt so she could cinch it tight enough to hold. It too stunk of neglect. Horsehair had assimilated into the weave and greasy stains shone on the dark grey fabric. And something crawled and itched over her skin that made her shiver with revulsion.

Carefully, turning to peek back at the couple on the log, she lifted the fine white linen of his spare tunic to her lip and breathed the scent of leather and recent laundering.

Where villages remained, she could hope for clothes better suited to her needs. And, she hoped, some of the comforts the people of her home range had long since lost. Stealing one last quick sniff, she refolded the shirt and turned back to check the others. As she watched, Ula slipped a confident hand up his back from hip to shoulder then stood, and Brin gasped as a small tin fell from the fabric she held to the stones at her knees.

“Good girl. Don’t wait to hear his secrets, hunt them out for yourself.” Ula laughed, pulling the tinkling weight of her beaded braids into a bunch and dropping them behind her neck.

Brin shoved the tunic down with a rough hand, hating the flush of heat that rose into her cheeks, and fumbled, searching the ground for the small tin.

Antony walked slowly to where she knelt, his eyes upon her. She didn’t need to face him to feel the burn of his scrutiny.

From beside the fire, Ula used the fabric of the kilt she wore to wrap the pot handle and pour away most of the boiling water. She deftly refilled it with cold, and reset it over coals, then moved to stand beside Antony. “Our boy here doesn’t look that stupid to me, though Brin. If I was going to search him, I’d start closer to his skin.” Lifting a foot, she kicked gently against his calf. If she’d hit the correct leg, she might have felt the hard tile tucked between the lining and the leather of his boot.

“I wasn’t hunting.” Brinnie collected herself, dusting her knees as she stood, and Antony bent in front of her to retrieve the small round tin she had accidentally dropped. “I was wishing I had clean clothes. Hopefully by tonight, I will.”

Ula snatched the tin, twisting it open.

“Not much of a forge in that lot.” She grinned derisively at the charcoal. “What sort of fire were you planning to build?”

“No fire.” He accepted the tin from her hands and knelt to slip it back into his satchel. “Didn’t you draw on the stones as a child?”

Yes they had. All the children had drawn with hard-won charcoal, scouring the smith’s cold charcoal pit or trying to steal close enough to the roaring forges to pick pieces from the ground. But the only adults Brin knew who drew on stones or wrote the complex runes on rolls of leather were the Druids. And their secrets were too powerful to hand around to strangers. Their skills, their arts, and their magic symbols were a language too potent to risk. Others daren’t copy things they couldn’t understand.

She raised her face to his as he stood, the blush of embarrassment fading as she smiled with growing self-satisfaction. “Aha, then. I had almost started to doubt.” Her smile widened to a grin. “Now all your prophecies stand.”

He shook his head, but a hint of laughter glinted in his eyes. “Don’t start,” he warned, “or we’ll be back to you thinking I know something I don’t, and me thinking you’re crazy.”

“What does he know?” Ula stepped back into the conversation, but Antony kept his gaze fixed on Brin’s smiling eyes. Searching or not, she’d found one of his secrets and she knew it.

“I don’t know,” Brin answered, tilting her chin. “But he has the sight, I know that much.”

“I’m a soldier,” he said again, some of the good humour falling away from his face.

“He’s a soldier, Brin,” Ula announced. “It’s bull’s bollocks, girl. You’d believe anything. Sometimes I think you’re as gullible as a child.”

"That," Brin stepped past her, "is what he said." And she walked down to the river to rinse her hands. Relief sparkled in her blood, racing to tingle in the fingers she thrust into the cold water. A rush of giggles bubbled in her chest, and a mass of weight lifted. Somehow, whatever lay at the end of this road she was forced to travel, it would be all right. If she could trust nothing else, she could hold him to this one important truth. She wouldn't be alone.

"I didn't need any faerie sight to know that." Ula mumbled under her breath, and she turned to face Antony. Her expression had reset itself, no laughter, only business-like determination. "So. You're a mercenary, not a Roman deserter, you say?" She nodded and turned away, moving the pot of pork back from the heat to simmer. "She seems to think it's only the priests can write. Will we tell her Roman soldiers read and write, too?"

"Tell her what you like. Why ask me?"

"Why let her think you're something you're not?"

The feeling of exposure burned between his shoulders again, more annoying, winding its tension up into the clench of his jaw. "Are you talking about me being a priest? I told her I'm not, but if it helps her, I don't care all that much what she makes of it. Something I said makes her feel a little easier."

"Eases her conscience, you mean. Eirbrin should go back to sit in her father's fine house. She's too fragile for this world. She only sees what she wants to believe." As she stepped back towards him, Ula reached a single finger to his belly, running it lightly over the fabric at his waist. "I'm better suited. I never had more than hard work and a shrewd head could win for me. I've always seen things as they are."

He caught her finger in a fist and smiled. "I'll tell you what I've seen. I saw two men turn their backs on you last night, and neither of them got a chance to prove their intention one way or another."

Leaning close against her ear, brushing the soft skin of her cheek where gentle heat rose between them, he whispered, "If you want to try your luck getting close enough to search me, you'd better be real sure of yourself."

Ula didn't step away from the threat. A slow smile grew over her mouth, her eyes had darkened and her breath came in short gasps. "We make a good team." She wet her lips and tilted her head back. "And your right, life's too short to bicker. I don't need to search you. Only someone like Brin, who'd never been in a Roman city, would believe you could have just walked in and out. So you're a soldier, a deserter, traitor to your own trainers; what's that to me? Nothing. But I agree it's better to let her think what she does."

As she spoke her hands slid slowly up her stomach, ruffling the rough fabric and settling under the curve of her breasts, pushing their fullness up towards him. Here was the true face of insanity, dark with desire. He had threatened her life and the words only served to whet her appetite. But there was more to her delusion. She glanced down at the riverbank, making certain he knew Brin was nearby.

"Don't want more than you can hold, Roman. She'll go to him; her guilt won't let her do anything else. And he'll kill you." She shrugged and raised a finger to his lips.

"Don't touch me," he growled.

Ula laughed loud enough to ensure Brin had heard and strolled back to the cooking pot.

Eirbrin heard. And she'd seen him lean in close to whisper, seen Ula respond in her typically warm way, and seen her seal his lips with her finger.

Brinnie dropped back to the water and thrust her hands into the icy flow. Filling them and bringing the cold wash up over her face gave her moments to calm her racing

heart and shock herself back into breathing. She'd seen them and it made her sick. Before she'd named the rising disgust, or acknowledged the disappointment that made her want to pull up into a ball, anger rose to colour her view of the water.

When she had first told Brin she'd seen him, Brinnie knew Ula would be fixed in her intent to drag Antony to her bed. The knowledge had irked then, when she had nothing but her gut feeling and his denials to balance, when she'd had more reason to believe he would betray or abandon her. The thought had made her cold after he'd come to her dark room, his thumb warm against her lips, his breath on her cheek, the otherworldly focus of his gaze set on hers.

Was it foolishness to believe those eyes drew her and no one else into his solitary world? It was. Girls like Ula would always be appreciated for their warmth and willingness.

And what had he seen of her that had caught his interest on that night a year ago? Innocence, naiveté and beauty. Those things were gone. Lost or worn away by time and hardship and grief. Beneath the rough clothes her bones were close under her skin, where Ula was soft and well rounded. It wasn't surprising at all that he would turn to someone as direct and uncomplicated as Ula. If he saw her as clearly as he'd seen Brin, he'd know she brought nothing to snag or tangle in his life.

Men need a soft place to lay their head, Ula had said once, and that was what she offered. History had proven Brin couldn't make that offer so lightly. The memory pulled at the tears inside and the slow burn of her annoyance rolled into a knot of pain. He said she wouldn't be alone.

Beside the fire, Ula poured cornmeal and spices into the cookpot and Antony repacked the saddlebag, his face down so his hair fell forward to cover his expression. His prediction hadn't named her companion, but she had assumed he was speaking of himself.

As she watched him move, that assumption raised a thrill of pleasure and panic that spread from her chest, up and out over her skin. It caught at her breath and warmed a pulse at her groin. With irritation seething quietly inside, and the kind of delicious terror she thought forever gone prickling in her skin, she moved back to the fire and food.

Eat and ride, she told herself. Her future was known and for now it could take care of itself. Three days to the full moon. Today she had to eat. They had hours of riding still ahead, and uncertainty all along the road. The only thing she could know for sure was at the end of it all, she wouldn't be alone any more.

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CHAPTER TEN.

The paths they followed into the mountains were better than Antony had imagined. It was true: there were times he saw himself guilty of a certain cultural snobbery. If she had failings, Rome at least brought civilisation. She brought comforts and standards. And she brought roads – miles and miles and miles of roads where, generally, there had been no roads before. These Celtic highways were not Roman roads, but they were serviceable through difficult country. As long as they had regular maintenance they were fit for sleds and light wheeled traffic and the free movement of people and stock.

With his cape pulled in against the late afternoon chill, he considered the world around him. This was the land his mother had praised in the stories of his childhood,

and he saw the rugged peaks and rolling hills, the waterways and dark forests, with the eyes of the child he had been.

His father had seldom spoken about the world to the north that they had left behind. As a boy he had believed that was because he no longer felt any kinship with the land. But in the years he'd spent up here now, riding through the glens and forests to the south or along the eastern coast, his ideas had changed. Now, it seemed, his father said nothing because the decision to leave had been made and there was no point lamenting the places he could never revisit.

His three older brothers had been born in this territory, well to the south, near Camelon, and the twins may even have been old enough to have memories of the place – before they left to become the bastard sons of the camp.

In that they had not been alone. While Rome sanctioned no legal marriages for its recruits, local rites required only commitment and stepping over a besom to enter the marital dwelling. The wives and children did not exist. Rome shut her eyes.

He'd grown most of his life in the village of Glevum, outside the fort where his father lived and worked and fought. Maybe that was why only he and his youngest brother were conceived after enlistment. He chuckled quietly as his thoughts wandered through memories stirred by the world around him. Or maybe five boys under six were enough for any sane woman.

Then the Twentieth had been a feral legion, left to run wild at the extreme edge of empire. He was old enough to remember the Iceni uprisings, and the hardships that came to Britannia with them. But Rome had prevailed against the overwhelming odds.

He'd ridden with the Legion in the northern campaign against the Brigantes, and in Cambria. Long and fierce and bloody campaigns under a determined general, and that same general commanded them now. Agricola.

There was not a moment's doubt in his mind that Rome would prevail in Caledonia, too. Though why she wanted to prevail was an open question. She had no use for anything in this land of mountains, forests and bogs. Except for the men. Rome would always need men. And Caledonia was preparing to sacrifice all of her best and fittest in the name of freedom.

The dilemma was that Rome needed men to hold the boundaries of empire, now. Where ever there was continued unrest, rebels or guerrillas and militants easily disrupted the lines. The Roman army was stretched too thin.

But what the empire did was not his problem to resolve. With this season drawing to an end he had seven more to survive, and then he too would be a Roman citizen and free to find a woman to share his life, and to bear sons who would be Roman citizens by birth, with all the benefits that entailed.

Edan had chosen not to wait. He had four more years to serve, but his common-law wife and his children lived in spartan invisibility at the Legion's base at Deva. Tav wouldn't know who to marry unless Edan pointed her out for him. He grinned again, wiping moisture from his hair and watching the boys' horses ahead dig their toes into the climb.

The black had taken the lead, pushing into the turf and scree with all the power in his broad chest. Ula rode him like she'd been born to the task. It was as well, too. Edan would be livid by now and looking for blood. If he didn't get the black back in one piece, it would be Antony's blood that would spill. Brinnie looked less confident. Certainly she had less reserve to call up for this sort of endurance, but she held her place without complaint.

The sky ahead had gathered into banks of slate coloured cloud, and where the sun broke onto the mountainside around them, the light was too clean and too pure in

contrast. Every shade of green seemed lit from within and the pale stone gave up its grey for silver. Sunlight caught in the fine droplets of mist in Brinnie's hair, shining like jewels in a halo of copper.

As they crested the shoulder of the mountain, a wide green valley opened below, its distant loch little more than a pond. A fold of shaggies and a small herd of goats raised inquisitive faces to the riders as the horses blew in relief and started the downward trek.

"There are houses below," he said, drawing up beside Brin, letting the horses settle to a walk. "We've made fair time and this is going to set in." The sky was lowering, and clouds that had risen high like hanging boulders, now rushed toward the valley like an avalanche, dragging a curtain of grey toward the loch and its village.

She was short of breath and shadows darkened the skin beneath her eyes, but she smiled and nodded. "There should be places like this all along the stock routes. I just hope the people are of a mind to be helpful. Who knows who's been through here ahead of us."

True enough. Hardship brought out the best and the worst. For every brave heart heading for the front there would be opportunists on the make. But most of the travellers had been sent on along the coast. Most, by Brin herself. And the volume of traffic alone would have picked the northern route clean.

"The road we've followed seems mostly unused. It doesn't look like a gathering army has travelled this way." He smudged a smile away. Ula thought she had shrewdness to herself and it was dangerous to underestimate your friends and enemies.

"No," Brin agreed, turning her face up to the sky. "There's no picking the weather though, is there? Even if we run flat out, we won't get to cover before this starts."

It wasn't complaint against the elements that showed in her features, more an elegant acceptance. And the sunlight soaked into her skin like a river returning to its source, recharging the brightness of her soul.

"You're not so reluctant to make this trip now?" he asked. Not reluctant at all. If anything, she seemed to have passed a crisis and to have found a new hope in the way forward. Something screwed tight abruptly in his chest at the thought, and it pulled a frown onto his brow.

"You see, you said I'd have found a better solution by tonight." The smile she turned to him threw back the sunshine. "You were right." The deep-set core of her beauty shone from her eyes and with it all the echoes of the girl he'd seen so many miles ago. She was breathtaking. Beside her all the wonders of the natural world were pale shadows, devoid of colour or substance.

"I was guessing." He raised his eyebrows and scratched at the roughness of his chin. "Grasping at straws."

"That's the gift then, isn't it? Whatever you tell me becomes the truth. Saying it makes it so."

The new tightness in his chest screwed tighter still, and made his next words painful. "What I'd give to make that true," he said, needing to study the thick grass of the pastures opening around them. There was not a green in the fields or trees to match her eyes, and they stayed on him, he felt them. Any moment they must surely see the lies he'd woven like a net all around them both, but she laughed and the sound itself might have broken his heart.

"You underestimate yourself, that's all," she smiled.

Again, if only. He straightened, stretching stiffness out of his spine and letting his lungs take their fill. The houses ahead were no longer visible, but the path they followed had become worn where the villagers passed often from their homes to the slopes.

As cloud shadow stole the radiance from the countryside, Ula held the black up, waiting for them to draw alongside. "No warm welcome, but there'll be food and clothes left behind."

"Aye." Antony spoke sparingly and refused to face her.

Brin turned to him. "What are you talking about?"

"There's no smoke," he answered.

"No one's home up here. They've gone or they're dead," Ula pronounced as the first fat droplets jabbed at them like fingers of ice. "And the sooner we find out which, the drier we'll be."

Ula lay low over her horse's neck and Brin copied the stance, imploring her thighs to hold on for just one more minute, and then one more. Her shoulders ached and her bottom was bruised, but she gripped the reins and a clump of mane in one hand, pulling her blanket in tight with the other. The huts could not be far away now, though the view ahead was little more than Ula cantering through a pelting mauve veil.

An avenue of mottled pines emerged from the wash and Ula sat more upright, forcing Brin to drag herself and her horse's head up to avoid a collision. Ula waited for Antony to come abreast, ignoring Brin, then called over the rush of the rain. "That's the village roundhouse, but somewhere here there'll be stables and storage." Ahead stood the large oval communal meeting hall, and running either side were narrow alleys of smaller dwellings. Dragging rain down his face, Antony shrugged and pointed to the path on the left. Ula moved to the right. He turned his horse toward his chosen path and Brin quickly elected to follow him. He lay down over the withers again, this time to better see through low doorways and under heavy thatch. Winding between the few huts, he moved slowly peering around and over bushes.

Behind the roundhouse, another huddle of stone houses marked the far edge of the village square. Behind them again, a stable and forge. Moving quickly now, he approached the large open sided byre, and ducked low under its roof. He was on the ground when Brin came in out of the pummelling rain and drew a long dry breath.

Grinning up at her, he wiped the hair back from his forehead and stepped forward to steady her slide to the ground. "How are your legs?" he asked, still smiling as her knees buckled, then staggered and straightened.

"Fine. Never better." She groaned, lifting the dark wool away to examine a patch of inner thigh where saddle leathers had pinched the skin. A small pink blush surrounded the nip of broken white skin and the blue promise of a bruise. When she looked up, his eyes too, were fixed on the tiny wound and she dropped the wet kilt, straightening abruptly. "Now what?"

"We get warm and dry." He hadn't moved, and the heat of his gaze crept into her blood, leading a gentle wash of warmth up under the gooseflesh on her arms. His stillness sent shivers of apprehension running down her spine.

"We'll search the houses for anything we need or can use." All the intensity of his eccentric gaze was focused on her face and her heartbeat rose to meet it, hammering a pulse hard at her throat. The shadow of his beard had darkened his skin, highlighting the deep cleft in his upper lip and hardening his jaw. Brinnie watched his mouth, her tongue slipping to wet her own lips as her breath grew short.

"And eat," he said finally and the softness of his mouth tightened. When she met his eyes again they held a plea, and she caught her hands together, twisting the weakness from her fingers, afraid of what he was about to ask.

"You didn't tell me why it's easier to go back now." He tried a smile but there was no conviction in it, and the tension in his shoulders and thighs made her heart jump in her chest like a netted hare.

If he truly couldn't see her reasons, there was no easy way to answer. There was too much he didn't know, unless Ula had shared the worst of the past. He couldn't understand all that returning to Calgacus' camp had entailed, all the terror, all the sacrifice. There was no way he could know that his words had given her the courage to stand by her own convictions. And if she tried to speak Cam's name aloud she would lose what grip she had on that brittle sense of worth.

Looking into his eyes she could be sure, at least, that if she spoke of being alone he would know and understand that pain. He stood only two paces away and Brinnie longed to raise her hand to his cheek, but she had none of Ula's brazen confidence. "I'm so tired of being alone," she said carefully, "and you promised I wouldn't be."

He turned so quickly she couldn't catch the change that swept over his face. "Half the population of the territory will be at this camp," he said over his shoulder as he began to unlace his surcingle. "It's a fair guess you'll have company."

She managed a nervous smile and turned to attend to her own horse. "Is that what you meant?"

He laughed dryly and walked past her carrying his saddle to a rail against the wall. "When did it matter to you what I meant?" Then from beside her as he unlaced and slipped her saddle free, he said, "You hear whatever you want to hear, and then credit the wisdom to me. Who is it you think you'll find there?"

Her hand came out to his shoulder without her consent, stopping him close in front of her and she mustered her courage to reply. There were still signs of ridicule in the laughter that twitched at his lips, but the deeper, darker aspect of him shone there too, hanging on her words. "Those devils you said I was running from, they'll all be there. Everyone I ever trusted will be there. Everything I thought I'd lost forever will be there waiting for me. And I could never have faced them all alone."

Snakes rolled and twisted in her stomach, and the knees so weakened by the exertions of her ride were close to folding, but she held herself steady and forced herself to meet his penetrating scrutiny. "You've told me the truth when no one else would. You didn't even know me. You had nothing to gain or lose, but you've been honest when everyone else just took whatever they wanted from me."

He'd closed his eyes and each breath dragged, waiting, and she finished hesitantly. "I can go there and do what I have to do if you're there with me."

He pulled his shoulder roughly from under her hand and stalked toward the rail as Ula rode in under the thatch and wiped her face, calling, "Hey Roman. There's an old woman in one of the houses back there."

She had to be as tired as Brinnie felt, but she threw her leg forward and slipped to the ground like she'd ridden no more than the length of the square. Energy flowed around her like an aura, vibrating through the air and making Brin feel even more worn in its wake.

"Like you said," Brinnie said from between tight lips, "if you keep calling him that, it'll get us all killed."

"That's okay, Brinnie." Ula smiled up into her face, dragging the weight of the wet saddle easily to the rail beside where Antony pulled hay down for the horses. "He knows what I mean by it, don't you Roman? She said there are still some stores of root crops and some wheat and barley. There's milk in the goats. Honey. And beer." As she dropped the saddle over a rail, she slipped her arm into his and led him back to where Brin waited.

"Poor old bugger, she's been here alone for four days now. We'll find out what she knows before you kill her, though."

Antony ripped his arm up out of her grip and Brinnie stuttered over her own

horror. "What? Where is she?"

Scowling, Antony threw the packs over a shoulder, ignoring both Ula's cheerful violence and Brin's mortification. "We need a fire," he said, nodding toward the curtain of rain, waiting to follow Ula to the home of the surviving resident of this village.

"She was left here to die. Riders came through four days ago, killed two boys and took the girls with them." Ula said as she stepped out into the downpour, jogging between houses and diagonally across the square, moving without hesitation toward a house that was, to Brin, indistinguishable from any other.

The house had been sacked. Someone had rifled through, probably in search of valuables since the practicalities, pots and blankets, were left where they lay. A small stack of firewood lay by the hearth, some kindling and bound faggots, but the grate itself was empty, swept clean of ash. The pallet too, was empty.

"Where is she?" Brin asked. "The old woman?" There was no sign of occupancy in the hut. It had been empty for some time.

"Next door." Ula plopped onto the bed, leaning to unlace her boots. "We don't want to stay too near her. She's not so clean."

Antony knelt by the fireplace with a flint and iron, his back to the women and their conversation.

"Which way?" Brinnie was already at the door, anger and disgust in equal measure clear in her tone.

Ula raised a hand, motioning to the left, amused disinterest just as evident in her smile and Brin paused to challenge the look. For as long as she had known Ula, she'd tended toward conceit, but the last days had shown a callousness that went way beyond her expectation. The last year had changed them all, every harm and every hardship leaving its own wound and its own scar, and Brin had no way to judge the things Ula had seen. Still, this coldness made her sick.

"Here. Take this." Antony stood, holding the food pack toward Brinnie. "We'll bring her back here when you're ready."

With Brin gone, Ula walked close to the rising fire, dropping the blanket she'd worn as a cape as she came. The heavy overshirt followed, its dark-stained wool slopping onto the flags by her feet. "We need that fire high." She smiled. "I don't want to get cold."

Antony turned to watch the display, fixing a wary eye on the creature that slid around him. She was a hand span shorter than Brin. Her hair, when it was dry, was dark honey blonde and it sparkled with glass beads, coloured and foiled, woven here and there into the braids and threaded in long lines down her back.

Her eyes were dark, somewhere between green and brown, and old kohl smudged into smoky bands at her lashes. She was a lovely little thing to look at. Voluptuous and tempting. Just as the cold of still dark water is tempting before it closes over your head without a ripple. Just as the reddest fruit is tempting under a glaze of poison.

From just below his face, she stretched to lift the saturated tunic over her head. Under it, the linen night attire of the brothel glued close, invisible but for the beadwork at her throat. Her breasts were full and heavy, her raised arms lifting large dark rose nipples to him, her waist narrow over the curve of her hips.

When the tunic fell from her fingers, she rested her wrists on his shoulders. "I'm so wet," she purred, "and you could warm me up."

Antony caught her wrists and moved them roughly back to her side. "You're doing well enough on your own," he answered. "And you're not in a brothel now."

"No I'm not." Her tone lost its kitten warmth and abruptly became urgent. She freed the pins that held her belt and pushed the heavy kilt to the floor. "And you're not

in the army now. We're free. Neither of us are slaves to them any more, and just think what we could be together."

Together? There were plans in her eyes that went far beyond seduction. "You're too far ahead of yourself." Steam rose from his thigh where the heat of the reaching fire touched wet wool and stroked hot fingers up his chest and throat. "We're not together. We're not a team. And I wouldn't trust you as far as I can spit."

"I know. I know. But listen." She brought her fingers up to her gathered neckline, dragging at the fabric until the drawstring broke. "You think she's going to see the way you look at her and she's going to come running. She won't. She'll go back to Calgacus. Don't pine for what you can't have."

Struggling, peeling the sticky length of her tunic away from her shoulders, hips and down her legs, she stepped from the ruined dress without taking her eyes from his. "You can have this." Ula spread her arms to display the whole of her pale nakedness, and no will on earth could keep his gaze from spreading down over her soft white flesh.

The soldier in him heard every word and agreed. His gaze moved over her smooth skin and his fingertips buzzed at the thought of touching her, of sliding through the soft curls at her groin.

He smiled at the knowledge she thought him a love-struck deserter, and marked her certainty that Brin would rush into the arms of her leader. It was where he needed her to be, and her trusting hand on his shoulder would give him entry to the rebel's inner court.

"Listen," she demanded again, stepping closer, reaching into the air between them but holding her hands still before they reached his chest. "She turned her back on the husband who adored her, the sweetest kindest man that ever drew breath, so she could go to Calgacus. When her homelands were under attack she refused to go to aid her own family. Her own parents. She stayed with him and his dream. Why? Because when he turns the Romans back he'll be king in this land. The only reason she is travelling with you now is because she believes your lies. If she knew who you really are, she'd kill you herself."

The man himself heard every word and knew their truth. Shame boiled up under his skin the likes of which he'd never known. Inside he raged. Brinnie didn't want to go back to Calgacus, he knew that, she'd said so. She'd begged, and he'd found flippant answers to feed her need for nonsense and keep her moving back toward the ghosts of her past. And the only reason she kept moving beside him was that she trusted the lies he told her. Everyone she'd trusted had somehow lied and stolen from her. He was just last in a line.

And when she learned the truth....

The tightness in his chest screwed tighter again and inwardly pulled him into a ball. Outwardly, a frown deepened over his eyes, and he turned from Ula to the fire. "I need to heat some water."

Naked, moving confidently, as if in this state she was in her natural element, Ula took the kettle from his loose fingers, walked to the window and dipped it down into a large stone cistern on the outer wall. Her movements had become crisp, determined, all the languid sensuality was gone.

She reached past him, hooked the kettle to its chain and said, holding his face toward hers, "You just need to think about it a while. Men are going to die here. Thousands of them. Their lands will be empty. Brave men, men who can fight, will be able to take what they want. Slaves yesterday will be barons tomorrow. Think about it." She edged closer, bringing her other hand up to cradle his face between her palms. On her tiptoes, she leaned in close to his mouth and whispered. "Just think about what we

could be together.” Her lips were chilled, the fire as yet unable to warm the last of the rain from her skin, but her mouth was hot, her tongue teasing against his lips.

Her reasoning was wasted on him. When she stepped back down, he shook his head, his eyes still focused on the other truth she had brought forward. When Brin found out the truth she wouldn’t need to kill him. If the pain in his chest didn’t soon ease, some essential part of who he was would already be dead.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN.

The old lady had been beaten but she was more weak than injured.

Brin helped her sit, helped her eat a little bread and held the mug as she sipped water. Her thin limbs were chilled through, but there seemed little point in trying to lay a fire. The wood she’d had was long since burned away, and in the other house Antony would have a fire raging. Better she was restored a little and taken to it.

When he came, and with the cold air darkening so quickly around them she hoped it would be soon, he could carry her to the warmth of the other house. In a small trunk, Brin found clean warm wool and helped her wash and dress, then stripped and wrapped a blanket around her own nakedness and sat with the old woman to wait.

Between dark liver spots, the pale skin of her arms was tattooed in deep blue, and Brin took a cool trembling hand in hers, asking, “What does this say?”

The woman smiled, rubbing her own fingers over the tattooed lines on her hand. “It says I’m a long way from where I began. It says I remember who I am and where I came from. I’m proud of it, no matter where I am.”

“This isn’t your home?”

“Home? Yes, it’s home. But I was carried here as part of the ransom for a war my husband fought against my father’s clan. Fifty years ago, give or take.”

“And you stayed? Did you never want to go back to your own lands?”

“To what? This is good land. My husband was a good man, as good as any other. No. I never tried to go back. This is home enough while my sons are here and their sons. The hand moved weakly in Brinnie’s. “Now my sons and grandsons have gone off to fight another war, and left me with nothing but houses and land. Nowhere will be home until they come back to me.” The milky blue eyes darkened with the study of her sadness and Brinnie nodded in support.

Home was an abstract for Brin, a nebulous cloud of grey where the notion of a hearth fire and a warm embrace moved without the certainty of stone and mortar. Where was her home? She could take up her father’s lands, his title, but there was no wealth left to sustain his holdings. Like everyone else, slave or freeman, landed or tenant, she would have to start from scratch.

She had the right to take up Cam’s house, the allotment he farmed, his stock, the home they had made. But it was down along the Roman lines and dangerous. Probably no more than dust and ash by now.

When the Romans were defeated, the world she had known would be unmade and remade in another image. If she had a home to go to, she could not yet guess where it might be. The cold threat of loneliness pushed a shiver over her skin and she held the hand a little tighter.

Antony would come soon. Brinnie peered anxiously at the darkening doorway, tapping an impatient foot. The fire would be laid and the kettle boiled by now, surely.

“My daughters went with their men, too. Just as you’re doing. Is it your husband you’re travelling with?”

Eirbrin straightened, fixed a smile over her own grief and stood to walk to the door. “No. He’s a mercenary, just one of the many moving to the front lines. Our paths crossed and here we are.”

“There are bad men moving with the good, lass.”

That was obvious. Bruises marked the fine skin of her brow and small cuts and abrasions had dried black on her cheek and arms. Bad men who had murdered the children she’d tried to protect, and stolen away the girls they could use on their journey. This woman, more than most, had the right to mistrust. Did she know it was Ula who posed the greatest threat to her now?

“Yes. But not this one. I’ve trusted him with my life.” There was little more she could say. “Where is he? He should be here to help you to the other house.”

“The other girl, the coarse one, is she with him now?”

Brin spun back. “No! Well, yes, she’s there, but she isn’t...” A scarlet flush of anger flared too readily over her cheeks and irritation and doubt churned her stomach. She felt foolish, embarrassed by the unintended acerbity of her words. “He might have gone to gather supplies while there’s still light.”

The old lady smiled and raised her arm for help to stand. “That would be easier with me to tell him where to look. So,” she smiled again, knowingly, “your paths have crossed, and I think, your stars. Look.” Leaning heavily on Brinnie’s arm, she moved a weak finger along one of the tattoos that ran up from the back of her hand, around her wrist and on up her forearm.

“These are the lines of fate, and you see how they cross and cross and cross again. There’s no breaking the line, and sometimes the gods will turn the world upside down just so two paths can cross.”

Brin knew it was true. It was the truth she’d been born with, a knowledge sung to her in the cradle. Past, present and future were all written in the stone of the mountains and the wood of the forests and flowing in the blood that ran in her veins. And it was true, it was certain, that some, a lucky or a cursed few, could read those twisted lines of fate.

Footsteps jogging through the rain and puddles tore her eyes from the promises of the woad to the misgivings of the night. When he broke from the curtain of rain into the shadows of the house, Brin found herself rushing through an assessment.

He hadn’t changed his clothes, the spare set he carried were in the saddlebag at her feet. He was still wet through from travel, the fleece cloak still over his shoulders, his boots and leggings still laced and in place. The tensions in his stance were reassuringly present, and Brin let a silent sigh of relief slip from her lips and she smiled. “You took your time. We’re freezing in here.”

Antony ignored the prods, stepping close to the old woman. “I’m wet,” he said apologetically. “Wrap another blanket over your shoulders.”

When he turned to face Brin, she almost stepped forward, her hand starting to reach toward the torment that flashed from the shadows of his face. “What is it?” she asked. “Is there something wrong?”

“No, nothing. Just gather your things and let’s get back to the fire.” To the old woman he said, “Is there anything you want to bring with you?”

She shifted her grip from Brin to Antony’s forearm and smiled up at him. “No lad, there’s nothing more I need now. You know that.” Briefly, she held his hand on hers, studying it as if the scars she saw there described a truth that she could read. “A fire. Some warmth and some light. That’s all I need.”

He lifted her as if she were nothing more than a bundle of bedding and watched while Brin adjusted her own blanket up over her head and held it tight against her nakedness. Bending self-consciously, Brin tucked the loose food items back into the saddlebag and, with a last glance around the gloom, stepped quickly out into the night with Antony at her heels.

Ula lay on the pallet enjoying the fire. Her blanket was loosely wrapped so the full swell of her breasts were barely hidden, the flesh pale and soft, vivid against the dark fabric. Brin stepped into the warmth and immediately up to where she lay. "Move," she said bluntly. "We'll set her on the bed; she needs to be warmed."

Ula was in no hurry to make way, waiting until Antony approached before she stretched her legs sideways, opening the wrap to expose the full length of her inner thigh as she slipped from the bed. "She'll warm soon enough, won't you love? I've found mead. It's warming now. We'll all get warm, get a nice little buzz going. Everything will look better then."

Antony laid the woman into the covers and stepped back to make way for Brin, shrugging the heavy leather and fleece from his shoulders. She leaned in close, fussing and tucking, anxious for the old lady's comfort. The damp blanket clung in close to her hips and bottom, tracing the long lean lines of her thigh, and he quickly turned to the saddlebag, looking for his own dry clothes.

Searching the houses was not a reasonable option while the rain drove down in the darkness outside, and Ula seemed perfectly happy with her dress arrangements. Without his notice, Brin had folded the beaded linen *tunica* from Inbhir Nis and tucked it down into his pack. Turned into the shadows, he ran his fingers over the fine material with a vivid recollection of her draped so elegantly in this exquisite tissue warming his blood.

It was not what she needed now.

Unlacing his boots with the clipped movements of a man irritated by necessary details, he kicked them off. He faced the wall, his back to Ula's obvious scrutiny and slipped the pins from his belt buckle to let the kilt fall away. The suede breeches under it were wet, but not through to the skin. They would dry. He wrapped the dry kilt and belted it tight, then lifted the wet tunic and overshirt together over his shoulders.

"Oh very nice." Ula was grinning and clapping her hands. She'd turned completely from the table where she sat to better clear her view of him. "Look what our soldier has been hiding from us, Brinnie."

He turned and threw the bundle of wet clothes at Ula. "Not hiding. Just staying dressed. It's an idea you might like to take up."

She laughed and dropped his sopping tunic to the floor. "I'm warm enough as I am for now. Once the rain eases I'll find something easier to keep wrapped."

Aye, well, it wouldn't be too soon. He dropped to the pack at his feet and lifted his clean linen tunic, walking to where Brin stood and holding it forward. Her eyes were fixed on his chest, as they would have been to the woad on his back and shoulders when Ula called her attention to him.

Marked on his chest, over his heart, were the same two runes his mother had set on his cheek when he was ten years old. And below the blue circles, a small red wound where Brin had pushed him for help.

He brushed a thumb across the cut and let a smile curl his lips. "Are you wondering if it's fatal?"

"No." She stepped back and looked up, wide-eyed like a guilty child, reaching for the tunic he held. "I'm sorry."

Was she sorry for cutting him? For demanding his help? Or simply for staring? "Don't be sorry. This isn't warm, but you won't feel so exposed. I know where it is if I

need it.”

Sunlight, moonlight or firelight, her skin seemed to drink them in. In each she trained nature’s palette to create new colours that were hers alone. In moonlight she was pearl, in the sunlight ivory, and here in the firelight misted gold. Her eyes were clear, studying him with a nervous intensity that raised a spot of colour to her pale cheeks. She was wrong: he could see no past and no future when he looked at her. Time itself was an irrelevance.

He could see no more than a singular grace, something he’d never seen before and never would again. Perfection. And his fingers curled tight into his palm with the desire to touch, and hold, and to possess that fragile light. To have it always before him as his own. And trust. He saw her trust, and shame flumed up like a blast from a furnace.

Brin looked down and he snapped back to himself. He was staring again, and he turned from her, striding back to the fire.

Ula was beside him. “Let me look, here,” she said lightly. Her fingers were cool, tracing triangles and circles over his back and she laughed as she followed a line down the middle of his spine.

He turned on her and she stepped back, but only for a moment before she raised her hand to his chest and brushed her fingertips over the ink that stained him there. When he snatched her fingers from his skin, there was ice in his eyes that took the smile from her face. “I told you once. I won’t tell you again,” he warned. “Were you raised in a kennel?”

“No.” Straightening and pulling her hand free with a sharp twist, Ula set a hard smile back on her mouth. “I was raised by my father. I worked and fought and drank beside my two brothers. I had to if I wanted to survive. I worked the fields beside my brothers, and then beside my husband. I never had the luxury of keeping my hands soft and white. But I will have that luxury. And slaves and money. I will be the lady.”

“Then you’d better learn to behave like one, instead of like a whore.”

“You’re right.” Ula stepped back, raising her arm and opening a hand in invitation to Brin.

She had pulled the white linen tunic down over herself and stood fixed, with the blanket caught at her waist, watching the dispute escalate with an expression of pain and horror on her face. Her green eyes were full to brimming with tears that didn’t fall, even before Ula could begin to deliver the barbs she had to share.

“Brinnie tell me, how does the daughter of a good family act? Tell us all, because he says a real lady doesn’t behave like a whore.”

“I don’t know,” Brin whispered, swallowing hard and forcing her back straighter.

Antony watched her for no more than a moment. Ula was warming toward the revelations she held against Brin, and he wanted to pull her up, to shake her and yell into her face that he didn’t want to know. He’d heard enough about Calgacus, he had no interest in what she’d done in the past.

He snatched his boots and sword belt, his wet clothes and the cloak. On a shelf above the table stood sealed jugs of mead and he took two of those as well. “It’s too crowded in here,” he mumbled. Ducking under the weight of the fleece, he picked up a burning brand and stormed out through the door.

“Well.” Ula shrugged and grinned. “I guess he likes his ladies pure, Brinnie. That’s us out.”

“You’ve got a nerve calling me a whore,” Brin stuttered and choked. “You’ve no right talking about it, no right telling anyone about my life.” Of all the women complicit in her shame, Ula was foremost. Not only because she had argued so hard that Brin should go to Calgacus, but because she herself would have traded places in an instant.

That night a year ago, Ula had wrapped her shawl around Brin's shoulders when her own hands could do no more than fumble. Ula had supported her, walked her through the long dark night to Calgacus, and held her up when her knees would have dropped her on the track. Ula had ridiculed and shamed her when she cried at the entrance to the Roman watchtower. Of all the women who had circled around her and chided and berated her cowardice that night, Ula had cried the loudest and the longest. And Ula had been her only friend.

"I didn't call you a whore. You're over reacting, as usual." Ula strolled to the shelving and took down a heavy wooden mug. "You're still waiting for a warming drink, aren't you love," she called to the woman who watched silently from under half closed eyelids. "I know I am."

To watch her, Brin would have thought Ula unmoved by her argument with Antony, but she was a little slower, her smile more fixed and wooden. When she'd ladled a good measure of steaming mead into the cup, she carried it close and handed it into the old lady's shaking hands. "What's your name, love?"

"Vettona," she answered.

"Vettona." As she reached for another mug and poured her own drink, Ula's smile slipped into a feral sneer. "Well Vettona, he's right. I can't drink this hot." She handed her cup to Brin and fetched down another jug, breaking the waxed seal and drinking from the lip. "And I don't have to tell him anything about you, Brin. When he came to the brothel to ask me to come with him, he already knew about your past. He was taking you to the leader, he said, and I should tell you anything that would make you follow. Lie, he said."

Brin wiped angrily at the tears of pain and frustration, refusing them. It was true. He knew. Whatever he said, he knew enough of her past to judge her.

But Ula hadn't finished airing her views. "You see, just for now he's clean and well fed and full of his own superiority. But give him a few weeks on the road. A few battles, cold, rain, mud. He won't be so fussy soon. I only have to wait him out. But you, Brinnie, you'll already be where he wants you by then. He knows where you belong, and he wants you there in two days. He's taking you to Calgacus and he's handing you back. You won't be alone. You'll be where you belong."

Brin washed away the burn in her throat with hot sweet mead and closed her eyes, refusing to be drawn. Her features had reformed themselves automatically into her familiar mask. She put away the wave of sadness that rose, and turned her attention to making a meal, ignoring Ula as best she could.

Ula had no interest in food once she'd had her say. She had an eye on the number of jugs stored on the shelf and counting down as they emptied. Finally, she slept across her arms, propped awkwardly at the table.

When Vettona broke her long, apparently sleep addled silence, the sound shocked Brin's lonely reverie. "How did this stranger who just crossed your path come to know so much about your history, do you think?"

She turned to look at the woman, disconcerted by her insight. For a few moments she looked in silence at the fire, then answered, "Some he overheard. Some he must have worked out for himself. Some Ula will have told him, regardless of what she says now. And some, he just knows because he sees things others don't see."

That seemed to end the conversation for a time and Brin stood up, collecting the mugs and the plate from the bed and placing them on the table. From the doorway she peered into the night. The rain had eased to spits and drizzle and the moon held a bright patch of cloud high over the cluster of roofs. It was too dark to see which other thatched vent smoked into the sky, and her feet were too warm to venture into the mud and wet

stone at the door.

He hadn't eaten, where ever he was. Or maybe he'd found food stores in another dwelling. Maybe he'd just drunk enough to go to sleep and wanted nothing more.

Around the hearth their wet clothes steamed quietly, and she moved along the line turning the shirts over and spreading the lining of the boots to the fire.

"What makes you think he can see your past?"

Again Brinnie looked up in surprise, then moved to sit beside Vettona on the bed. "He was there." The memory burned creases into her forehead and she wiped them away and smiled. "If you'd seen him then, you'd understand. His hair and beard were long and he looked like he'd been living in a cave. He looked like a wild hermit and he stared straight into me. When he touched my hand his fingers burned my skin."

Vettona nodded. "So he isn't a stranger after all? Your paths have crossed before and now the fates have brought you back together."

"Aye. And it happens that it was the night that everything in my life changed. Right then and there, from the moment he touched me everything went wrong."

Again Vettona nodded sagely. "I told you, the gods will turn the world upside down, break it to pieces, to bring two lives together."

Which two lives, though? Brin stepped into the bog of her sadness and peered into its murky depths. "I met two men that night. And my husband died. I thought I had left the whole thing behind. I thought I had put my past away forever. But the seasons turned a full circle, and then the same night they sent a man to take me back, Antony appeared. He understands things. He explained things in a way I'd never considered. He told me I wasn't to blame."

"But he's taking you back to face your past? So his touch is still burning you, is it?"

There was no answer to that. He'd pushed her fingers away because he didn't want her to touch him, and yes, now he was taking her back to the man who had thrown her life to the winds. So, along which path did her fate lie?

"With all this fear and sadness, you still want to follow him. Tell me, why is that?"

"I think he's a priest. He says he isn't, but he's different from any other man I ever met. I think he came to me to give me a chance to make better choices, to make up for broken promises." She'd worn herself out with trying to explain her certainty even to herself. "And there's this. Look."

Reaching into his pack, she drew out the tin of charcoal and held it forward for the old lady to see. "When I found this, he asked if I had drawn on stones as a child. I did, we all did. But it's priests who know and draw the magic symbols, not soldiers."

"And women. But we draw on skin."

Brin nodded and returned the tin to his pack. "What do you think? Have you seen enough of him to judge? Is he a priest or prophet?"

"I don't think he's any prophet, lass. Not when I look at his hands. They aren't the hands of a sage or mystic." She held her own hands up, studying the symbols that linked the blue veins and spots of age. "Let the priests think what they like, it's our women who have the sight. His mother did. She marked him to prove it."

"A lot of women mark their boys with tattoos. What makes you think she foresaw something when she did that?"

"Many women do, you're right. And when their boys sit in the hills with goats or in their village among their own kin, there's nothing said about it. But for a boy who has to live in the world outside to carry his history on his face for everyone to read, she must have known he had the courage and character to bear it. Or she knew he would choose a road where he'd need to build those things if he was going to survive."

Brin turned her face away. Antony had denied his sight every time she held it up and now this woman, wise and without prejudice, would confirm his denials. "You don't understand." She heard herself pleading. "I've come a long way on his promises. When he looks at me, I know he sees things that I've hidden even from myself. If I've imagined it all, I don't know if I'll have the stomach to keep moving."

The old lady laughed weakly, stroking trembling hands down over the curls at Brin's shoulders. "It can't surprise you too much that he sees so deep into your heart, surely. When you're in the room, he doesn't see anything else." She chuckled to herself again and pulled her hands together on her lap. "Do you ask him what he sees when he looks at you, or do you tell him what you want to hear?"

Brin smiled sadly. She did, he'd said as much. She heard what she wanted to hear, and called it his wisdom. "Yes, I did once. He said he saw a beautiful face, nothing more." Dropping that face, she said, "And now he has Ula. All face and legs and naked breasts pushed so close up against him he couldn't see around them if he tried."

"Aye. But he doesn't look at her, does he. He looks straight through her." A frown creased the wrinkled brow and a dark light grew in the old lady's eye. "If I was her, I'd tread more carefully around him. Those aren't the hands of a healer."

"What she says is true though, isn't it? He might sneer at her now, but he's only a man. Sooner or later the offer won't seem so bad." That wasn't the only truth Ula had thrown down before her. They would be at the main camp tomorrow or the next day. He was taking her, rushing her blindly, toward Calgacus' camp and all it held. "And if what you say about the way he looks at me is true, tell me why he's so determined to take me to another man? He told me if I followed him I wouldn't be alone, but he didn't say who would be there in the end."

"What do you see there? When he told you that, what future did you see?"

"I thought he meant he would be there with me. I thought...." It didn't matter what she thought. The future was written and wanting couldn't make it change. "Who did he mean?"

"I can't tell you, my dear. There are two ways you can learn the answer to that question. You can follow your fates and see where they take you. Or you can go now and ask him the questions you are asking yourself." She took Brin's fingers in her painted hand. "But when he answers, you will have to decide if you trust his words, and whether you trust what you see. I told you, it's our women who have the sight, lass, not our men."

Antony lay on the hard bed, peering through the window at a patch of bright cloud that marked the near-full moon. The rain had passed and the moon seemed overly bright, too anxious to throw light on the lives and plans of men. And what bloodshed it would reveal.

Whatever the Picts had planned for the unification ceremony, it would take place at the full moon. Then they could put maybe forty thousand men, women and boys up against the Roman lines. Agricola wouldn't need to field even a third of his army to hold them.

Better not to. Better to send in a force that could hold their formation without crowding each other. And with the new emperor reluctant to shed more Roman blood in the outer colonies, it seemed likely it would be the foreign auxiliaries who would head the battle. Stock standard, a battle plan they'd used a thousand times in the past, and yet the nations refused to learn the lessons of history. Infantry would hold the centre, cavalry on the wings.

In three days at the most, he would ride in against the people of these mountains and kill as many of them as tried to kill him. In three days his lies would be perfected.

He raised his arms, crossing them over his eyes, and tried to keep the shake from his hands. There were things he needed to do before then, but he couldn't stand to look at them. Edan would have solved the dilemma swiftly. The problem would never, should never, have arisen. And he should act on that solution now. Better late than never. What was one more life, or two or three, taken?

Outside the crannog he had held his thumbs against her life and unknowingly stepped back from duty. And once on that road, he'd found justifications for his choice again and again. He had placed Brinnie above his commission without knowing or understanding why.

And there she remained. He could no more think of killing her now, than taking his own life. He could never take her light from the world. He needed to hold it close and let its warmth burn away the cold emptiness inside.

The thought of taking her further along this road, back to the men she feared, the other men she'd trusted, caught at his gut and pulled him into a ball around the burn of frustration. He could see her mouth and her bright skin under the lips and rough hands of another man, and the pain pushed the breath out of him.

Damn it. Damn it all. He forced himself straight and pulled the bed linen over his hips. He could leave. Now. Just go and not look back.

She didn't want to go to the front in the first place. If he left now, she could stay right here, hidden in this safe little hamlet, isolated and away from the dangers of the past and the future.

He'd eaten only enough bread to soak up some of the slosh of the mead, but there was not enough alcohol in the jugs to fill his head with sleep. And not enough to numb away the sense of desolation left by the thought. If he left and took the horses, she'd have no way to travel. She'd have to stay. And he'd never see her again.

She'd be alive, but no more than a ghost to him. He'd go back to the cold tight restraint of isolation. Waiting; refusing to touch or be touched until circumstances better suited the choice. Burning up need in the arms of girls like Ula. And always knowing that perfection existed but somewhere too far away to ever approach.

That life had lost any of the allure it might once have held. The logic was too cold and useless. And her eyes haunted his heart. Damn it.

Restlessness and self-reproach pushed him to his feet and he dragged the meagre sheet of linen with him, tying it loosely at his hips, and went to stoke the fire. His clothes were drying and he turned them roughly.

The jugs on the table were empty but he checked them both again anyway, and paced a circle from the table to the fire and back. If he was going to leave, he should go now. Of his choices, it was the least appalling.

Travelling alone, he would be at the main Pict camp in a day. He only needed numbers, that was no more than a head count and an ear to the ground, and he'd be back behind Roman lines in time to turn around and ride back into the fray. But he'd have to go now.

He checked a jug again, and the knock behind him nearly dropped it from his hand.

Brin stood framed in the doorway, a plate in one hand and a jug in the other. She still wore his white tunic, but she'd found a long dark woollen skirt in the debris of the hut, its bulk serving to emphasise her tiny waist. So slim he could slip his hands around her. Hold her, pull her close.

Her hair had dried and the curls had mutinied, most fighting their way free of the braids and falling in graceful curves down her brow and cheeks. She was pale, her eyes dark and wide, her breath catching over trembling lips as she tried to smile. By the gods,

he should send her away -- yell out some of the frustration that burned in him and sting her enough to make her step back.

She held her hands forward and he stepped toward her, taking the jug, and then back to lead her into the room.

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CHAPTER TWELVE.

Brinnie let him take the jug and made herself step over the threshold. Her breath was fast and shallow, keeping her head light and agitation seething in her stomach.

Great gods, she'd steeled herself to come here with her questions but she'd imagined him dressed. The sight of him in firelight with nothing but linen knotted loosely at his hips took the courage from her breast and the strength from her knees.

Blue circles shone from his pale skin and drew her eyes from his broad shoulders and down, over the flat bulk of his chest to the lean hard landscape of his belly. A soft trail of dark hair fell from his navel and disappeared and she raised her view quickly to his face.

His eyes were fixed on hers with a dark vehemence, his breath was short and erratic.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I thought you might want something."

His eyes brightened and a smile glinted in their dark depths. It touched his lips for a moment before he answered. "Don't apologise. I always want something."

"Food," she said a little more confidently, wishing she could match his humour.

"Close enough." But the smile had died and the fire rekindled in the time it took him to set the jug on the table and reach for the plate of cold meat and cheese. "You should be sleeping," he said. "There's another long ride tomorrow."

"I can't sleep. I have too many questions." There was no point in confusing the issues further. And no point taking another step along this road if she was rushing after a delusion.

He started to chuckle and it grew into a laugh as he turned away from her, his hands rising up to wipe his hair back. Soft curls darkened his armpits and her gaze slid down over the tight pattern of v's that skimmed his ribs. Wide muscle strained at the simple movement, and Brinnie found herself mesmerised by his naked skin. Even from across the floor it set small waves of heat moving out from her belly, and trembles started in her knees.

His nipples were drawn tight, small and dark, surrounded by a fan of pale silk, and her breath stumbled over her tongue, too much like a moan. Without her props, with nothing to fill her hands, she longed to reach and trace a line down over his smooth heat. Her fingers grappled instead with each other, twisting pain from her own joints.

His shoulders were painted in blue, as she knew. Jagged triangles reached from his spine to the tops of his arms, and complex knotted lines traced the form of his back, curved along his ribs and arched across the wide muscle like wings. A line of connected circles marked his spine, each knot pouring its predictions into the one below. Brinnie was set with the sudden certainty that if she could read the runes and symbols etched so deeply into his skin, all the answers she needed would be hers.

"I don't have your answers." He laughed again, but when he turned back to her, there was no laughter in his eyes at all. "I don't have my own. I'm not sleeping either." A deep frown had set across his brow. He shook his head and shrugged an apology.

“Some.” She stepped closer and made herself focus on the wild depths of his eyes. “You have some answers for me. You can tell me what you want. Why you’re here. Why you want to take me back.”

He dropped his face, turning his eyes away from her and his breath caught so hard in his throat she heard the jag. It was the only sound he made. He stood silent for a long time looking at the floor and then the fire, but he said nothing. Thoughts warred on his face and his hands flexed and extended, forming fists and falling open. His fingers visibly trembled, but even when he finally turned his face back, his gaze was focused inward and he said nothing.

“You must have an answer. Say something,” she pleaded gently.

“I don’t,” he said at last.

When his eyes met hers, Brinnie felt like she’d been kicked in the chest. The intensity of his stare burned deep into her heart. The air in her lungs burned her dry throat as it left in a silent sob. “You don’t have an answer?” There was no strength in the words, and her chest crushed into itself trying to find a way to make the sound.

“I don’t want to take you back to him.” His hands had risen slightly, open, but forbidden to reach. Want shimmered the air around him like the blast of a furnace, but he kept himself contained.

“Then why?” It was still only a whisper and her breathing stuttered and rushed, hard and shallow, timed to the racing of her heartbeat.

“It’s where I have to go. I couldn’t leave you in the city; you’d have been dead by morning.” The frown cut his flesh to the bone, pain and pleading shone from his eyes.

“Ula said,” she started, but he cut her off.

“Don’t listen to Ula. Or me. We’re the same, her and I. We’d say and do anything to get what we want. Anything.”

If he didn’t want to take her back, then what did he want? It was the question that burned on her tongue, but she didn’t want to form the words. Taking two hesitant steps forward brought her close against him, and she reached to take his face between her hands. Pressing hard against the solid heat of his chest, Brinnie closed her eyes and touched her lips to his.

There was no lessening of his rigid stance, but his mouth moved softly under hers and his breath broke hot over her cheek. The hands that had clenched at her side reached to touch her. They slipped lightly from her waist, down to cup her curves and draw her hips in harder against his. Stepping onto her tiptoes, she gently bit onto his lower lip, opening his mouth, searching his kiss for hints of desire.

It was there, she could taste it on his tongue and she dared to open her eyes. His were closed and the painful frown had eased, but he still looked like a man condemned by his choices.

Fingertips that had once burned her still spread their fire, rising over her back as he slipped his hands higher, under her tunic, over her skin. The heat of his touch woke echoes in her flesh, a warm pool of longing growing and spreading out on her pulse, throbbing low in her belly, down her legs, and up to swell in the breasts she pushed against him. Her hands trailed down to his shoulders, down his chest and sides, and she reached around to spread her touch over his back and down to pull him to her.

Soft moans broke the kiss and she slid her mouth over the roughness of his jaw, dragging sharp breaths as his lips crossed her cheek and his teeth found her earlobe. Hot air became words, became her name, and she pulled her attention into focus. “Brinnie,” he whispered, “will you stay here?”

“Yes.” The sound sobbed out on relief. “Yes. I don’t want to go. I’ve given enough, now.” She buried her face into his shoulder. “We can just stay here.”

“No Brin.” He freed his hands and held her away from himself so he could see her face. “I have to go. Will you stay here?”

The tension that rippled through her set into shudders that rose along her spine and stuck in her neck. Her knees were weak, but he held her up. “No.” She didn’t need to say it, surely. “No. If you go, I’ll go too.”

“Why? There’s nothing there for you. They don’t need another sword, and there are already wives and mothers there to pick up the pieces when it’s over.”

She searched the desperation in his face for understanding, for anything more than he wanted to offer. “Don’t you listen to me?” she asked. She was staring into pain. It flashed across his brow like lightning and caught his features in its thunder. “I don’t want to offer him another sword, or clean up the mess when his men are slaughtered, or stand at his back to watch for traitors. I’ll go for me. I’ll go if you go, because I don’t want to be alone any more.”

Antony groaned and pulled her in against his chest, burying his face in her hair. If his lies were sickening, this was the ultimate betrayal.

Nothing before had ever felt so entirely right as holding her. The sweet taste of mead was on her mouth and there was heat in her skin that burned against him. But he couldn’t wrap her around his guilt and pretend he was innocent. Not wanting to lie didn’t make his words true.

Acid fumes burned in his throat and ached in his lungs as he pulled his arms to his side and stepped back. Her hands stayed at his hips, unable to let go but afraid to hold him tight.

There was only one bridge between where he stood and the future she represented. The truth. The whole truth exactly as it was. But once those words were spoken, everything she offered would be lost, forever. He shook his head and fought the urge to bend double. There were scars on his body where swords had laid muscle open to the bone, and none had hurt as much as this moment of silent bereavement.

“You don’t understand,” he said. “I have to go. There are too many secrets.” They weren’t secrets, they were lies. Bare faced deceptions he’d used to force her to move ahead of him, as surely as if they were a knife at her throat. Better maybe if they had been, at least then she would have known where she stood. He had been unable to give her the clean death she’d asked for. He’d lied in the name of a duty he’d spurned; betrayed her and betrayed the cause he served, trying to hold onto a deformed loyalty to both and neither.

He’d done more than blur the line between being pedantic and insubordination. He’d even lied to himself about why and what he wanted. She had asked him what he wanted. This. Her. This was what he wanted more than life itself.

“I’ll tell you everything, all my secrets, if that’s what you need.” Brin said, raising her hand to his cheek to stroke the lines of torment from under his eye. “My past is awful, but it’s done with. It’s over.”

“No.” He cut her off abruptly, stopping her stories of the past and other lovers. “Me. My secrets.” He swallowed the burn. “My lies.”

“I don’t want to know.” There was fear in her eyes, a moment’s awareness of just how profound his deceptions might be.

And he didn’t want to tell her. He didn’t want to consider any world outside the circle of firelight. He wanted no part of tomorrow or the consequences it would bring. He stepped back, turned away from her and moved stiffly to take a stool at the table.

“You were going to leave without me tonight, weren’t you?” She followed him, standing in front of where he sat, demanding his attention.

“Aye.”

“Why?”

“Because it was the only way I could see to keep you safe. I couldn’t take you with me. I had thought you’d be better with,” he couldn’t say the name, “him. Better fed, more comfortable. Better.”

“When did you change your mind?”

The words he should say weren’t so hard to form. If she stopped with the questions he could tell her who and what he was, and she could walk back out into the night. Or stab him in the chest and relieve some of the pressure building there. That truth wouldn’t leave his lips. Instead he answered her questions quietly and as honestly as he could. “Today. When we were in the stable here. When you said you didn’t want to face them alone.”

“So you decided I would be better left here alone, instead? Am I meant that you can make these decisions for me? Am I a child?”

“No.”

“Were you going to come back?”

“No.” It was an admission that hurt too much, and it wasn’t as true as it might be. “Maybe. One day. If I survive.” He had seven more seasons to serve.

“You’re a soldier and not a seer, so you keep telling me. So think out loud for me. We’re a day away from an army. Not a professional army with a full van and supply routes and all that entails, just a conglomerate of clans from miles around. To the north and east they’ll have picked the land clean. How long will it be before they’re sending foraging parties back this far for food?”

He looked at her. Strain formed in every muscle of her body, her mouth was a tight line and her eyes were fierce, challenging him to see her as more than an innocent. Once again he’d underestimated her savvy, and the fact stoked the cold burn deep in his gut. “Days,” he agreed.

He’d underestimated her understanding, read her as naive. She was just as capable of putting all the pieces together as Ula was. She was just more reluctant to believe the unpalatable. “They’d have a day’s ride to here, two days back with supplies. They’d be too late unless they’re already moving. It will all be over in three days.”

“But you’d leave me here, safe?” She laughed, a short humourless sound. “My husband left me behind, safe, but I wasn’t. He promised he’d come back but he didn’t.”

“I didn’t promise I’d come back,” he snapped. She was moving too close to the stories of her past and he didn’t want to stand in the shadow of other men. “You want to make your own choices? Okay. Choose. Keep moving back to the front but call it your own choice. Don’t trust my word. Don’t call it an oracle.”

Her hard smile turned to genuine amusement at his irritation and the wash of her beauty almost overwhelmed him. “I won’t.” Instead she came to kneel at his feet, the touch of her hands on his knees smouldering like slow burning coals. “I’ll trust myself. If you will tell me one completely true thing.”

“What?” Ask who I am. Ask why I’m here. Ask where I’m going, Brinnie. Ask and let me tell you the truth.

“I don’t care if you’ve lied about your intentions. Tomorrow we’ll trade secrets. Just now. Right now. Tell me what you see when you look at me.”

He hung his head. The firelight catching in her eyes was too warm and deep and tempting. It lit her madness, her passion, her need. Her skin was flawless and her hands warm on his thighs. Her lips were soft and pale, shining in the shadows falling from her hair.

“I think you’re crazy,” he whispered hoarsely.

“I’m not.”

He conceded the point with a slow smile. "I see the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. I see everything I ever wanted and couldn't name. Everything I looked for and couldn't find. Everything I've waited for.

"I see the sort of passion that I dream about, when I wake up in cold sweats, burning with a longing that nothing can touch. I see perfection. And I see you, looking back with the same need and the same emptiness and the same desire. And trust that I don't deserve."

"Because you lied so I'd be safer?"

Yes he'd lied to keep her safe – when he was the only threat. Her eyes had darkened and misted as she leaned forward. Those soft honey lips were close enough to touch. "And because it's greed," he said. "What I feel has everything to do with having you and holding you as mine and mine alone."

Her breath had grown short, he could hear the catch, and her tongue moistened her lip. "I came here to ask you what you wanted," she whispered. "Why you were here. If that is your honest answer, then I don't care about your secrets. I'll hear them when you're ready to hear mine."

Her lips touched his and there was no more hesitation.

Every word was true, and every admission pushed the sense of time further from his mind. Only the present and flesh existed as he stood, taking her hand to gently lift her to her feet.

A wash of heat, relief and weakness rolled from Brinnie's shoulders to her knees as his mouth closed over hers and drew her up into his sanctuary. They were alone in the world and safe from tomorrow.

She relaxed into his arms and let herself exalt in the silky smoothness of his skin, the hard hot muscle of his chest and back, the warm, clean male smell of him. She wanted to laugh; elation welled up from deep inside and threatened to break into tears of joy.

She held his face and drank from his lips like a grail, as his fingertips skimmed her back and shoulders. Lifting the loose tunic and raising it over her shoulders, small moans slipped from his lips, and his pleasure raised a rash of gooseflesh as the cool night air touched her skin. Desire darkened his eyes and he looked deep into hers, his fingers moving slow fire from her throat, up her cheeks to her ears, and his tongue slid to tease her lobes, his mouth tracing burning kisses down to her shoulder.

With her hands in his, he stepped back, sitting onto the pallet and leading her to kneel on the bed beside him. Her woollen skirt was heavily gathered, bunching at the waist, and anticipation thrilled through her as he reached around her, pulling her towards him as he untied and loosened the garment. He buried his face against the softness of her belly, the rough stubble of his chin scratching the tender skin and making her flinch and groan as he slid the skirt down her thighs.

Brin fought her panting breath, weaving her hands through his hair, holding him against her as his lips and fingers sought the tight ache of her nipples. His warm hand cupped the swell of her breast, his thumb rolling over its firm tip and he sucked the other hard and deep into the fire of his mouth. Tingling threads of pleasure tightened in the soft flesh, drawing tiny whimpers from her as she pushed kisses over his hair and turned his lips back up to hers.

His hands pulled her toward him, gliding over satin skin and urging her to follow his silent breathless lead. She held her ground, kneeling beside and above him, holding his face and his lips up against hers, luxuriating in the gentle pressure of his hands as they covered her back, and her hips, her bottom and thighs. The slow movement of his kiss, his stroking tongue, primed the hot wet pulse that throbbed in her groin as her

longing for him grew.

Fire flared in his eyes and a smile turned the corners of his lips, as they slid from her mouth, down her shoulder to find her nipple. His hand climbed her inner thigh, and her heartbeat stuttered as she tilted her hips forward to meet his fingers, her knees sliding wider.

Soft moans became muted sobs of ecstasy as she lowered herself onto his touch. Dropping her face against his neck, she groaned in sharp breaths into his shoulder as his mouth sucked pleasure from her breast and his fingers slipped easily between the folds of her sex. Primal rhythms moved her hips, slowly, in unhurried bliss, and the sweet dew of her arousal glistened on his fingers. Sweat rose over her skin and shaking seized her neck and shoulders.

Her strength was seeping into him in long molten streams, her bones became honey and her will collapsed into his hands. Raising his face to hers, he whispered hot against her ear and slipped his light touch up her spine, tangling in her hair as he held her lips on his and laid back. Brin was where she wanted to be. Emotions caught and knotted in her throat and the months of loneliness and loss rose and were warmed away by the heat in her skin.

She leaned down to him, her breasts falling into the cups of his hands, and studied his face. He was blessed by the gods. From the ragged veil of his dark lashes and the pale haunted blue of his eyes, half closed in the firelight, to the soft fullness of his mouth. His chin was dark, a deep cleft under his nose perfected the shape of his lips, and she touched her tongue to his.

Reams of rough prickling fabric caught and tangled on her boots and she kicked irritably at the constriction, trying to free her legs from the skirt without taking her lips from the pleasure of his mouth.

The dark roughness of his beard plumped her lips and brought her tongue to touch them gently as she shifted her study to his throat. He lay with his head back, a damp sheen over the hard pulse beating in the shadows of his hair. She pressed her lips against it and against the deep hollow at the base of his throat, breathing the heady mix of clean sweat and horses, of skin and hair and longing that rose to her touch.

Her eyes were heavy with desire, her skin alive with nerves that sought his feathered touch. Rashes of sweat and gooseflesh traded places as lust heated her blood and raised a flush of passion in her cheeks.

A final kick freed her legs and she shifted her weight over where he lay, sitting over his hips, with the loose knot of the linen before her. She dipped her face to his chest, her tongue tracing the edge of his nipples, flicking as they puckered and hardened, and she teased the fabric open.

Waves of longing rose up through her belly and chest, pushing air from her lungs and rushing blood through her pounding heart. She was trembling all over, riding the insistent staccato beat of needs she'd too long pushed away. Needs that rippled and pulsed painfully in her tender flesh. His mouth was open, drawing deep breaths past her lips and she rocked her hips to slide the throbbing ache along the hard length of his erection. Her arms were weak and she rested into his strength, surrendering to him as he lifted her aside, and rolled to press her shoulders into the hard bed.

His lips teased over hers, his tongue flicked the sweat at her throat and his hands caressed and kneaded the softness of her breasts, teasing and lifting her nipples until the need building in her groin was unendurable.

Her thighs rose around him and she reached under his belly, over her own sweat damp skin and took him in her hands. His whispers raised a small smile and his lips burned on her cheek and throat as she stroked him, so hard and hot and silky smooth in

her hand, drawing out the delicious torture. Pleasure beat painfully deep in her womb, making her writhe, yearning to have him inside her, to feel him fill her and to see his need growing in the dark shadows of his eyes.

Moaning under his cheek, she set his burning arousal at the entrance to her sex and brought her hips up to meet his. He thrust deep into her and she cried out, arching up to him.

Brin closed her eyes and let his gentle movement fill her world, let it stoke the ball of tension building in her flesh, harder and hotter. Her fingertips slipped lightly over his skin, tracing the endless lines and ridges that marked his back. From his shoulders, down to circle the hard curve of his hips and buttocks and she pulled him in, urging him to move against her faster and deeper.

As his pant grew ragged, his searing breath breaking over her shoulder, she grasped blindly at his sweat slicked back, pulling him down to her, her ecstasy sobbed in time to the pounding rhythm.

Tremors broke in her belly and she locked her legs down hard over his thighs, pushing up against him as her body sucked and shuddered, light and heat and painful bliss rolling through her flesh in ever reaching waves.

Her belly spasmed and her back arched away from his kiss as she struggled for breath, and the muscles in her thighs went to water. With his face pressed into the thick curls of her hair, he moaned and clenched down over her shoulder as the hot burst of his seed spilled deep inside.

Their bodies pulsed together and again, less intensely, and the strain fell slowly from their flesh.

Brinnie lay like a crucifixion, her arms outstretched, her head back, letting air rush down into her gasping lungs. His hot skin glued over hers, his arms caught tight about her, his face turned into the hair behind her ear.

When she woke she was still wrapped in his arms, her face tucked in tight against his chest and her legs woven through his. Dawn was in the air, with gentle birdsong and enough chill to make her want to snuggle in closer, but she woke with a start and opened her eyes, already searching for trouble.

The laces of her boots were too tight and digging painfully into the skin of her calf, but that wasn't the problem.

"Roman." The bellow from above was accompanied by a kick to the bedding and Antony jumped, awake and alert in an instant. "Get up. We've got company."

He rolled to sit up. "Who?"

"Am I your watch dog? Get up and see for yourself." Ula didn't spare as much as a sideways look at Brin, but her eyes were red and swollen. More likely the effects of mead than tears. No doubt hung over.

She stalked out the door and Antony turned to set a gentle kiss on Brinnie's cheek. "I'll go see. Get dressed and packed, ready to leave."

"You're not leaving me here now?" She smiled but there was only a dark and frightening intensity in his eyes when he answered.

"Would you stay?"

She shook her head, afraid to speak aloud.

"Then I guess not."

He moved quickly, and Brin watched him like she was learning a dance. Muscle slid under his skin with every movement, taut and hard, lean and graceful. He dressed, dragging suede up his long legs, lacing his boots with practised ease, wrapping the heavy kilt and belting it in place in moments. He strode to the doorway, pulling the tunic she'd borrowed over his bare chest and the glaring blue of his shoulders, and clipping

the belt of the broadsword across his back. From the comfortable nest of the bed they'd shared she watched him, with happiness bubbling up through her heart and a belly full of warm memories.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN.

Stepping out into the sunlight, Antony scoured the huddle of dwellings for sound and movement and found none. Ula led his saddled horse and Edan's black down the alley from the covered stable, her mouth turned into a silent sneer.

"Up the valley," she said sullenly. "Men came at sun-up. They've come for the stock."

He took the rein she shoved at his hand, looking toward the distant slopes for signs of the intruders. "Let's go see who they are."

"Do we care?" she asked. "They don't have any interest in us. They're just looking for supplies for the camp."

"They'll know where we have to go and when." He turned to look at her, moving so his view was clear, and touched her shoulder, turning her to face him squarely. "If you didn't bring the horses, two horses, down so we could go after them, then why?"

She pulled her arm away, tuning back to adjust trifles on the saddle. "I'd put together some good reasons for you to leave her here. It must have been the booze. I really thought you'd see it my way this time."

Before he could shake off the shock of her words, she spun, hitting him hard enough in the centre of the chest to force a backward step.

"Did you tell her who you are? How did she take the news?" Her face was as pale as a scar, the redness in her eyes and the shadows under them stark in contrast. "You didn't tell her, did you?"

There was no need to answer, and any words that were nearly sufficient were too hard to find. For all her bluster and the indifference she painted on her life, her pain was as sharp as any blade and he stepped back from it. Moving silently to his own horse, he threw his leg up over the saddle and slipped down into the seat.

Ula climbed quickly onto the black, ready with a calming hand as he skittered and stamped in a tight circle. Bringing him up short, she leaned closer to Antony and hissed, "Just remember, I didn't care. When they cut your throat for daring to touch her, just remember that I knew who you were and I didn't care."

It was hard to say how much more dangerous she had become, and he certainly had no intention of correcting the errors she'd made in her calculations. She still believed he was a deserter. That suited him well enough. "I've got a brother you should meet," he said. "But I don't think he wants to take over the world either. I don't know. I'll ask him."

"You're evil," she spat, turning the horse and moving to follow the path up into the mountains.

"Aye. You and I are too much the same, girl." As long as it was easier to keep her alive and with them, that's what he preferred do. And they were enough alike to trust that she would do the same for him.

Eirbrin searched the hut finding no sign of women's clothing, but there was one heavy tunic, cut for a boy but large enough for her to wear comfortably. It was rough against her skin when she slipped it on, and she cursed the lack of something soft in

wool or linen that she could wear under it. She washed quickly using cold water, anxious to get back to her elderly friend, to fix her some warm porridge and to find her a good stock of food before they had to leave.

And to share the insights she'd gained by asking her questions.

She smiled and touched her lips, still tender from the brush of his unshaven jaw. An unexpected sigh of pleasure escaped, humming at the back of her throat as the memory of his touch rushed over her skin. His eyes, his mouth, his smile; the vision flashed vividly behind her eyes. If this was her sight, then it came with the certainty that she never wanted to be anywhere but in his arms. Did she believe his words? Did she trust her instinct? Without question.

She stopped. He was going forward into the war that lay ahead, and where did that leave her?

In those first days after Cam's death, how many times had she begged the gods to let her live her life over and have her choices to make again, to let her follow him down into that fort and to meet whatever fate he met. But the skies had never opened; the day never broke anew; the world never changed to help her mend her broken promises. The day never came and she'd stopped hoping.

Now Antony was going to fight and just as before there was nowhere safe for her to wait. She didn't lack courage, but she had no great skill with a sword. The field itself was no place for her. But the dangers of the leader's camp were more frightening than bloodshed.

She could refuse him. Of course, she would refuse him. This time she could govern her own choices. But that would put Antony's life in danger; she needed no second sight to know that with certainty.

She couldn't stay behind, not again, the cost was far too great to contemplate. But what would they do when they got to the camp? When the past she'd come to face became real and present and deadly. What then? Familiar icy fingers gripped at her stomach. The situation had changed, but the fears she'd wrestled every day since Euguin's visit were no different.

Her consideration of risks and possibilities stopped abruptly when she walked into the other hut. On the bed beside the old lady, a child sat huddled under a blanket, her dark eyes deep shadows in a ghostly face. Fine strands of mousey hair glued down over her brow and stuck to her cheeks, and the old woman fussed beside her.

Ula had the fire high, but the child gave the impression of cold that ran soul deep. Chafing at the thin arms under her blanket, her grandmother whispered reassurances, and looked up to Brinnie as she entered with a frank appeal in her eyes. "My baby has come back to me," she said. "Is there warm food for her?"

Brin leapt to the hearth, reaching for the food pack and its bag of corn meal and crushed oats. "Milk," she murmured to herself. They needed fresh milk from the goats on the high pasture. "We need a nanny."

Quickly she poured grain and water from the kettle into a pan and raked coals aside to nestle the gruel into. From a mead jug she poured half a mug and topped it off with hot water, carrying it to the child. There was no recognition in the spectral gaze, the child remained still, unblinking, her vision fixed on images long since gone from before her eyes.

Vettona turned the child's face to hers, kissing her gently on the forehead and then took the mug from Brin, holding it to the ashen lips. Dutifully, the child drank a little of the warm drink and pulled her face away, nodding slightly.

Brin stirred the porridge and walked to the door, peering through the clear morning to the hillsides far above. There was no sign of the ragged mountain cattle they'd seen

as they passed, or of the herd of goats. “I have to go up and catch a goat. She needs hot milk.”

“The men will be along again soon. They came for the stock, to take them back to the main camp with them.” Vettona wiped her blue stained hands gently down the child’s hair and rested her head back onto her own frail shoulder. “You will have to beg them to leave us one of the nannies.”

“Beg them, nothing. What’s the point of fighting for a land that has starved to death behind their backs? Where did Antony and Ula go?”

“I don’t know, child. Up after them I suppose. The girl was packed and ready to leave at dawn, then the riders came. They left me with my baby, here.”

“How did they find her?”

“She was walking back up the valley. They found her wandering and couldn’t get her to speak. She knew this place, so they left her with me.”

Brinnie pushed the heavy sleeves of her tunic up and rubbed her arms impatiently. The men, whoever they were, were not taking all those goats past this doorway. The people of this village had paid a heavy tribute to this war already. Their one remaining child had a right to her own milk.

She bent to the cooking pot and stirred the thickening gruel again. “I’ll help you to wash, then I’ll go up into the pasture. If they’ve tried to leave, I’ll go after them. They can’t travel fast with the stock.”

The child rubbed at a bruise on her wrist and sighed, seemingly bored by the whole question of survival.

“They’ll be looking for whatever you’ve put aside here, too. I’ll gather what you’ll need first. Where are the vegetables stored? The honey, cheese? The grain?”

The old woman struggled out of the bedding and leaned on Brinnie’s arm as she stood, shuffling past the table to a where a tin basin lay against the wall. As she washed and readied herself for the day, the child watched her, turning her head slowly to keep her grandmother always in her sight. It was a good sign, Brinnie hoped.

She was maybe ten years old, with big dark eyes and a soft blossom mouth that should have been touched with the blush of a petal. Her hands worried at each other in her lap, her bare feet crossed, and a blood-tinged fluid, wiped from her thighs, had stained the fawn skirt of her tunic.

Rage brought a lump into Brin’s throat and she forced a smile over her lips for the sake of the child. There was no need to fear the cruelties and excesses of Rome. When the best of her countrymen had gone to die for their freedom, those who’d done this to a child would be left to be lords of this land.

She took the pot of porridge from the fire. “I’m going for milk,” she said, turning as the biggest man Brin had ever seen filled the doorway.

He stepped back, leading his entrance with a wooden pail half full of frothing milk. He leaned, and once in, ducked his head as if the thatch above was too close for comfort.

A mane of chestnut hair, grizzled by the wilderness, hung down over his shoulders, while his ruddy face was meticulously scraped bare except for a long thick moustache. Over his ears he’d shaved back a wide strip of scalp, so his hair seemed all the thicker and longer above it. Rising up his throat, and over the shaved patches of his scalp, the skin was heavily tattooed. All up the effect took her breath away, and all the intent to fight was shocked out of her.

“Belus, Ma’am. I brought milk for the child,” he said, the words sounding like the drag of boulders in a flood. They echoed in his cavernous chest and he held the pail forward, dipping his massive head courteously.

Brin stepped forward, taking the milk and forcing her attention on to stirring some into the gruel, to sweetening it and ladling a serve for the child and her grandmother. Struggling for a sense of herself, she stammered slightly, "Will you eat? Your men?"

"We have food." He motioned through the door. "They're dressing goats now, there'll soon be meat."

A sword, longer still than the one Antony wore over his shoulder, hung at the giant's hip, and his hand twisted nervously at the leather-bound handle. "Ma'am." He ducked his head again in deference to Vettona. "We have a wagon. We can't move any faster than the bullocks and we haven't too far to go. Will you and the child come with us to the main camp? It's safer, surely, and there's nothing left here to guard once we leave."

The question might have been expected, there was no indecision in the old woman's attitude. "Let me sit with the child a little while. I think she is better in her own home. Let me think on it."

He nodded once and fixed Brin with an odd look, like she'd stepped from his dreamscapes or as if he might have reached a great paw to touch her cheek, then shuffling awkwardly he turned to duck under the lintel.

The warm porridge had touched something in the mind of the little girl. She had tasted it for herself and was slowly spooning it to her own lips.

"I think they would leave you food if you want to stay," Brinnie said, walking to peer out through the door, then taking herself a small bowl of breakfast. "He seemed a decent man."

Vettona didn't respond, she was weighing considerations of her own and watching the little girl eat.

It wouldn't be hard to stay here, if only Antony would consider the choice. In truth she didn't know the reasons he'd come here from the frontiers so far away, or why this war mattered enough for a man who lived on blood money to risk his life for free. His mother's land, he'd said, and that was all.

Even a wanderer had more sense of belonging than she did.

If he had the conviction to go forward, she would share it. Whatever the purpose that drove him to this battle, even if he had secrets he had not shared, she could stand with him. At very least she could mark her resistance to those who had taken Cam from her. She had let the leader take her from Cam. But she had been afraid, then. And stupid. And alone. She was wiser now. Now Calgacus was only the man who led the resistance. Not a god. Not a lover.

In the village square outside her door, horses cropped the fresh grass, the huge black that Ula rode among them, and smoke billowed from the roundhouse roof. Antony was with the riders now, she guessed, and Ula with him. Soon enough they would return to tell what they had learned and she would know the direction her fates were running.

"Well, my sweet." Vettona leaned wearily into the cushions she had pressed against the wall and sat her empty bowl aside. Pain and weakness were still everywhere evident in her movements and expressions, but she had rallied, better by far than when Brinnie had first seen her. "Now it matters for you and me both. Did you decide that this man is a prophet? What does he see of our future?"

Brin smiled and colour rose into her cheeks. "I decided that I trust him."

"Good. That's more important than anything he had to say. And it's a soldier's vision I need most now, not a sage." She smiled and touched the hair of the silent child. "There's nothing more I want to know about the plans of gods and monsters, only what I should do about tomorrow."

"Today will be the same as yesterday," Brin ventured from her own certainty. "But

tomorrow night it's the full moon and everything will be decided after that."

"Ula was ready to leave at dawn. If you're all still leaving, it will have to be soon, you've already lost too much daylight."

Brinnie allowed herself a small smile. "She would have been too late. He would have been gone before first light."

"Without telling you he was leaving? And you still trust him?"

Trust him? "Yes. He's lied to me when he believed my choices were too dangerous. And he's been right, too. He would have gone last night because it's safer here than at the front line. Especially for me." Yes. She knew him just as well as she knew herself. When he looked at her he saw a mirror, and she knew him.

That didn't change the fact that they would need to leave soon. The morning wasn't old, but every hour they lost was a league or two they were behind. And he'd told her to pack. She had to ensure there was food put aside for Vettona and the child, and to repack what they could find for themselves, food and clothes and blankets, fleeces or oilcloth if there were any left behind. She collected their bowls and set to work.

Antony sat back against the wall of the meeting hall, silently listening to the men make their plans for moving the stock back to the camps.

The gathering forces were spread in a thirty mile arc north and west of the main camp, but starting to converge. The foragers were taking the stock through the middle, leaving a beast here and there for the men who waited. Tomorrow night the animals that remained would be slaughtered at the unification ceremony, their blood washing the alliance clean. Along with the other sacrifices.

He was still looking at a fighting force of around forty thousand, at a rough guess, but many more than that had gathered for the battle. Upwards of sixty, from the descriptions of the camps and the amount of food the army of warriors and supporters was going through.

These men were getting lean and hungry. If there was to be a feast at the ceremony, Calgacus would send his men in to battle soon after, while their bellies were full and their strength was up.

From today, he would be moving with the girls through the outlying camps and into the crush of men moving in for the final night of the gathering. Once they hit the camps, the danger escalated ten, twenty, fifty fold.

Men who were restless, bored and irritable; men who were out of their comfort zones and suspicious of every stranger; men who were hungry and growing afraid as the test drew closer, were men who posed a serious threat. Most of them had brought families with them and that made Brinnie a little safer. They were a little less likely to blow off the tension with sexual violence, but he flicked a quick glance at Ula and wondered if she really had the good sense he tended to afford her. He watched her a moment and hoped she did.

She was standing quietly by the door, her arms crossed over her bosom, her face down, frowning with concentration. With the possible exception of her blind ambition, there was nothing there that wouldn't get a nod of approval from Tavish. It was a shame they would never meet.

The dressed goats had been butchered and spitted, the pack sized chunks charring aromatically, reminding him of how long it had been since he'd eaten well himself. The meal Brinnie had brought for him last night had been forgotten, not surprisingly, and the long days of riding and the night's exertions now ached in his empty gut.

There was not much more he needed from the roomful of men. They weren't generals or strategists; they were northern villagers, far from home and meeting the

needs of their nation as best they could.

Their journey lay ahead to the northeast, following the course of the river until the path moved east along the stock routes. By then, they would be moving with other travellers. All up it was only five leagues to the next major camp. Another six to Calgacus' base itself. If he pushed the girls hard, they could be at the main camp by midday tomorrow. If his reluctance was contagious, not until nightfall.

Standing forward, he reached for two lumps of goat meat, taking hold of the wooden spikes that spitted each. "For the women," he said calmly. No one moved to stop him, there was even a nod of approval and a separating to make way.

The red-haired giant who had loose command of the troop rose as he passed. "Try to convince the old lady to travel with us. We can make her comfortable in the stores wagon."

"I can try," he agreed. "But if you can spare them a nanny for milk, some meat and some barley, they can eke it out here for a few more days. The battle will be won by then."

"You think?"

Cold grey eyes searched Antony's and he shrugged. "If not, the retreat would kill her. I'll talk to her."

He moved a step toward the door, but the big man stopped him again. "The girl, the tall one, is she married?"

"No," he answered, a rash of heat starting over his chest and running in hard waves toward his stomach. Regardless of what had passed between them, she was not his, not in the way he wanted her to be. And Ula's warnings had a sickening ring of truth. Sooner or later she would know he'd lied. "But if you're looking for a wife wait a few days. There'll be more widows than wives and the choice will be yours."

Belus blushed under his wind chapped cheeks and his eyes glittered dangerously, then a huge grin split his face and a laugh as big as his belly rumbled up into his mouth. "That may well be true, lad. That may well be true." And he turned back to his men.

Ula stepped through the gap Antony left and seized another chunk of meat for herself. Flicking her eyebrows toward the door, she said, "For him." Men laughed as she turned and walked from among them, catching the rein of her horse and following Antony back to the hut across the green.

When he stepped into the room, Brinnie felt the air jam in her chest, then rush with the warmth rising on her pulse. Her arms twitched, seeking their own initiative to wrap around his neck and to hold him close, to feel his arms around her and the warm deep passion of his kiss.

But they hung by her side, and only her eyes touched him, stroking his cheek and searching his face.

He carried two lumps of charred goat, which he rested into the coals, and Ula followed with a third. There was damp in his hair and his jaw had darkened under new beard, so his eyes seemed paler and even more piercing. As he stood, they found hers and fires that reached for her glowed in their depths, but he turned away too soon.

"We have to move, Roman," Ula said, dropping her goat onto a wooden platter and lifting one of the dead spy's ornate swords to slice the meat. "There are worse men to have behind us, and the rest will be waiting for their supplies before they move. We'll be a little ahead of the rush at least."

Antony nodded thoughtfully, and flicked a quick glance at Brin and away again. It made her nervous. There was too much reluctance in him to meet her openly, and it prodded her heartbeat and pulled tension into her lips.

So he didn't want her to move forward? Was that it? If he was waiting for her to

volunteer to stay behind, he would wait for ever. "I've packed what I can find. There are blankets and food. I'm ready when you are." She stared at him, letting her gaze pull his attention back to her.

"Roman?" Vettona asked.

All eyes flashed to the old lady, then Brin glared at Ula. Antony turned his attention back to the meat searing on the fire and Ula grinned, biting into a juicy piece of goat. "That's right. That's what I call him."

"Why would you call him that?" The old lady watched Antony, apparently more interested in his reaction than any reasoning the girls might give.

"Because she's an idiot," Brinnie answered, and turned to the shelf for platters enough to feed everyone.

"It's a leftover from a misunderstanding we started with," Ula said happily, enjoying the new source of tension in the air. "I thought only a Roman would know what he knew, you see. I thought he was just a lowly deserter. I didn't know he was an oracle back then."

Brinnie watched Antony. That stillness that at once frightened and exhilarated her corded the muscle of his shoulders. His hands moved calmly to turn the meat and then wiped slowly down the length of his thigh as he stood. "We've got time to eat," he said quietly. "We can still be an hour or so on the road ahead of these men."

He walked to the side of the bed and spoke directly to the old lady. "They want you to go with them. They've got a store wagon; it won't be hard to set up bedding and make it a comfortable place to travel. They'll be moving slowly, going through a line of camps with these supplies before they get back to the main camp in time for the Druid's big show piece.

"I don't know how your little one here will go with the journey. She made it back this far by herself once already, and you can't know if or when you might meet up with the men who lost her. I told them you'd be better here, left with a little food and a nanny for milk. I think they'll do that for you if you want. It's up to you."

She looked at him through her clouded blue eyes, reading the calm in his hands and the fire in his eyes. "How long will we be alone here?"

"They'll go to war the day after full moon, or the next." He paused for just a moment. "They'll be in hard retreat and back this far two days from then."

"Four days, or five? We can manage that, can't we dear?" She stroked the shoulder of the little girl, who turned and offered a slow smile. "She doesn't need to be moved again. Between us we can make enough to eat."

Ula shoved plates of meat forward, one for Vettona and one for Antony.

Brinnie felt slightly ill. The tension between Ula and Antony frightened her somewhere deep in her gut, under conscious reasoning, and she couldn't quite put her finger on the cause. Nausea moved and churned in her stomach, but she swallowed it, letting it pull the coldness from her cheeks down into its roll.

"I've put aside cheese and honey pots for them. And for us," she said. Her voice had no strength and she felt removed from the room, like she was watching someone else perform a complex set of movements. "There are turnips, too," she added, trying to shake off a creeping sense of unease.

"I think they should go," Ula chimed and Antony smiled at her. There might have been light in his eyes but it was cold, and Brinnie studied him from under her mounting confusion.

"We've heard what you think," he said. "Now you can shut up and eat. We'll be riding hard for the next twelve hours. Eat well." He strode to the door, and Brinnie almost jumped after him, afraid he was leaving and not sure why. But he stopped and

turned on his heel, walking up to stand right in front of her, and he reached a hand to her shoulder, letting a thumb slip gently down her cheek.

"Will you stay here?" The same desperation was in his eyes that she had seen the night before. The same fire, the same passion, the same earnest pleading.

She couldn't answer, but she shook her head slightly and as he had once done, turned her cheek into his palm.

"Then I'll saddle your horse. You have to eat more, get some strength back." He tilted his face forward to rest his forehead on hers, and then turned back to the door.

"Eat," he called over his shoulder.

"Ula?" Brin let the adrenaline settle more evenly through her system, unclenching her fists and forcing her shoulders to loosen. "What was that about?"

"About? Nothing cryptic there."

Vettona watched the girls silently from her pallet, slowly chewing the pink meat.

"Have your say. Finish it and get it off your chest. You want to make trouble for him. I'm guessing that's because you wanted, what was it you said now? You wanted 'one that looked like him to keep you for a pet'. Was that it?"

Ula walked to face Brin, a grin as cold and unlovely as the one Antony had just given her smeared across her face. "What more could I possibly need to say, Brin? He walked in and out of a Roman city. He speaks Latin as his first language. He may know our language, but his accent is so thick sometimes you could trip over it. He writes, probably reads as well, Roman soldiers do, did you know that? Add it up."

Brinnie nodded. She'd asked herself about each of these points before. "None of that adds up to squat, actually." Not when he'd put his own life on the line to save hers. Not when he had so many opportunities to ride away and not look back. Not when he'd told her how he felt about her, and she'd seen the truth of it in his eyes.

"As for reading and writing, you don't even know what that tin is for. If he's a deserter, if he's any kind of Roman, he wouldn't be here now. For all your speculation, there are times you haven't been with us, things you haven't heard or seen. Things that make a difference."

"I know that, Brin. Many times I haven't been with you. That just means he prefers to lie to you privately. You said yourself he thinks you're like a child, all innocent and naive. Or stupid." She walked easily back to the roasting meat and turned both pieces. "But you're wrong. I don't have any interest in making trouble for him, none at all. He's the best chance we've got to survive all of this, and with him I can still come out on top. So long as your lover doesn't cut his throat for him."

"I don't care if he's Caesar himself, or why he's chosen to jump their ship and take up this cause. I'm just waiting for the day you betray him like you have every other good man who's fallen at your feet. First you betrayed Cam for Calgacus, now Calgacus for the Roman. And when we get to the front, you'll betray him for our new king."

"When you do, I'll still be somewhere nearby. Waiting."

Brinnie pushed curls back from her face, and pulled her shoulders straight. Ula would be somewhere near; there'd be no doubt about that. But her wait would be wasted. Calgacus was not her lover and never would be again.

There was nothing to be gained from this conversation. The words cut too close to the bone, opening old wounds that were bloodless now from the months they'd been laid bare and unhealed. Her betrayals were past, her innocence and naiveté gone. "I'll assume you've told him all that, too?" she said in a tight hiss.

"You'd be right."

Of all the things he'd said, of all the truths he'd given her, even if there were lies among them, Antony had known she didn't carry all the guilt for her past. He didn't

blame her. “Good. Then we don’t have to discuss this any further, do we. Like he said, shut up and eat.”

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN.

Antony stood with his arms crossed over the back of Tav’s horse, forcing himself to choose a course of action.

Whatever he chose to do, he would have to take Brinnie aside. The things that were between them were too precious and too vulnerable to be discussed with an audience, especially one as hostile as Ula.

Last night the thought of leaving her behind had been heartbreaking, the knowledge that he’d never see her again sickeningly bleak. But now he’d complicated the issue past all resolution. In staying, in refusing to tell her the truth, in choosing to make love to her, he had locked himself into a situation where all his choices were insufferable. Everything he believed, everything he valued, everything he knew about himself had become smoke.

Now the thought of leaving her seemed like death. Confronting his own deception and telling her the whole truth was just as bad. The result would be the same. Giving her more half-truths was unforgivable.

And Ula had decided she wanted him alive. Hurting her had not made her so much more dangerous at all. She’d played out her role as scorned woman just as he should have expected. He’d be able to judge the fallout from her explosive piece of spite when he went back to the house. If there was no blood on the walls when he went back to eat, he could put off the issue for another twelve hours. Once they started riding hard no one would have the breath or the energy for in-depth conversations, and there would be no break for midday today.

He rested his head down onto the horse’s back and blew out a long sigh. He felt like a coward. But twelve hours took them within spitting distance of their goal without having to face the rebel leader himself. And it brought him the time to try to find a way to convince Brin to stay beside him, even if he had destroyed all hope that she could ever trust him.

Ula would have expounded her theories on his desertion. He chewed at the side of his thumb and kicked a toe against the rocky ground. As lies went, her theories weren’t so bad. Closer to the truth without damning him completely.

Brinnie was smart enough to keep what she knew to herself. So far she’d failed to share her memories of the battle at Fendoch with Ula, and they were pieces of the puzzle that between them they couldn’t fail to put together. If Brin told Ula he’d been travelling with his brothers, she would know there was no chance he’d deserted the fort at Inbhir Nis to follow Brin on a passionate whim. If Ula knew he’d been with the rebels at the attack on Fendoch, again, she’d have the question of who he was sorted in a moment.

He couldn’t return to the Roman lines until he had completed his commission. He had to get to Calgacus’ camp and get the final numbers and position, regardless of the circumstances and complications. If Brinnie realised he had no choice but to keep moving toward the front, she would see through him like he was glass. This was his mother’s land, but that was not reason enough to force his hand.

So, that was his best course. It stunk. It reeked of lies and betrayal and cowardice,

but it bought him a little bit of time. The best he could say and do was to say and do nothing. If Brinnie had questions, he would answer them as honestly as he could. She knew he'd lied; he'd been truthful enough to admit it.

He felt sick. Deep sickness, heart deep sickness. And shame beyond words. But the truth would take her from him. The taste of her kisses was still on his tongue, his skin held onto the memory of her touch and when he closed his eyes he could see her eyes, dark and lovely. She'd hear his secrets when he was ready to hear hers, she said, and he would never be ready to hear about the men in her past.

He had more lies yet to tell.

Brinnie watched him eat, forcing food past the thickness in her throat. He was no longer so tense, but she could see the way Vettona was watching him. Ula had fixed a self-satisfied smile over her face, and Brin wrestled an awful sinking certainty that the happiness she'd glimpsed was about to fall away. He had secrets too painful to share, and in the cold light of day, those secrets terrified her.

She looked at the food on her plate, the best meal she'd had since the brothel in Inbhir Nis, but her empty stomach seemed to prefer to stay that way. She needed to eat; Antony had said they would ride hard through every hour of daylight.

She had never done much riding and her body was already stiff and sore. The thought of getting back into the saddle today was unappealing, but she could wear the discomfort without complaint. As long as she could make herself eat so she'd have the strength to stay in the saddle.

At that moment she wanted nothing more than to stay in the warm hut with this wise and brave woman; with the green of the mountains and the clear blue of the sky; with no war and no pain and no fear. She wanted Antony to stay beside her. To walk on the slopes after a small fold of cattle, to bring her fresh milk and give her babies of her own to love. But he wouldn't stay and she couldn't watch him go.

Soon enough they were ready to leave.

Antony had spoken at length to Belus and his men. He had brought a nanny and kid, handing their rope gently into the hands of the child. And he'd saddled the horses and loaded what comforts they could carry onto them.

He was impatient, his eyes dark and restless, their manic fires brightening the shadows in their depths. As they mounted and turned the horses down along the valley to the north-east, Vettona called, and Antony dropped back to the ground and walked into the hut to speak with her alone.

He was uncomfortable with the old lady's scrutiny. The blue marks on her arms were too much like the runes on his own mother's hands and brow. He stood back from the bed, hanging his head forward like he'd been accused, letting his hair fall over the view of her.

"Come here lad," she said. "Closer, where I can see you plainly."

Reluctantly, he stepped forward, then at her insistence knelt beside her, and closed his eyes when her fingers touched his cheek.

"Are you expecting a judgement from me?" She smiled. "It looks like you do. I have none for you. I just want to remind you of something important. "This," she tapped the circled knots on his cheek, "is where your mother painted the courage you would need. Here and over your heart. What did she see, for you, I wonder?" Her words trailed away into a sleepy drawl.

When he opened his eyes to face her, the milkeness of her pupils seemed to clear a little to let the light of her sight out. "She's exceptional, that one, and she deserves the best and the finest. If you wanted sex, the little one was there for you. You made your choice, now you have to honour it. Your mother gave you the courage to do that, I can

see it.”

Then she couldn't see enough. Every word she spoke was an accusation of cowardice. He was a soldier. Born a soldier in a family of soldiers and the day would never come when he would turn his back on his service. Now, with Brinnie branded into his soul, dearer than his own skin, he was trapped between an irresistible love and an immovable duty. The only courage he had found was to stand still and wait for them to pull him apart. He smiled, but it looked no more than a grimace. “What would she tell me to do?” he asked.

“You know the answer to that better than I do. Answer your own question.”

This time he laughed, a short harsh sound. “She would say fight for what you want with everything you have, and then be content with the outcome, whatever it is.”

Vettona laughed too, but there was joy in the sound. “She is wise, then. You already have what you want, the battle is half won. You only have to fight to keep it.”

She gripped his hand, tight. “Would you have killed me, if I'd asked it of you?”

“There was no need,” he said. “Your army will be back along here in a few days. Whoever is left in your family will be back. You would have survived. With the little one here, you'll do well enough.”

“Ah, so you are a prophet, after all. Tell me one more thing. You think the battle will be a rout. What will we do next summer when the call comes to fight again?”

“I don't need to be a priest or prophet to tell you that. First you have to survive a winter with no food put aside and all the wounded you carry back from the lines. That will be a miracle in itself.

“Then, your men need to know what is happening outside their borders. Rome is stretched too thin. She can't hold her boundaries and still keep moving forward. In lands where the country is harsh, and to Rome, useless, she won't waste men fighting a losing battle. Tell them to go back to their own strengths. Guerrilla war is their best defence.

“The greatest threat to freedom in this country isn't Rome, it's the men who have taken power now, and who send you all out to die, and who won't want to relinquish that power and wealth when Rome moves back.”

Vettona smiled, then laughed, tapping once more at the circles of woad on his cheek. “I see you already have all the answers you need, don't you. Your mother is a wise woman, indeed. She would be. From this I see she's of my own people.”

Bright clear sunlight struck fire into the tips of his hair as he moved out and mounted, and Brinnie made herself breathe steadily, caught between fear and relief. Whatever he'd discussed with Vettona it had lightened the frown from his brow, but it turned his focus inward. He was thinking so hard about details she couldn't read that he seemed to have withdrawn from the world around him. He adjusted his seat and looked up into the high blue dome above, fixing his eyes on the sun and shaking his head slightly. “Let's move,” he said, letting Ula give her horse his head, and following at a loose canter.

Brin pushed her mount into stride beside him, afraid of his thoughts and longing to know what had lit his face with this species of hope. “What did she say?” she asked bluntly.

“She said she's Cornavii.” He grinned and Brinnie felt her heart catch, as she smiled a small smile of her own. “My father is a braver man than I knew. Imagine a whole village of women like her and taking one for a wife.”

Eirbrin thought of Vettona's wisdom about her home village. “She was taken as war ransom, did she tell you? Fifty years ago. But she said she's at home where she is, she has no need to go back to her mother's land. She remembers who she is and she's proud of it, no matter where she lives.”

“Aye, it must be a thing these women have in common, then.”

There was some truth, she thought. So what he’d told her about his mother’s home was true. And her hatred of Rome? “Is that all she had to say?”

“No.” He looked at her with a softer smile, and her heart filled with the light of it and burst in her chest. She wanted to leap across the back of the horse, and hold him and press kisses into his flesh deep enough to mark his perfect skin. His gaze wandered over her cheeks and her hair, and she felt its heat glide over her skin like the feather light touch of his fingertips. “She also said that you deserve only the best and the finest. And I agreed. She’s a very wise woman.”

“She called you back just to tell you something you already knew?”

“It seems so. Everything I need to know I already know, she tells me.” He raised his eyebrows. “So, what is it I know that holds all the keys?”

Was this old woman so very wise? There was only one question Brin had needed to hear answered for all her fears and doubts to vanish. She knew what it was that she needed to know. That this man loved her and she would not be alone.

The day’s ride was harder than Brin could have imagined. The cramps and bruises of the day before had no sooner warmed and hurt a little less, than a new set besieged her back, bottom and thighs. They rode at a steady pace, taking short breaks to eat and to let the horses drink while Antony checked girths and feet, then back on to ride again until the next break.

By midday they had begun to pass small family groups, huddled in makeshift tents or squatting in crowded villages now denuded of crops and animals. Bored women and children stared as they passed; belligerent men drew swords and held them up as a warning.

At Antony’s word the three of them held their gazes down and rode at an unbroken pace through these small outposts. On the few occasions they were halted or questioned, he answered simply that the supply wagon was on its way with beef and grain. It would be there by the morning he assured them, and together they continued their agonising ride.

Late afternoon, they passed what had once been a major camp. They had left the wide river valley midmorning, crossed between high peaks and over lightly snowed summer pasture, down glens and rocky passes, to arrive again at a watercourse. This they now followed, but the presence here of so many men had long since scarred the countryside beyond recognition.

The grassy verges of the river were now no more than muddy bogs; the numerous village buildings were much the worse for vandalism. There was no sign of green from one end of the settlement to the other.

The day was losing its light and Brinnie leaned forward, out of breath, energy and patience. “Will we camp here tonight?”

Every muscle tensed in anticipation of him saying ‘aye, we can,’ but Ula said under her breath, “Are you crazy?”

Antony laughed, keeping his face down as he’d instructed the girls. “Too much man here, even for you Ula?” He nudged the worn horses just a little faster as they crossed the river ford and turned their faces east again, toward the distant tree-lined mountains.

There were no signs here of the domesticity that had been evident in the smaller camps. No washing hung, no children ran among the buildings, no wagons. Horses, men, and here and there a chariot. And violence. Two bodies hung from dead trees above the water line and the smell of burnt flesh hung on the cool evening air.

This was the face of warfare, of angry men, marking time and bored, finding

nothing to kill so killing each other.

A renewing wash of adrenaline rushed into Brinnie's muscle and bone. The trees that marked the edge of the settlement and the relative safety of solitude seemed to move away from them faster than the horses could carry them. When they finally gained the cool shaded air that hung in under their branches, shaking born in relief and exhaustion began and threatened her grip on the horse's side.

"Antony. Is it safe enough to stop yet?" she called, and he turned, hauling up on his horse's head while she caught up.

"Are you going to fall?"

"No, I hope not. But I don't know how much longer I can keep going without a break."

He looked her up and down, studying her face and the way she shook as she drew each breath. "I'm sorry Brin, a bit further. Over this range. There'll be family groups here somewhere, back down one of the valleys a little way, keeping clear of that camp. The first one that seems safe, I promise."

He was watching the sky, and she knew he was counting another hour of twilight and the miles he could carry them before the darkness overtook them. An hour, she told herself. No more than an hour and she could fall to the stones and sleep like the dead.

There had been some traffic in the vale Antony had chosen to follow, but the earth had not been chewed and pitted. He stopped the horses, watching the single wagon that sat back under the fall of branches for many minutes, before he came to some silent decision and walked his horse slowly into the trees and up to the vehicle.

It seemed abandoned, but fresh mule tracks marked the wet sod to the side, and the ashy fire still let go wisps of smoke. Night was upon them, this had to do, there was nowhere else to go and Brinnie was not going to move from here if the gods themselves sent lightning to shoo her away.

She sat in silence while Antony slid to the ground, touching the grass here and there, counting the footprints he could still read in the murk.

"It's all right. Get down." He steadied Brin and then moved up to help Ula slide to her feet. "We have food," he called to the silent woodlands, then waited.

The wagon had once carried straw, but that had been picked away with such care that only a stalk or two sprung from the floorboard joins. A few possessions, very few, were bundled up against the seat.

He had just begun to pile sticks to rekindle the fire when Antony stopped, facing the darkness of the forest, his hand on the hilt of his knife. A man walked from the shadows, his hands forward, open and empty. "You have food?" he asked.

"A little. Enough for the children." Antony searched behind the man, watching shadows detach and move forward, becoming a family group.

The fire rose and Brinnie watched the three small children eat and Ula scowl. They had packed their stock of food in three separate batches specifically so they never had to bring out all the food at one time. Antony had opened two of the satchels and freely given most of their food to a family of strangers.

The fact didn't concern Brin. She chewed wearily at crust as dry as sawdust, dipping it in mead to soften it enough to swallow, and ate what she could of the meat and cheese on offer. When Antony sat beside her she pulled her blanket up her back, rested her head against his arm and closed her eyes to the warmth of the fire.

The smell of her hair rose on the warmth of the fire. Antony found the soft sound of her breath beside him more compelling than the murmured conversation of his hosts, and his body timed its subtle rhythms to match hers. She was perfect. In her the gods had made their finest work, and conspired against all probability to bring her here to

him. He raised his arm and pulled her gently in against his chest.

She hadn't asked.

None of the questions that filled him with cold dread had arisen. Whatever doubts Ula had managed to conjure, she'd put them aside, and for now, his secrets were safe.

"What's your secret?" The traveller's question caught him by surprise and pulled his attention back to their story about the travails of journeying from Cala na Creige.

"Times as hard as these and you have two beautiful women to yourself."

Antony smiled with relief and Ula made a derogatory huff.

"Times are hard, even with two women," he said. "And some," he looked pointedly at Ula, "exist only to make things harder."

"Well, you might have your hands full, my friend, but you won't be sleeping under the wagon with my wife and children. You and I will sleep out here by the fire. The ladies are welcome to get in out of the fog."

It was fair enough. The edict of a loving husband and father. "Brin," he whispered against her cheek. "Go in under the wagon with the children. Get some sleep."

Ula walked with him to tether their horses deeper into the forest. "What do we eat, now?" she asked as they walked.

"I'll never make a king, I'm sorry." He was laughing at her, weighing the enjoyment of seeing her fume against the risks he took in provoking her further.

"Kings and barons can afford to be generous. They don't go hungry when their slaves eat. I'm not being harsh, I'm being practical."

"So was I. Those kids are going to starve. Their parents think they'll get back to their homes on the coast when the Romans are beaten in this battle. It'll never happen. They need to run west, now, hard, before the rush of refugees starts in earnest."

"Eirbrin is already near starved," she pointed out. "If we starve instead, will it make you sleep easier at night?"

"We won't starve. At least I won't. You?" He shrugged and she punched his arm, hard.

"Why are you so sure we'll be beaten?" she asked.

"Why does it matter to you? You'll find yourself a thug to be part of the new power base no matter which way it goes. The more of your countrymen who die, the better for you."

She groaned, a small pitiful sound that stopped his teasing. "You don't understand. It would have been different. You're different. We would have been great together."

"Too different."

"It could have worked. It still could."

"Do you think I should just forgive and forget what you've done and said over the last few days? You really think that could happen?"

"I get angry sometimes. I say things. Eirbrin takes everything and everyone I ever wanted away from me. She always has."

"I get angry too, so be warned. I told you, we're too much alike you and I. And she didn't take anything from you. Not here, not now."

She punched a hand against her own thigh and smiled. "So you don't want me to call you Roman any more?"

"No." He grinned at the dark air. "Call me Master."

"Okay, tell me – look me in the eye and tell me – am I right? Are you a deserter?"

He paused. There was always, around this woman, a sense of threat. More than once he'd felt the fine hairs on the back of his neck raise in her company. He knew the fate of men who turned their backs on her. And yet, here she seemed vulnerable and harmless, naked and offering herself as she had once before. He wanted to answer

simply, no. But while she was occupied with this delusion, she was less likely to stumble on the truth.

“If I denied it, would it matter? Would you believe me, anyway?”

She grinned, and it seemed the fatigues of the day rushed up on her from behind. She shook her head sadly and seemed to slump a little bit. “No. I wouldn’t.”

“Then let’s go and get some sleep. I’m not looking forward to tomorrow.”

“That’s wise. I know these people. They’ll tell Brin she’s duty bound and she’ll change her mind and go back to him. If you want to stay alive, you’ll have to leave her there. You’ll see.”

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN.

The family of refugees had fled west past the leader’s camp, and Antony had inscribed the details they’d shared into his memory but he was scarcely going to need them. Once they left the side path that had taken them into the secluded valley, they entered a slow-moving river, a moving mass of the finest blood in the Caledonian highlands.

Brinnie was afraid, and it was all he could do to keep from scooping her onto his saddle and holding her close. Her face was white, frozen in a mask of silent dread. All her movements were stiff, and her gaze flicked nervously around her as if she feared assassins at every turn. But it wasn’t death she feared. It was faces from the past.

The number of vehicles in the flow brought their pace down to a walk, and Antony chafed with impatience and irritation. Where he could he led them wide around the wagons and many chariots and they picked up to a jog, but travelling was eating up the daylight hours and he wanted good light to judge the rebel camp.

If this was an army still gathering, with what they’d been past and what lay ahead, he was beginning to reassess the numbers. Many of those moving on this road were women and adolescents, but in every face he sensed a determination to fight.

There would be closer to sixty thousand warriors, and unless there lay hidden in these mountains an arena of battle vastly wide and well positioned, this would be a disaster of limitless magnitude. Chariots like these were part of the war machine for fast and open combat. Where they would meet in close quarters, in a valley or narrow amphitheatre, only the most skilled or psychotic commander would bring them into play.

More of the wagons than he’d anticipated were carrying food and supplies and that at least was a positive. The rebel generals had pulled this last essential out of hiding, and it would do much for the morale of people too long exposed in the wilds. Every person he passed bore arms. And he looked at each face as if he was farewelling a corpse. He knew the Roman commander too well to think this courageous horde stood a chance.

Ula kicked up to ride beside him, pointing out to the side. “That’s where we’re supposed to be heading. Why is everyone moving straight on down the valley and away from his camp?”

A muddy track, deeply rutted and heavily used, ran up to the left, climbing through dense forest and up into the mountain. The solid wash of people kept moving on past, but there was no doubt in Antony’s mind that Ula was right. That was the road to Calgacus’ base.

He watched the turn-off pass by, clenching his indecision in tight fists, then pulled

his horse aside, kicking him straight up the rough mountain side, shinning his way through forest litter and scree, into the shadows of the trees.

Behind him, grunting with exertion and swearing fit to colour the cool clear air, Ula followed with Eirbrin close behind. Pushing the horses, skidding and sliding through the dense sloping woodlands, they came back to the pathway up and he waited.

"I don't know why they're passing the base, unless he's moved the whole show in closer to his battlefield."

"It's full moon tonight," Brinnie said, her grey features turned down to where the noise of the passing hordes sounded below. "There are fifteen tribes remaining, and the ceremony will need room for the gathering of all of them and every clan from each. That's a lot of people to have in place by tonight."

She was right. The slow burn of ice tightened in his gut as he watched her. She was closer now to her past, to the woman who had shared the burdens of leadership, the woman who was trusted to coordinate the movements of all the northern tribes. Tactics. Logistics.

"Even if this camp is cold, I want to go up and have a look. Do you think he'll still be there?"

She shook her head painfully. "No. He'll be where ever his men are."

It was hard to recall the face of the man. The night Antony had sat in the crowded roundhouse and heard him rally those doomed men to battle, he'd been too engrossed in his study of Eirbrin and self-reproach. But Calgacus commanded this. Men who'd travelled from the extreme edge of the nation had answered the call to arms on account of one man. He was a leader indeed.

"Let's go look."

The camp wasn't quite cold. There was no evidence of boredom or vandalism in the large open village. Everything had been well maintained and there were still faces at some of the doorways. The old and the very young of certain lucky families were waiting here in the wings.

The village square was trampled bare and had seen huge bonfires in the nights before, but the fire bed was cold, and the rank smell of damp ash hung on the air around it. Antony moved past it to the community roundhouse and slipped down from his seat.

No one approached, and he waited by the door while Brin and Ula walked to join him. When he ducked in under the thatch, he pulled a low whistle back through his teeth. "The royal residence," he said as Ula pushed past and helped herself to the remains of a breakfast buffet.

A fire on the central hearthstones had burned down to ashy coals, but the space had stayed well warmed. Along with the wide trestle buffet and couches, the huge room boasted thick rugs and furs on the floor and walls. A massive straw bed, raised on crossed timbers to waist height and shrouded in veils and curtains, squatted heavily against one wall. Its covers were rich fabrics, dyed in bright colours and shining with metallic thread.

And drawing Brin's attention so she crossed the floor in a rush, a vast iron tub, raised on bulbous feet and heated from below by small fires and a pile of rounded hot-rocks.

The scrape of a sword on its scabbard turned Antony on the spot, his own sword rising over his shoulder as he turned. Ula was beside him in two strides, the ornate swords she so loved already in her hands.

"There's no reason for you to be up here." The speaker wasn't older than his mid-thirties, but his voice carried the clear authority of a commander.

"Of course there is." Brin spoke from behind them. "Didn't Euguein tell you to

expect me?"

The sword dropped to the floor as the young officer strode forward, pushing past Antony and Ula as if they were pieces of stone and wrapping strong arms around Brinnie. "Oh lass, it's good to see you. We didn't know what had happened."

"Euguein isn't here?" she asked, freeing herself.

"No. He hasn't returned yet. Great gods, come on. I'll take you to Calgacus."

"No." Antony heard the rising desperation in her voice and his heart clenched painfully. "No. I need to eat and to rest. I want to use this." She pointed to the tub. "There's plenty of time and he'll have his hands full. I'll follow when I'm ready."

"I'll have boys bring you water." The young officer passed a rapid assessment of the room. "And more firewood. Food? I'm not sure what food is still up here, but I'll see what I can find."

"Don't tell him," she said quickly, and again Antony heard pleading in her words. "I'll join the camp when I'm ready and I'll surprise him. If Euguein didn't come to tell him I was on my way, let him be surprised when I see him."

The young man looked uncertain. In a nightmare of people and organisation, no one liked surprises. But it was plain to anyone looking at her that Brinnie needed to rest and to eat, and that plain fact swayed his judgement. "Aye, all right." To Antony and Ula he said, "You two should eat here, too, before you go. I'll send an escort up for Eirbrin. When she's ready they'll bring her down to our leader."

"No." Antony looked at the floor, feeling the colour draining from his cheeks, then up to meet the irritation of the commander. "Euguein swore her into my care, and I'll stay with her."

"He's not here, and I'll tell you to stand aside."

He had no interest in arguing with this man, except that it went some way to vent the frustration rising in his gorge. He lived with rank and order every single day, and there was no ignoring the authority insinuated by this man's stance and tone, but even if Antony had not had the call of a senior officer, he would still have refused. Brinnie was here long enough for him to get the numbers, and she wouldn't spend a minute away from his side. "I'll step down when he orders me to and not before."

"Euguein can't be far away," Brin interjected, moving to stand between the men, her face modelling a calm smile. "Believe me Arlen, he's going to want to tell Calgacus about this man himself. And what he was able to do and why he's here."

Arlen looked from Brin to Antony and back, obviously unimpressed by the suggestion of heroics and unhappy about leaving a man so close to this particular woman. Nodding toward Ula, he said, "And her?"

"You can have her." Antony smiled like an adder, but Brin stood forward on her behalf.

"There'll be people here from home, Ula. Where do you want to be?" She didn't turn to look at Ula, and only the closest scrutiny might have picked the slight curl of dislike. "Do you want to go on ahead and find them?"

Ula slipped her swords into their belt and stepped up to place an arm around Antony's hips. "I'll stay with my man. When he's released from service we'll go to find our family together. I can wait if he can."

Antony stifled an open laugh. This girl was a fox. If there was a time or place she was not ahead of the game and thinking of herself, he'd yet to see it. Why would she leave the comforts of this hall for the rough mud and mayhem in the camp below? And putting herself on his arm made the officer relax his disapproval just enough to step back.

"Brinnie...." He was hesitant. Doubts raged over his face, ticking and tugging at

the muscles of his cheeks. "If it was anyone but you...." He turned away. "All right. The ceremony starts at sundown. Eat and sleep. I'll send you water and food."

"Thank you. You're a gem." Brin hugged him. "And remember, not a word."

He faced Antony and glared pointedly at Ula, still wrapped around him like a vine. "If she hasn't found her way down to the marquee by then, I'll send an armed escort up here for her. And let me explain something, so you'll know why you won't get a very warm welcome here. We're doing something here that's never been done before, on a scale our fathers never dreamed of. And all of it, all of it, rests on the shoulders of one man.

"There are more of us, of course, but we all follow the dream and the vision of one man. She's part of that vision. Understand. To him, and so to us, she is the purity of the union we're going to forge here. She is the spirit of our land, embodied. If anything was to happen to her, if anyone was to harm her, if we even thought someone might take her away from this cause.... Well, you can guess."

His tone made the threat quite plain. And it wasn't any great harm to her that he envisaged. This man, like Euguein and no doubt all of the generals in this war, wanted Brin beside their leader. Every one of them understood the need he had to wrap her grace around himself: to cover the fear and the pain; to embody the hope and the victory; to hide the guilt and the terrible cost. For all he knew, every one of them envied their lord.

"Follow me," he said to Antony and strode to the doorway and ducked out into the bright day.

He was already mounted, glaring impatiently as Antony climbed back onto his own horse. He didn't wait for small talk or explanations; he simply turned his horse to a path leading on up the mountain and expected he would be followed. The way moved through steep pine forests dense enough to close out the sun, but they hadn't gone too far before Arlen pulled aside and dismounted, stepping out onto a flat outcrop of rock which made a natural observation platform for the valley below.

"You can see there are twenty main marquees."

Just as he said, the sight below was like that of an enormous market day. At the farthest point, nestled into a curve in the flow of good-sized river, was the largest of a collection of tents and wide marquees. Spreading away on all sides were twenty large and hundreds of smaller canvas covers.

Men moved through the grounds in astonishingly ordered chaos. It was like no army camp Antony had ever seen, but the precision with which the roadways and alleys had been laid out was obvious, as was the careful adherence to some obscure vital standard. Wagons and vehicles of all kinds ringed the area, but very few moved inside the boundaries of the camp.

"All you have to worry about is the main marquee. See it? Remember it. If Brin isn't there by sundown you're dead."

"You're sure of yourself."

"No, I'm not. I'm sure of nothing, that's why I'm still alive." Arlen glared at him and he read the hard experience that had shaped this man's attitudes. They were not so different to his own. "I don't believe Euguein left a stranger to escort Brin, not while there's breath in his body. If he's coming, he'll be here before tonight, and I'll ask him why he did that, myself."

"Do that." He could wait to have Euguein answer all his doubts. That sort of time frame suited Antony nicely. "The circle," Antony studied the camp and pointed below, "did the Druids build that? Is it ceremonial?"

Where the land swept back from the riverside and curved in a vast arc up to the

base of the mountain they'd climbed, a wide flat circle had been marked in the grass. Stones the size of a large man stood at short intervals around the circumference, and two much larger boulders marked the highpoint of the curve closest to the camp ground. One, wide and flat like a massive brick, lay at odds to the orientation of all the others. The second, an enormous pillar many cubits high, lay in the grass with its base hanging over a pit, swathed in ropes and trusses.

And, filling the bulk of the cleared ground inside the circle, a gargantuan pile ready for the light; the biggest bonfire Antony had ever seen. Its light would be a beacon for the Roman generals where ever they were.

"Yes."

"Tell me; is there another field as big as this one? Is the site he's chosen to meet the Romans on as good as this?"

"It's further on. If you're alive at daybreak, you'll see it." Arlen smiled and fanaticism sparkled from his eyes. "No, it isn't as wide, or as deep, but the priests chose it."

"And they chose this one for themselves?"

"Don't you utter anything sacrilegious here. Not in this place. Not today."

He had puffed up, and Antony raised a calming hand. "I'm just looking at the size of your force. It's vast. You're sure you have room to field all these men?"

"Aye. I'm sure. And this is the more important time. We have the heart and the numbers, but alone and separate, we'll be picked off by Rome as she picked off every other tribe of Britons. The only time we've held them off, down in the south, was when we joined forces, when we stood together. Alone we're weak, but once we are unified, once we are joined for ever as one people, Rome will never stand a chance."

"Aye. You're right, my friend. Not a chance." Antony watched the men, women and children moving trustingly into the glorious camp below. A brilliant mind had conceived it, and everything was running faultlessly. This would inspire confidence in the most jaded man on earth ... right up until he learned that the priests had chosen the battle arena and damned them all to death.

The hut was too warm, its shadows banished by fires on the hearth and under the iron trough, and then also by several braziers lit and smouldering, but the light was perfect. The light was pure magic.

As he entered, Antony stopped to drop his cape and saddlebag and to unclip the sword belt from his shoulder. There was not a lot more food on the buffet than had been there when they arrived, but he moved closer and took a platter.

"I can't believe this place." Brinnie rubbed at her arms, still feeling a cold that wasn't present in the room. Her face remained ghostly, her eyes shadowed, silently pleading for rescue. "He was always a soldier. Eating and sleeping with his men. I can't imagine the man who lives like this while the people out there starve in the mud."

Ula patiently stuffed the heavily spiced food into her mouth. She hadn't stopped eating since a group of young boys, all dressed in matching gold trimmed tunics, had delivered fresh stocks to the table. "Sycophants, Brin. It doesn't matter what the king wants; the king gets what a king should have. It makes him so much more dependent."

Antony turned to Brin, wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her against his chest. "Are you all right?"

"No." The food she'd tried to eat was sitting in a hot lump just above her stomach. Illness swirled in the acid below it, churning bile into jagged spikes and her gut felt

loose and heavy.

“Eat. And I’ll take you out of here.”

“Are you mad?” So he’d had a chance to gauge the competence of the generals he’d fight for, and having done so, was happy now to ride down to the mud of the camp below and join the party. He could think again. “I’m going nowhere. Arlen’s a man of his word. Unless you gave him any reason to doubt us, he’ll say nothing to anyone.

“Even when I was a child I didn’t have luxury like this. Ula’s already scoured the trunks. A few trinkets, a little gold, no nice clothes unfortunately. But I will soak in that tub and I will sleep on that bed. How many hours do I have until nightfall?”

Antony shifted his weight, the slight movement the only indication that he was uncomfortable. “Four, maybe five.”

Five hours of peace. Five hours before the threats of this camp would have to be faced. She nodded and softened her tone. “Arlen was threatening you. He doesn’t trust you.”

“I know.”

Brin lifted her face from the warmth of his chest and looked up into his eyes. She had her own doubts and questions she needed to ask, things she’d put off until now that could be put away no longer, but not while Ula hovered at the edge of her sight like a buzzard over a dying man. “He was serious.”

“I know.”

Ula walked to the tub and waved a hand through the warming water. “If I can use this tub first, I’ll take the watch. I’ll sit at the door while you two sleep.”

Brin closed her eyes and tried to imagine Ula a long, long way away, and Antony laughed and walked to where she stood. “I promised myself I’d never turn my back on you, and I’d definitely never close my eyes while you were behind me.”

“That was before you knew how much I’d plan to lose if I stabbed you.”

“No deal. You can go down into the main camp. It’s clean and well laid out. I’d lay odds they have bath stalls down there; they have everything else.”

“Go down without you? And have them think you’re up here alone with the precious lady herself? That would be risky.”

Brin walked to one of the iron braziers and fiddled with sticks, turning them and watching the colour rise and fade. “I’m having that tub. You two can go walk in the hills and argue all you like. Better still, you can go and find me some wine. I would really like something to take the edge off these bruises.”

Ula reached across the buffet and raised a silver carafe. “Done. And I’ll take the watch anyway.” Brinnie caught the small frown, the resignation in her eyes as she turned. “You can owe me.”

“I got you out of Inbhir Nis and brought you home,” said Antony. “I owe you nothing.”

Ula sneered dismissively at him and trudged to the doorway and through into bright sunlight, and Brin felt adrenaline surge in her system. She had questions, but she had four or five hours in this wonderful room with her man.

The water would be hot enough.

Her heartbeat rushed and her unsettled stomach flipped and settled deeper as she grabbed a crisp lavender handful of dried flowers and herbs and tossed them over the hot water. Past the hearth and buffet, Antony squatted beside a couch, his attention set on working at the high back. When he stood, he pulled a section of the frame away, and stood the couch on its end. Happy with his efforts, he moved to the doorway, and jammed the broken couch against the opening.

“You really don’t trust her.” Brin smiled and waved her hand through the water,

spreading the *pot pourri*, watching his back and shoulders flex as he moved.

"Not one bit." He strode to where his cape and saddlebag lay on the floor, and snatched the leather satchel up, moving it to the floor beside the bed.

His urge for destruction was not yet sated and he moved next to the bed frame, where he separated out one of the filmy veils that curtained the huge bed and ripped it free from its rails. He pulled it several ways and seemed pleased with those efforts as well. Tossing it to the floor beside the saddlebag, he moved to the buffet, tipped bread and crusts from a wide cutting board and threw that, too, into his pile on the floor.

"What are you doing?" Her smile began to jitter as amusement gave way to curiosity. Reluctantly she looked away from him, ladling water over the coals to douse the heating fire.

"You'll see." Moving like a man on a singular mission, he reached for the second couch, checked the layout of the room, dragged it across the floor, and set it between the bed and the tub. Then with everything as he wanted it, he walked slowly to where she stood and slipped his fingers over her cheeks, cupping her face in his strong hands and turning her lips up to his.

Sudden fear burst in her chest and she stepped back, her panicked heart rushing up to choke her on its fright. She gasped and stepped back again, staring at him like he'd just stabbed her through the heart. She couldn't breathe; a knot of horror had risen into her throat and lodged itself there.

"What?" Her fear was mirrored, the frantic mystic staring from his eyes.

"I...", she stammered. "Nothing. I don't know. Just panic."

"Panic? Are you sure you don't want to get out of here? If you're afraid, I'll take you somewhere safer."

"No." Brin laughed unconvincingly. "I'm sorry. I don't know what happened. I just.... I'm all right now. It's passed."

"It's too much, with everything that's happened over the last few days. You need to rest and regain your strength."

He was right. All the horrors of her life had come together here, all the bad memories and the pain and guilt had followed her along the journey. All her ghosts were here with her now. Only her trust in this man gave her the courage to keep moving. And he had secrets that threatened her grip on that courage. It would be all right.

He wrapped his arms around her and held her close, let her close her eyes and breathe, let her find her equilibrium against him, and she hugged him tight. When her heartbeat had settled, she raised her face, closed her eyes and reached up for his kiss.

His mouth was bliss. Echoes of spiced meat and sweet wine lingered on his tongue and his lips were as soft as summer petals.

When she opened her eyes, he smiled. "Sit," he said.

She took a seat on the couch, and he straddled it before her, took her foot in his hand and unlaced her boot from her shin to her toes. First one, and then the second. "You don't need these." He grinned and she let herself surrender to the wash of giggles that climbed up into her mouth.

"Why did you move the room around?"

"I want to watch you bathe, and this is a good spot."

The nervous trembles started in her belly again and her cheeks coloured. "I thought you might join me."

"I might."

"But you'd like to watch me first?"

"Aye."

He leaned toward her and she pushed her mouth onto his, her breath suddenly

coming harder. The thought of him watching, of his eyes on her naked skin and the heat of pleasure rising in his blood, sent a thrill of longing coursing through her.

She sat back and turned to stand, her nostrils flaring as she bit her lip and tried to keep the rush of her own breath from deafening her. He watched her every move, her skin acutely aware of the heat of his gaze even when she turned her own face down.

Her toes curled in the soft nap of the rugs under her feet, and she turned to face him, reaching trembling fingers to her back, feeling behind her hips for the ties that held the skirt in place. The bow gave and her heavy skirt slipped lower, its rough weave scraping on the overheated skin of her belly like the rasp of a tongue.

A tiny moan slipped from her mouth, and she dared to raise her face enough to look at him. His eyes were dark pools, their clear blue hidden in the shadows of his lashes and a small smile touched his full lips. The heat of lust and exquisite terror fluttered and churned in her stomach; her head was light and her breath and knees unsteady.

She tugged at the masses of fabric gathered on her hips, letting it slip down over the bare skin of her thighs and into a mound that tangled at her ankles. The tunic she wore reached to her thighs, dropping down over her hips as the bags of her skirt fell away, and she lifted the hem a little, stepping sideways to clear her feet.

Antony watched, aware of nothing but her closeness, and the hard pulse that pushed burning blood through his flesh. It was too loud, beating in his ears, searing his throat and his earlobes, raising the hairs on his chest and rolling in hot waves from his shoulders down his back.

She raised her face just enough to let him see the shy smile that played over her lips; then turned from him, walking to the side of the tub and reaching for the petals; stretching so the hemline of the tunic climbed the smooth curve of her bottom. For a moment he glimpsed hidden promise, darker where the unblemished cream of her skin slipped into shadow.

Harsh grey wool dropped down again to take the prize from his view, and she clutched it at her waist, her hands tugging nervously in the crude fabric. Slowly she turned, walking back toward him, crossing her arms to take the bottom of the tunic in both hands. As she lifted, slowly, she twisted to free the tunic. She was so close; he could smell her hair and her skin, and the taste of her kiss was fresh on his tongue. Before him, close enough to touch, the long clean line of her thighs flared up into the gentle curve of her hips, and a nest of chestnut curls drew fire into his fingertips.

The tunic skimmed her sides, the ridge of each rib slipping from shadow into golden light as it rose. Its itching weave puckered the clear skin as it dragged, tickling over soft curves to reveal the rounded cup of her breasts, the rose of her nipples. The heat from her skin reached out to him, the throb of desire burning hot at his groin, and he raised his hands, sending his fingertips out to touch her.

Brin dropped the tunic to the floor and her hands came up quickly, catching his fingers as they moved toward her. She fixed her gaze on his, her chest aching over every hard breath, as his eyes swept over her skin, piquing her awareness of her own nakedness and excruciating vulnerability. Pulling his hands wide, stretching her own arms out as she spread his apart and away from her, she arched her back, bringing the swollen pink bud of her breast up to his lips.

His mouth closed over her nipple, and he drew the sweet flesh deep into the searing softness of his mouth.

Brinnie groaned, the air sighing from her, and she rocked, her knees aching to fold. She opened her eyes and steeled herself, watching his lips and tongue teasing and suckling at her breast, and prepared herself to step back. No part of her flesh wanted to

break the contact, but the spirit of devilment that dwelled in her bones urged her. Step back. Let the burn build, watch him long for you. Ache for him.

She stepped away, dropped his hands and turned, shaking, back toward the tub.

A hand flashed out and an unexpected touch, his fingertips grazing the curve of her hip, flashed over her skin like lightning, snatching her breath and raising the hair on her nape like a static charge. When she spun back to face him, a smile growing on her lips, he had leaned almost from the couch, his eyes burning, his tongue touching his teeth.

"You are exquisite," he rasped, and slowly he relaxed and sat back onto the couch. With a smile as warm and unsteady as the flickering fire, he raised a hand to the tub behind her, and said, "Your bath?"

"I had to undress," she said, opening her hands with frank honesty, and his smile grew wider. Carefully she steadied herself on the edge of the tub, then lifted her leg and stepped over into the water.

Heat rushed up her legs and bit at her toes and ankles. She winced at the bite, holding the edges again as she slowly lowered herself down into the tub. It shoved air out of her and she grimaced, but slowly, slowly, her body inured itself to the heat and she relaxed. The steam was fragrant, heavily spiced, just as the food had been and she breathed it deep.

She pulled her hair together, lifting it from her shoulders and twisting it into a failed knot at the back of her head. As it writhed and fell free, she slipped her shoulders down into the water and closed her eyes. Bliss.

"You really should join me. This is wonderful." She stretched her legs, resting her ankles on the lip and wiggled her toes in the warm air.

Antony sat with his knees pulled up, the breadboard jammed in hard against his thighs. He had wrapped the fine curtain cloth over the wood and was flicking soft black lines over the surface, glancing up from time to time, smiling.

Brin nearly leapt from the water. "What are you writing?" she demanded.

"Magic runes." He grinned. "I'm writing everything I know about beauty."

"Can I see?"

"Later." His hands flew with the certainty of his vision. When he tugged the cloth down and stretched some tension into the next section, it was not the frustration of failure that sped his fingers, but the inspiration to draw again, another angle, a better light, her shoulders, her chin, the way her hair fell down her back in ringlets.

"Why?" Her eyes were wide, all the peace and relaxation had fled and she was hanging onto the lip of the tub with white knuckles.

"I want you to see what I see when I look at you. I want you to know how beautiful you really are."

"I have a mirror." She sat back a tiny bit, her chest heaving but her gaze a little softer.

"Not good enough. You can look into that and see the faults you want to see. With this you can only see what I want to show you."

"Are you saying I don't see what's there, only what I want to see?" Her eyebrows rose in a challenge and he laughed.

"No. I'm saying I see what's really there, regardless of what you believe about yourself."

"That's the secret of your vision, is it? That's how you cast your oracles?" She was grinning now, too.

"Maybe. You're all I can see. That's how I know my perspective is right." He looked at her, sliding the board down flat. "Go back to sitting in the tub like a goddess. I want to see the faerie blood in your veins."

"I can't now, I'm too tense. I have to relax all over again. The muscles in my back and side are all tight again." She lay her chin down on her crossed arms and smiled. "You could come in here and help."

He could. And he wanted to, at least as much as he'd wanted to catch her light.

He should. Tomorrow..., he stopped any thought of the battle to come and looked critically at the work he held. He dropped the board down onto the couch, and bent to unlace his boots.

He would.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN.

Brinnie watched him undress, just as she'd watched him dress at the village. There was grace in his movements: taut, agile grace. Lean hard muscle under pale skin. "You need to shave," she said, the memory of his rough chin on the bare skin of her belly, sending a tiny thrill up her spine.

He slipped the skinning knife from its sheath and handed it in to her, then walked unselfconsciously to a trunk at the far side of the bed. He rattled among the vials and jars that stood there, sniffing at one that seemed promising and carrying it back to the tub with him, along with a tallow block.

"Why hasn't he set a guard on all of this?" Brinnie asked. "The people down there would ransack this place if they knew it was all just sitting here waiting for him to come back."

He stepped into the water and Brin slid back, making room. "He won't come back." He shrugged. "If the battle goes well, they'll keep moving east, fighting the Romans back to the coast. He won't need any of this, but he can always send riders back for anything he wants. If the battle goes badly, it's all just surplus; too much to carry in retreat."

Brinnie turned between his knees and leaned back against his chest. "Have you always fought? All your life?" Fear and reluctance spurred her heart and she regretted the question as soon as it was asked. It wasn't the time or place for life stories. Not yet. There was so much more to learn about him, so many ways to see him. She'd never watched him sleep. She hadn't found what made him laugh.

So much more to learn. And plenty of time.

"I have," he answered softly, pressing his lips against her crown. "Here."

He held out the small bottle of fragrant oil and she turned awkwardly, slipping to her knees and sliding up to position herself over his thighs. She juggled the knife and the bottle, pouring a pool of oil into her palm and wiping it thickly over his cheek.

She paused, peering deep into his eyes, running her fingertip softly down over his lips. In a moment she would kiss those lips. And his throat. And the broad muscle of his chest. And his belly, where a dark line of hair trailed down from his navel.

She fixed her concentration on the razor sharp blade, laid it sideways over his skin, and bit her lip as she slid the knife-edge down. The first few times she drew it over his cheek, she expected to see a wash of scarlet rising and rushing down, but shaving a man was not a skill easily forgotten.

She had shaved her father's chin from childhood. And Cam. And the owner of this room. Their faces came before her and she shoved them away. Her attention was on Antony. On his long thick eyelashes where they rested on his cheek. On the swell and

hollow of his jawline and the blue beneath his eye. On his lips.

The tallow block had turned in his hands, and he brought the soft viscous lather up over her shoulders, his hot hands smearing slowly down and up her arms to her throat and down her chest.

She shocked up straight. "This is sharp and I have to concentrate."

His hands kept moving in slow circles, pressing the soapy suds onto her skin and he smiled. "I trust you. You're a woman of many talents."

The soap trail dragged back to her shoulders and reached behind her, sliding gently over her back and down, down the ticklish reaches of her ribs. She smiled and squirmed, trying to focus on the grate of the blade over bristle, trying to keep her eyes on his skin.

He damped the lather, reaching back to barely skim her sides and then to slowly move his hands together, gliding along the bottom of her ribs, over her belly and up. Brin froze, closing her eyes, arching her back and leaning into his hands as they cupped her breasts, glanced over throbbing nipples, and out. His touch was light. Against the sensitive skin of her underarms it was like the rush of insect feet, like a million tiny tongues all licking at her skin.

She opened her mouth to speak, but his hands found her eager breasts again, his thumbs pinching gently at their tips and she closed her lips and sighed. Her breath was harder, gooseflesh rose under each soft sweep of his hands and a restless urgency grew in her hips.

As if he read their burning, he slid his hands down to cup her bottom, raising her from her seat, bringing her lips forward to his. With her hands full, she leaned to his mouth, the fragrant bath oil smearing her cheek and chin as she shuffled forward on her knees, feeling the hard insistence of his erection under her.

Balanced on her forearms, leaning on his shoulders, she let the kiss linger. His tongue stroked hers, sweet in her mouth and his lips moved with a slow sensual rhythm that echoed down through her body, gently twisting her spine and moving her hips. Her breath kept catching, aching and moaning from her mouth as his slippery hands resumed their soft sweeps of her wet flesh. Gentle pressure on her back brought her harder against him, his hot palms on her breasts moved her slowly back.

"I'm going to finish this," she whispered as she dropped her face down onto his shoulder, groaned and wriggled slightly away from him. "You don't want only one cheek shaved, so let me finish." Her voice was hardly more than breath and she shook, her rapid pulse rattling her wrists and hands and fingers.

"And then?" he murmured, onto her cheek, his hands pulling her hips back to where they had been.

"You might bleed to death," she said. "My hands are shaking."

"Leave it." His hands were never still, sliding over hot wet skin, sluicing away the slippery suds and shifting her weight against him. "I want you now. I want to kiss every inch of your skin."

His words drew rashes of sweat in the steam and her breath shortened as she turned her lips down his shoulder, sucking and biting gently on hard muscle. "Wait," she whispered, not sure she could or that she wanted to.

He shook his head, lifting her hips so her breasts rose to him. "No." His mouth was burning as his kisses brushed her skin.

"We have five whole hours." She smiled, letting her hot breath spill down through his hair. Sitting determinedly, she made him face her and waited for him to open his eyes. She had given up trying to control her breathing, her mouth was open, dry in the steamy air and she swallowed, sliding her tongue over her lips as she brandished the

knife at him.

"Sit still and keep your hands by your sides." She grinned. "Or else."

"Cruel," he breathed and lay his head back on the edge of the tub.

"You'll survive." If she could make her hands grip the knife and keep her mind on what she was doing, he might just survive.

For the most part he kept his word, sitting very still and staring at her from under heavy lids. Twice he reached to slide her closer, a villainous smile twitching at his lips, and the second time she didn't try to move her hips back. She brought her concentration close to his top lip, afraid of damaging the delicate bow, and she drew the blade up in long confident strokes as she cleared the darkness from under his jaw and his throat.

"There." She sighed against his lips, kissing him at last. "All done. Now, what were you saying before?"

"I don't remember." The bath had turned milky, and Brin slipped back to the edge of the tub as he splashed the hot water over his cheeks and up through his hair. He leaned back, studying her, spreading lather up his own chest and under his arms and chin, washing away itchy prickles. "What was I saying?"

"Something about kissing, was it?" She lifted a toe and drew a long line down the slimy foam on his chest.

"Can I move now?" He grinned as he splashed the soap away.

"Yes."

"Good."

He stood suddenly, stepped from the tub and lifted her from the water.

When he lay her back, wet, on the bright coloured bedding, Antony felt a very real physical swelling in his heart. She was flawless. The touch of her skin against his lips raised a fire in his blood that consumed all time and all reason. There was a sense that if he could sit somewhere near, he could watch her for an eternity and never tire of the sight. But to touch her, to have the heat of her skin under his fingers, the soft silky sweetness of her flesh in his mouth, coiled something in his gut so hard and so tight that it forced all the breath from his body.

He could not remember a single true infatuation in his life. Sex was a need he met in the same way that he ate or drank or slept.

But Brinnie; good god, Brinnie. The perfume of her skin was the air he wanted to breathe, her lips the only wine he ever wanted to drink. And the thought that he might lose her kicked him hard in the stomach.

"Brin." He lifted his lips from hers, using his fingers to comb the red gold of her hair back over her pillow. "Don't ever leave me."

"I'm not going anywhere." She smiled, but there was fear hidden deep in her eyes and he couldn't look into them. He pressed his face down onto her throat, moved his lips over her smooth fragrant skin and held her.

If she was afraid, she could bury that fear in his arms and that was all he could hope for now. The light around them was magical. It changed the mundane daylight and shadow to a gentle moving wash of gold that spread over and burnished her skin.

Her breast filled his hand, its firm round softness seemed made for his caress. Her nipples leapt to his touch, rising on his tongue and drawing up, tight and hard as he sucked and nipped, exciting him with their greed for his attention. One was not more lovely than the other, and he lay between her thighs, delighting in them both.

Five hours. If he had a month, a year it would be too short a time to discover the limits of her loveliness. He moved his lips down over her ribs, over the hollow below them where her pulse beat out its hard urgent meter, pounding beneath her skin, and her breath came hard and fast.

His hand slid down her side, down her hip and thigh, slid up to cup her bottom and pull her harder onto his mouth. She sparkled in the firelight, droplets of water clinging to her and puddling in her navel and he licked the water from her skin.

Her moans resonated under his lips and her fingers slipped into his hair, trailing their heat from his neck, around his ears, up to follow his cheek bone and his temple.

His fingers ran gently over her belly, tickling across the tender place in the hollow of her hipbone and she flinched, raising her thigh. Her fingers rubbed harder over his scalp as he traced a feathery line to the fine mass of hair at her groin, lifting and teasing the curls while her breathing above him grew louder and harder.

She was his. She was all and everything he wanted, and the heat of her blood, rising to his touch pulled harder at his gut. Fire throbbed in his erection, it burned up into his belly and raged in a sweat slicked rash in the small of his back. She was his.

Slowly he let his fingers explore the hidden folds of her sex, sliding deep into the fiery wetness, slipping between the silky lips to feel her swell in his hand. Her scent rose to where he lay and it washed another hotter blast through him, from his chest down to clutch at his belly and stab in his groin. His lips moved through damp silky curls, and down to deeply kiss the lips that spread to meet him. His tongue slipped out to tease her, licking and stroking the sweetness of her body until her breathing became sobs, her fingers knotting in his hair, her thighs rising and spreading at his side.

He turned his face into the sweat damp skin of her inner thigh, finding the tiny bruise where the saddle had marked her and laying healing kisses on the injury.

He sat back onto his knees. Her eyes were shining, bright with her deep fears, filled with silent tears, and she tried to smile, but her lip trembled and she bit it hard, rising to sit before him, to wrap her arms around his neck and drag his mouth down to hers.

Those fears were contagious. The time for all the questions she'd shoved away was rushing closer and the only way he could keep them at bay was to close his eyes and stretch out beside her. He lay into the thick comfort of another man's bed, among his fine linens and rich fabrics and held his focus tightly on the heat of his lover's mouth.

Her kisses were intoxicating, her breath washing into his chest like it was his own, her lips softer than silk, her teeth hard and gentle on his lip, his chin, his throat.

She straddled him, sitting over his thighs, her hair falling forward to hide her tears or her joy. Exquisite lips played over his skin, screwing the hot pleasure poured into every muscle tighter and tighter at every move. The fine hairs on his chest ruffled under her touch and her mouth touched his side with raw heat that made him grunt. The veil slipped over his chest like fan of lightly trailing fingertips, as her lips brushed down his belly, moving lower, her touch barely there and all he could feel.

Her lips and fingers encircled him, her tongue flicking and teasing as softly as a dream and he rode a rising tide of throbbing heat. Raptures spread through his flesh on the in-breath, and he moaned wordless pleasure on the out, as the fire of her mouth and the urgent beat of lust bloomed across awareness. She was perfect. In everything, in every way. And she was his.

She leaned to him, kissing back up over his chest, her tongue tracing the blue circles that marked his heart and she nipped the soft skin in his armpit. Her lovely mouth found his and she lifted her hips, positioning herself carefully and then slowly, so very, very slowly, let her flesh surround him, taking him deep into her body. Air caught in her mouth like a sob and he lifted his shoulders, sliding them both higher up the bed, resting his back onto pillows piled against the wall.

She rocked gently, and he watched pleasure staining the planes of her face. Her eyes were closed, her mouth open and she tilted her head back, her fingers digging into

the muscle of his shoulders as she began to move harder. She brought her lips to his, and he steadied her against the rhythm, cradling her face in his hands as she rested her forehead to his, her cheek against his. Looking deep into her barely opened eyes for long moments, he watched her watching him, watched the tension slowly building, her cheeks flushing, a frown crossing her brow.

And she pumped the tension hotter in him, too, rising to his skin in sweat, burning hot and low in his stomach. He grabbed her hips and held the fire against him as his pleasure burst across every nerve in white light. He pressed his face into her hair and gulped the perfumed air steaming from her skin. When his hands relaxed she moved again, urgently, her face against his throat, her sobbing breath grown hoarse until she rode the shuddering waves of her own climax.

His love curled up against his chest, tucking her arms in under herself and her toes sideways under his hips, as if she could pull herself in tight enough to merge into his flesh. He wrapped his arms around her and let silence cover them both.

Brinnie let waves of morphic calm sweep into her, over sore muscle and bone, filling her head with sublime peace as sweat dried from her skin. Much needed sleep rushed forward, anxious to take its place in the blissful moments of euphoria, but she fought it away.

She was content to stay still, listening to his heartbeat and breathing until they steadied. "I'm hungry," she murmured, eventually.

"I don't want you to move."

She didn't want to move. She was exactly where she belonged, she fit there perfectly. But she couldn't stay warm and held and safe. Darkness would come, and they would have to move.

Down in the camp below she would have to face her past and stand to meet her future. And there were aspects of that future she didn't yet know. She couldn't guess and she was still too afraid to ask.

"We have to find somewhere safe for you," he said, as if she'd been speaking her thoughts aloud. "That might not be as hard as it sounds. Your friend took me up to a lookout on the mountain above us. There's a good clear view of the whole valley. If there's a safe place close, we'll be able to see it."

"It's not me that needs somewhere safe," she whispered against his skin. "There isn't anyone here who's going to harm me, not if I'm standing where they want me."

His pain was plain, the look of a hurt and angry child, and he shifted his shoulders uncomfortably as if he could shrug away the implications he saw. "You don't have to go to him. Let them find another virgin queen to sacrifice."

Brin sat back, studying his face, amused and annoyed by the petulance she saw in his expression. "I can choose what I want to do. You were the one who told me that."

She moved from his lap and turned to lie flat beside him, stretching cramped thigh muscles. "Euguein told you Calgacus would kill you. He wasn't being melodramatic. All they want from me is to be their figurehead, that's all. I can do that. But they won't want you hanging around in the wings."

"You can't believe that? You're too smart to think that's all it is." He turned on his side to face her, furious sparks flying from his eyes, his frown drawn tight. "You are their purity and their unity, you heard it. You're damn near a goddess in this camp, but that's only because they want you to shore up their god. They're giving you to him so he has the power to save the world."

"Don't be ridiculous," she snapped, hating the venom she heard in her own words and hating even more the men who had hung this burden on her shoulders. "Look, if you want to stay here and fight this war, they'll use your sword. It's all about the cause

and everybody playing their part, giving what they can. But if I try to hide, they'll kill you. If I refuse to be seen with their leader, they'll kill you. If I publicly choose you over him, they'll kill us both.

"I can stand beside him tonight. I can give them all their rallying point. I can do that much for this war. That doesn't mean I have to give myself to him; they can't force me to do anything like that ever again."

"Brin, no. I know how men see you. This isn't just play-acting. All the way here you've been terrified to face him. Now it's suddenly all right?"

"Now I'm here I have to face him. Everything has brought me back to this. I have the chance now to do it all again and make better choices."

His movements grew stiff, a fever had settled on his joints and he sat forward painfully, shaking. "Do I understand this? You want to go up to his marquee tonight like you've never been away, like nothing's changed?"

"No." This was ludicrous. Like a conversation with a child. Antony was a soldier, and no one would understand better than he did the need for sacrifice in times like this. This was not more than she was willing to do; certainly not more than risking her life in Inbhir Nis. Calgacus was not her lover. She had been foolish enough to betray herself, and Cam, once. That would not happen again.

In the end, she would be with Antony. After the war, after the whole nation had settled and life could return to normal, they would have their future. He'd needed to come here and fight, not her. This was the cost of his choice and it was not too high. "I'm saying that I can talk to the man. Not the king. Not the god. The man. The soldier. He needs his people united until the day of the battle. That's what matters; it's all that matters to him. There are a thousand women he can take to his bed. All he needs is for everyone else to see us together."

He lay back against the pillows and she cuddled up onto his chest. His breath was shallow and his face seemed grey in the golden light but he put his arm around her. There was no need for this jealousy, surely he knew that. Surely she had answered any doubts he could have with her body. "It can't be more than a day or two, can it? He can think what he likes for those few days. And then we have forever, together."

His hand slipped gently up and down her arm, rubbing mechanically over her skin, but as soft as a breath. He wore his thoughts on his face, written in the confusing lines of tangled emotion. "You want to go to him?"

"No. I never wanted to come here. I didn't want to have to face any of this."

"It's my fault you're here."

It wasn't a question but she answered as well as she could. "No. If you hadn't been at the meeting house that night, I would have made this same journey with Euguein and I would still have been dead inside. When I told you I died that night, it was the truth. You've given me a chance to take my life back without ever asking anything of me."

"I asked you not to leave me. You said you wouldn't."

"I'm not leaving you. I'm doing what needs to be done. Just like I did when I kept the men moving up to the front. Just as I did when I went into Inbhir Nis. Vettona said the gods will turn the world upside down to bring two lives together and here we are in a world turned into chaos. Everything is just as it is supposed to be. It's all been written. And in the end," she kissed his chest, "I won't be alone."

"I love you Brinnie," he whispered. "I've never said that to anyone before. I never even thought it before. I don't want you to go back, not even to talk to him."

The light in his eyes was terrifying. There was an intensity there that made other days and nights with him seem no more than scenes from a dream, and she looked into the truth of a love and passion that burned brighter than life itself. She had no words to

answer him; his fears were foolishness, so she slipped closer and kissed him, letting the heat of his passion re-ignite the fires in her own body.

When she was sleeping, Antony stood and stepped into the cooling waters of the tub. It was warm enough to be comfortable and to soothe old aches and strains, but he felt cold inside.

The fires had burned a little lower and the light shifted and rippled more, but he let them slow while he watched Brin sleep, as he had once before. There were no tears in her now, she was happier here. Content almost, it seemed. In Inbhir Nis she had been willing to die rather than to return to this man. Now, surrounded by the comforts of his life, these luxuries and privileges, she was ready to stand before the people like his queen.

Cold sharp pain ripped at his face, and he pushed his palms into his eyes, rubbing hard at the images he had created.

Outside the walls of Inbhir Nis he had handed her gibberish, a quip pulled from thin air to give her hope and keep her moving. To this. To exactly where he'd been going to bring her. Back then she had stopped, unable even to step up to the horse. And he'd let her trust him. Let her follow him. He'd let her return to stand beside another man.

And Ula had nagged at him. A bitter laugh snorted from his nose. She'd warned him, again and again. Once they got here, everything would change. Brin would feel this sense of duty. She'd be ready to sacrifice herself, again. Ula didn't just nag, she was certain. She put herself between them repeatedly and mocked him for refusing to see what would happen.

He felt sick. Some bread, some wine, something grey and spicy. It was all still there on the buffet, and he knew he should eat. He lay back with his head on the lip of the tub. How did it happen, he wondered. The first time.

How was it that she'd become the rebel leader's whore? She was a widow. It was no betrayal to a dead man, so her husband must still have been living when she made her choice. What incentives had Calgacus offered her then that had been so irresistible? He was only a man. What did he have that was so important?

Power? That was Ula's theory, but it didn't really suit Brin.

Luxury maybe. Safety. Excitement. Passion? Again, bright images stabbed his mind's eye and he pulled his knees up as his stomach churned and he retched. Bile stung his throat but its bitterness suited his mouth.

He had a few more hours to kill.

He couldn't stay here while she played her part in this disaster, and he couldn't give her any reason to leave with him but the truth. Bending double, he held his face under the water between his knees until lights flared in his head and his chest ached for the air.

His clothes were rank and he wished he had a clean set. But, as Brin had said, what did a couple more days of filth and deception matter. He dressed, he ate, he dragged the couch from the doorway, letting fresh air in from the clean bright day outside. So much for their guard. Ula was nowhere to be seen at the entrance to the hall, but the horses stood, unsaddled and tethered on the remains of the green.

Taking a seat on the couch, with his ankles crossed and a jug of wine at his side, he took up the cloth and board again, and worked with obsessive attention to detail on another sketch of Brin.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN.

“Hey!”

He turned, breaking the determination of his stride. There was the chill of coming darkness on the air as he scanned the nearby doorways for the call. Ula stepped from a hut, a bulky roll of cloth hanging over her arm.

“Hey?” he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“Aye, I couldn’t say Roman, and if you think I’m yelling Master across the village green, think again.” She was grinning as she crossed the distance to where he stood.

“You’d be beaten if you were my slave. So much for standing the watch.”

“I could see the door. And if someone was going to kick down your barricade, it wasn’t likely to be someone I could stop.” She strode toward the meeting house, lifting her burden up for his consideration, and he pulled her to a halt.

“Stop. Let her sleep.”

She paused, looking back to the hut she’d left, apparently undecided. “You can come back to the chieftain’s house with me, but his wife is very disapproving. She’s been watching through her window all afternoon. She expects their golden hope to be readying herself for their man, not tarding it up for the rabble. That’s you. Rabble.”

“Right, thanks for that. What’s this?”

She was carrying a soft split leather cape, fur-lined, dove grey. “Part of the regalia. They’ve got all the gold and fancy clothes Brin was looking for when we first got here. They have a whole wardrobe ready for her.” Ula flicked her head back in the direction from which she’d come.

Brin was expected, it should have come as no surprise. “Let her sleep a bit longer,” he said again. “She’ll have plenty of time to dress up for the big night.”

Ula stopped dead, her eyes wide and her mouth falling open theatrically. If she laughed.... Stresses tightened the muscle in his forearm, pulling his hand into a fist and he raised it without looking at Ula.

“Got it,” she said. “I’m saying nothing.” But before he could enjoy the silence, she said, “What’s next? The ceremony starts at sunset. They’re lighting the fires then. Are we going down into the camp?”

“Aye,” he said, moving on toward the horses. They would go down into the camp. He had to see the final numbers, listen for the plan of action, and get out. Then his job was done.

He was finished. For this campaign, anyway. Winter would soon be upon them and he was planning to argue for a short transfer down into Britannia to winter at the fort at Deva. Further south if he could wrangle it. He had planned to stay around until the eve of battle, but if that was still a day or two away, there was nothing to be gained by risking the extra time.

“When,” Ula was at his heels like a terrier.

“Now. Soon. I want to get a better idea of where everything is before it gets dark. It’s huge.”

“You’re leaving Brin up here by herself?”

“Who’s this chieftain’s wife? She can be her chaperon.”

She had the same wide-eyed look of uncertainty and deep concentration wearing at her features she’d shown the night she’d brought Brin out of the brothel. “Listen Roman,” she said, matching his stride to where the horses stood. “You’d better tell me what’s going on. I don’t like sudden changes of plan when I don’t know why.”

He caught the lead line for the horses and leaned to loosen the hobble strap on his

mount's fetlock. "Brin has decided to play the role of returned mistress. She's willing to be the virgin sacrifice. For a couple of days, at least. For the cause."

She didn't need the words, her body screamed 'I told you so' louder than any yell. But she had the good sense not to laugh.

Brin woke to a rough shake of her shoulder.

The face she saw was older; it seemed to have aged much more than the year since she'd seen it. "Eirbrin, wake up dear."

Alobragh. Still haunting her dreams and her waking hours. Her gaze swept the room, but Antony was nowhere to be seen. Ula, too, had vanished, but she was sure they'd be nearby.

"I've had clean water brought in. You can't go down to the ceremony with the smell of another man on your skin, can you?" She grinned conspiratorially. Helping Brin hide the evidence. And it was funny, was it?

"Where's Antony?" she asked, refusing to be shepherded toward the steaming tub.

"He's gone with Ula, down to the camp site. Not too soon either. I was worried you'd be caught. Look."

She turned away, opening her arm to indicate to Brin a selection of tunics and cloaks. The fabrics were fine wool and linen it seemed, and some had coloured threads across the weave. Others had embroidery and beads at the neckline and hem. And on the trunk beside her, jewellery – heavy golden torcs, finely carved with animal heads and figures, massive gems in filigreed silver, cloak clips, brooches, bracelets – all smouldering exquisitely in the firelight.

"He's had all this waiting for you for weeks. But I think he was beginning to think you wouldn't come. Beginning to lose hope."

Brin tore her eyes from the garments and the rich array of jewels. Antony wouldn't have just left her here, not without a word, not unless he'd been unable to get to her. "Did they come up here and take him? Did Arlen send men up here?"

"No Brin. Forget him for now. You have to get ready. Night's not far off as it is and there's a lot to do. Your hair is a rat's nest. You need make up. We need you ready."

Brin screwed up her hands in the covers under her. "I'm not going to move. Go and find someone else to dress up as queen." Her struggle across the vast bed made a lie of her words, but she fought to her feet. "Where is he?"

"He came out of here a while ago, collected Ula and rode down into the camp. Ula said you were sleeping and when you woke you'd be going down to meet with Calgacus. That's all. Now, pull yourself together and get into the bath so I can do something with that awful hair."

He'd just gone. Just ridden down into the camp with Ula. This was petulance beyond belief. Or something had happened while she was asleep that had concerned him enough to leave her here. "Are you sure no one else came up here. Did he speak to anyone at all?"

"No one. Now, even if you want to ride down and find him yourself, which I wouldn't recommend, you'd have to wash and dress. Get into the tub and let me do your hair."

That was true enough. Her pulse had risen and her cheeks were hot, her every sense had leapt to the conclusion he'd abandoned her here. He wouldn't do that. She'd looked into the depths of his eyes and she knew how much he loved her. He loved her and no one else, and there was no doubting that.

Forcing herself to stop, to turn and walk to the tub, she ground her nails into the palms of her hand, trying to make herself see the reasoning behind this. There were secret things she didn't know, too many questions she hadn't asked.

He wouldn't just go. So what had happened? Had he left her a message? "What did Ula say, exactly?" she asked as she stepped into the hot water. "Did you speak to Antony at all?"

"No, I didn't. Ula said, exactly, 'Brin is still asleep. When she wakes up she wants to go down to meet with Calgacus.' Those were her words."

"That's it?" Nothing else? He just handed her into this woman's care and left her to go to meet this night all alone? Ula, well, that was no big surprise. But there had to be more to it for Antony to do this. There was something more here that she didn't understand. What were the secrets he'd hidden from her? She hadn't asked.

Alobragh was tugging at knotted beads, trying to untangle braids at her temple that had long ago collapsed. "Hopeless," she exclaimed at last. "I need scissors. Wait a minute."

She left the hut and Brinnie stared around herself at the vast empty space. All the riches were piled into it: all the fine clothes, now, and gold. There were rugs and furs and fine fabrics, but she had never felt so starkly exposed and alone as she did here, now.

If this was temper.... If a man who would fight in a war he thought doomed, and risk his life for a lost cause, could be angry at her for choosing to play out the role the fates had given her....

She didn't even know why he had to be here. She hadn't asked.

If this had anything to do with punishing her for placing her own duty so high.... Tears welled up into her eyes as she peered hopelessly around the room. He wouldn't. There was something here she didn't understand.

She was going to speak to Calgacus and play her part in the theatre of war, and maybe he had come to accept that. Separating like this really did keep him that much safer. She wiped her cheeks but more fat tears rolled down to her chin. She would go on as if everything was as it should be. Soon enough she'd find out what he had planned. She would bathe and dress and wait. She trusted him.

On the couch beside her, the curtain he'd written on had been folded and left beneath the carving board. Brin stepped quickly from the water. Leaving a sopping trail across the fine rugs, she reached for the pale filmy cloth. There was no way for her to understand them, but she needed to see the symbols he'd written there.

When she spread it, shock dried the tears on her cheeks and she stood frowning, lifting individual images on the confusing pattern closer. It was covered in pictures of her. Some tiny, just a few lines that showed her shoulders, or the length of her back. Others were larger and more complex, the heavily shaded details sometimes smudged where the fabric had been folded. There were fifty, maybe more, spread over every usable piece of the cloth and each a small wonder.

Most of them showed her sleeping, and she wondered how long he had sat watching her before he'd left without a word. Some of the larger, more detailed works were studies of her face, her eyes especially and though she knew her own features, it seemed she looked at a stranger.

Her face was thin; her fingers reached to her own cheekbones, trailing a sooty grey smudge over her skin.

Her eyes were shadowed, deep-set, and the darkness was exaggerated by the weight of her hair. From their pits of grey, they shone. He had brightened her gaze, lightened it with the glow of fanaticism. Her brow was creased, a tiny tic above the

bridge of her nose that looked like sadness, but it didn't detract from the purpose written in her eyes. She had no mirror, no way to judge the truth of the light he'd given her, but he'd drawn her as a martyr: both zealous and resigned.

Alobragh re-entered the room and clucked about the need to bathe, but Brin stood staring at her image on the cloth.

"Look at this." She held one of the larger portraits up for the woman's appraisal. "Is this me?"

Alobragh drew a loud breath, dropping the scissors to her side and peering over Brin's shoulder at the work. "That's amazing," she said. "Extraordinary. Did he do this, the soldier?"

"Aye." Brin felt hot tears rising again. "Is he right? Is this me?"

"Oh, it is. It's just you."

"The eyes?" She tried once more for reassurance.

"Everything. He's caught you perfectly, hasn't he?"

This is what he saw? This was his vision, the proof she'd been seeking of his extraordinary sight? If this was how he saw her, then his oracle terrified her.

Even before the sky had begun to darken, the artificial sun that had been laid in the stone circle drove back any threatening darkness. The fire was huge and Antony and Ula stood well back, choosing to view the spectacle from among a group of strangers.

Ula could have found her own people. The tribes were separated, each clan with its own place in the grand scheme, but she'd elected to stay beside Antony and this collection of misfits. Also, this position left her closer to the horses, and she had been reluctant to leave the black horse in the holding yards with strangers.

Antony watched the fire and tried to concentrate on the men moving in a shifting mass around him. The flow into the site had dwindled as the evening came on, and he was happy with sixty thousand as his base line.

The battle arena had to be within a day's march, twenty miles, and Arlen had said they could see it in the morning, that made it close rather than further away. It was the kind of logic he saw enacted in every part of this campaign.

The organisers had found food in abundance. If families were doing it tough outside the camp, inside they had found every green leaf and vegetable and every fowl and beast that could be gutted and spitted. They had thick combs of honey and cheese as round as a wheel. Their men would go to war well fed.

On the day of the battle, there would be more than enough wagons for supplies to the field and then to carry wounded back. They would learn the lesson hard, too, that Rome would let them have their wounded. Without the sort of surgeon's skills Rome had on hand, an army of sick and wounded men was a hotbed for disease and difficulty. They slowed retreat, they took valuable water for fevers that would be fatal in the end, and they shared their deaths with those who tended them. The spirits of sickness had no qualms about taking the innocent.

The word stabbed his chest.

He knew what this camp would be like after the battle. He knew what the Caledonian mountains would be like for men who'd had no time to put aside food for the harsh winter, and for families with no homes and no stock and no fields to harvest. If she was here alone, this is what Brin would have to live through. But if she stayed here, would she be alone?

The old woman had listened to his predictions and laughed at his fears. He had all

his answers, she said. Now, he knew nothing.

"Are you all right?" Ula asked. "You look like you're going to puke in your boots."

"Sunset, they said," he mumbled under his breath. "She must be down here somewhere by now."

"If she is she'll be hidden away in the back of his marquee, working some magic for the battle." Ula froze the cold little smile on her lips and turned to walk away.

She'd be going back to the horse yard. At least Edan would be happy to know the black was getting such care; it was the sort of thing he'd have done himself. Except that he and Tav would be at camp down in Inchtuthil, telling drunken stories and making their plans for the winter months.

The main marquee was a mile away, back against the river, and they'd already decided that the fire at this end of the circle would be the place where all the action was. From here, the two mammoth rocks he'd seen from above were easier to place. One was a gigantic altar, ten men could stand easily upon it and be raised high enough for everyone gathered to see. The longer stone was a pillar, its pit already dug, and a team of men would pull its trusses, sliding it in to stand on end.

Nothing pleased a Druid so much as a stone standing up. Antony had no love for the priests. He'd killed as many as he could in more than one campaign. He'd doubtless kill more before he died. He couldn't know for sure how much of the talk was true, but if even a fraction of what was said of their rituals and rites was true, they were more animals than men. Sacrificing children and animals in the fire. Delighting in criminals as a way to hone their torture skills.

What did he know? It might all be true, it might be propaganda. He really didn't care. He didn't much care to see their rituals either, except that it seemed likely the leader would be here with his token princess, reassuring the masses. If he wasn't...?

He peered up into the sky, figuring the hours until night had fallen in earnest.

"I let someone steal my horse once before." It was a whisper, hot in his ear, and it raised a rash close to panic over Antony's skin. But a smile soon found its way to his lips and he turned into his brother's embrace. "It was a mistake. I should have killed him. You'd better be able to tell me where that black horse is."

"Relax." He thumped the hard muscle of Edan's back. "The little girl who rides him treats him like a pet."

"Little girl?" Edan huffed in disbelief.

"What are you doing here? You should be cooling your heels at Inchtuthil and carving mementos for your kids." He looked at the closing crowd, but there was no sign of Tav. "Where is he?"

"He's relaxing at the camp. Me, I got as far as Fachabair before they put me ashore with something half donkey and told me to find you."

Antony bent with laughter that he knew was ill advised. This turn of events was not going to have left Edan in a good frame of mind. He never liked to be away from Tavish. To be alone with anything but fine horseflesh, looking for someone who was not even on the road he was searching, was a recipe for disaster.

Edan cast an appreciative sweep over the assembled force. "Have you been moving with this lot?"

"Here and there. Mostly not. I've watched them come in today. I'm saying sixty thousand. Forty-five of those men. Good supplies. Good water. Good planning. I don't know where the arena is, yet."

"I do. About two leagues east of here."

"Is Agricola close?"

“Right on top of them, following the river in from the coast with all three legions. If you don’t want to watch the sacrifices, and if you can steer me to my horse, we can leave now. We’ve got about five leagues to cover.”

He was serious. It was so sudden. Edan had all they needed to know and he was ready to leave. The ice cold cramped Antony’s gut. The moment had come to decide; could he just ride away, accept his duty and leave her here? “No,” he said. “There are things I still have to do.”

Before he could find excuses to stall the inevitable, Ula strode into the debate. “I don’t like leaving him there. I think I should take him back up the mountain, tether him on the green and walk back down here.” She looked Edan up and down, but her main concern was the horse. “Unless you want to lend me your horse so I can lead him up.”

“Not a chance,” Antony answered, and she turned back to the blonde stranger.

“Friend of yours?”

“No. We just met.” He lied too easily. He lied without thinking. “He saw you on the black and was asking who you were. You can tell him yourself now. I have to go. Go show him your horse. I’ll be back.”

Priests were assembling around the Druid’s dais and the crowd was getting tighter. If he was going to cross the distance to the main marquee, he needed to start now. Although what he would do and say when he reached it, he couldn’t yet guess. All his time had run away. Every excuse and every justification he’d found for himself had expired and now he could do no more than beg her to come away with him.

He pressed through the shuffling crowd, moving like a salmon against the flow, the need to fight forward the only logic driving his momentum.

What could he offer?

He had lied about who and what he was. Fundamental lies. He was not just a man misrepresented, he was her enemy, part of a vast foe that threatened everything she knew and loved.

He was a soldier. Not even a Roman citizen yet, and without any of the benefits of citizenship. He was a *Natione*, a foreign auxiliary in his own land until his conscription expired. Seven more years. He had barracks for a home and at least eight months a year on campaign.

He pushed harder into the milling crowd as his movement began to slow.

And she would be invisible. Her children camp bastards, as he had been. But they’d eat. They’d have a roof and food and a fire. They’d have medicine, and when he gained citizenship, an education. And then he could show Brinnie the world, every country, deserts and mountains and open plains that went on forever. He could show her Rome itself.

But here, here she had her passion. Here she had the cause she lived for. This was her home. Here she was feted as a goddess and would be a queen. Here she had leather capes and gold and fine clothes. Here she had iron tubs and fine beds and furs on the floor.

Until tomorrow. Or the next day. Or through the slow painful decline of the next few seasons. Until everything collapsed under the weight of Rome. Then her sons would not be princes, they’d be slaves.

He had only his love to give. He adored her. Just as her husband had done.

Progress was slow and he looked over the heads of those passing against him. They were being pressed back, shuffled to the side of the road as a mounted line moved toward them. Eight or ten men, five women. Brin was among them.

She had been transformed. It seemed in both brothels and palaces they liked her painted.

Her hair had been tamed and forced to comply, in tight lines of braids running down over her shoulders, glittering with foiled glass beads. The fading sun caught in every facet and foil, casting a halo about her head. Her face was deathly pale, her eyes darkened, their shadows defined by smudges of grey cosmetic. And to counterpoint the loss from her cheeks, they had squeezed the blood from berries to stain her lips and fingernails.

She wore gold at her throat, her ears, and wrists. It chimed at her ankles with every step of the horse.

Pain wrenched the air from his lungs and his heart stopped.

He had to speak to her, now, and that obsession drove the native caution from his limbs. Without looking at the people he pushed, he shoved his way forward, forcing himself through to the side of the path. Men rode past him, but he didn't see them. His gaze was fixed on her, and when she found him, hers on him.

Arlen stopped, blocking his view and leaning down to speak in confidence. "You did well. Everything's as it should be, now. Go about your own business and leave her to hers."

"I want to speak to her. Now. Alone." He watched over the rump of the horse in front of him, stepping sideways to meet her horse as it came abreast.

"You can't." Arlen sat up abruptly, turned to another rider and called, "Calgacus. This is the man who brought Brinnie in." As he spoke, he turned his horse, using its rump to push Antony back into the crowd, clearing the way for a second man to approach, and blocking his access to Brin.

The rebel leader was a much bigger man that Antony remembered. Similar in build to Edan, with dark hair and compelling eyes. His mouth smiled readily and he wore the scars of a man who had fought hard for his beliefs. "I want to talk to you," he said amiably, with only the barest hint of threat in the words. "Arlen." He nodded and Arlen offered Antony his arm, waiting to help him swing up behind his saddle.

When they moved off again, Brin fell back, too far behind for him to easily watch, and much too far to speak. "Where are we going?" he asked the man in front.

"Up to the circle. We'll be standing with all of the tribal lords, and every clan chieftain."

"Those still strong enough to travel here. A lot of old men out there are starving in their burnt out homes."

"All those that matter are here and the unification ceremony is about to start. At least you've guaranteed yourself a good seat."

His seat wasn't close enough to Brin, and way too crowded all around. But the horses were moving with the flow, and the crowd parted easily enough to let them through. These were, after all, only the rabble. Just the muscle and bone that would carry the swords. Just the blood that would flow for their freedom.

Brinnie watched his back. Had he come down unarmed? No, the long knife was in its sheath at his calf. It was no match for the danger he had put himself in. He had been at risk before. Now that she had spoken to Calgacus, his peril was greater than either of them could have imagined.

Antony was right; their leader didn't want a figurehead beside him. He faced the biggest crisis of his life; he stood on the brink of the greatest success or the most brutal failure of his career, and he was justifiably terrified.

He trusted no one, confided in no one, carried all the burden of this mammoth campaign on his own broad shoulders. He was alone and exposed. A nation would live or die on the decisions he made, and he needed a partner. He needed to love and trust and hold someone in whom he had complete faith. He needed Brin.

The people around her cared not a jot for who she was, or why she was there, or who their leader took to his bed. It was him alone who cared – and the generals who knew how much of his confidence rested on his trust of her. He meant to have her with him. And his men meant to make sure she would stay. They intended to ensure she had no reason to leave.

Antony had to leave this arena, his life depended on it. He had to leave it, and she wanted with all her heart to follow him out. But he wouldn't go, she had no doubt of it. He had driving reasons to be here, something deeper than he was able to share with her. He had had to leave Vettona's peaceful village. He would have left her there alone in comparative safety, but he had no choice but to come to this place, to this war, to fight this battle. She couldn't guess what those reasons were.

He wouldn't be put off by the danger. He already believed the battle here was lost, he'd made that plain. And she'd warned him of the reception he would get from the generals. Euguein had made it clear himself on that first day. For reasons of his own he had to be here. No threat was going to make him leave.

If she begged him, would he leave with her? Take her somewhere into the mountains and stay there safe together?

He didn't suit the wilds. An image of him as she'd first seen him crossed her mind and a smile tingled tentatively on her lips. His hair and beard long, his eyes fierce. Insane.

What compelled him to this war in their mothers' land, year after year? He'd survived the raid at Fendoch, at least, when so many others had fallen. And his brothers, with him. Soldiers, when those around them were nothing more than farmers and smiths. What hope had there been for a gentle soul like Cam against the training and discipline of legions of professional soldiers?

They were near the stone circle now, moving to the spectators' gazebo where the chieftains would all meet. From here, each chief would enter the circle and take up their position at a stone, one for each clan. Together they would form a great unbroken circle. The land would be unified, never to be broken apart, never to be defeated.

Priests, a hundred of them, naked and painted in garish wheals of blue, moved inside the circle. A line of bullocks, their heads down with drool running from their slack lips, stood nearer the fire than any cow she'd known would willingly stand. They'd been drugged, she guessed. The terror had been washed from their blood and they appeared calm and unworried in the face of inevitable death.

The head of a great stag lay on the massive altar stone, its blood already washing down the sides of the rock, funnelling through cunning grooves and collecting in golden lavers at the base of the altar.

Brin turned her face away as she slid down from her saddle. Her priority for the moment was Antony, and she wanted to be nearer to him. While the ceremony took place, he was sure to be unharmed; none of them would risk the wrath of the gods and spirits. Once it was done, however, she would have to fight for his life or die beside him.

The whole performance had been choreographed. Each priest and shaman moving through his intricate pattern of steps, each working his magic on an appointed stone in the circle's reach, each tying the power he wrought for that stone, and that tribe and all its clans, back to the altar stone and back to the great fallen pillar.

In its own way it was mesmerising, but Brin had no interest in the movement. She could feel the heat of Antony's presence so close behind her that it cried out for her to turn to him, to smile and reach for his hand. The silent reverence tested her patience as nothing before, and when the time came for the generals and chieftains to move into the

circle and take their places by their allotted stone, she wanted with her whole heart just to turn and resume her seat beside him.

"Wait right here," Arlen told him. "As soon as this is over you'll have your chance to speak."

Brin watched his face as he studied the man in front of him and silently nodded. When he looked at her, there was an awful fatalism in his face. Resignation and desperation together. It reeked of his prophesy, of loss and death, and she almost sobbed as she was led out into the circle of light and sacrifice.

As soon as the generals left the gazebo, Antony strode to the alley and pushed through the press to where the leader's horses were held. He returned leading Tav's horse up to the head of the laneway, ignoring the gruff complaints of those forced aside. Edan and Ula found him through the crowd: his face ruddy with barely suppressed rage and hers turned to curd with disgust.

"So, you're still playing your games here, boy, are you?" Edan spat and Antony turned, needing to warn him not to turn away from the woman at his side.

"Watch her, she's more dangerous than she looks," he said, ignoring the fact Ula was easily within hearing. "As soon as this is done, I'm going to talk to Brin. It won't take long. Get your horse and be ready, we'll have to leave here in a hurry."

"Where are you going?" Ula hissed, her anger at his return to Brin's wake giving way to fear at what this meant. "And why would you be going anywhere with him if he's a stranger?" She was backing away from them, moving toward a gap in the crowd. If she opened her mouth, so much as called out, he was dead.

Lies were slower coming, his attention was focused forward on words he could offer Brin that might convince her to follow him. Hopelessness was setting hard around his heart and it made breathing more and more difficult.

Edan shoved fury right up into his face. "You think you're going to bring her out too?"

"There's not a good chance, no. But I'm going to try. If you want to take the black and go now, go. I'll try to get back onto the road up to the village, and I'll turn back east along the river bank from there. You can wait or not, it's your choice."

"No one's taking my horse." Ula's face had twisted into cold rage, all her sharp wits stabbing from her eyes as awful realisations dawned.

His inspiration stopped her. "No." Antony smiled reassurance. "Not taking him. I want you to come with us. Now. None of us need to die here for these madmen."

She watched him, her eyes stripping flesh from his bones and making his skin crawl. "Who's this?" she demanded, flicking her head at Edan.

"My brother."

She spat at him. "Roman." But she had moved no further from the fight.

"Ula, we don't have time for this. You don't love this cause any more than I do. You want power and wealth? Wait 'til this massacre is over, and take what you want from the ruins."

She glared at him, and time seemed to ruck up on his shoulders as he tried to force himself into calm and patience.

"Is this *the* brother?"

A laugh shocked out of him. There was no getting ahead of her, ever. "No. But they look the same."

"I keep the horse."

"Argue with him. And argue later."

"Why are you waiting for *her*?" She used the word as a curse, and it stung his eyes and brought a lump up into his throat. "I told you she'd do her duty. It doesn't matter

what she promised you. She lives for one thing and one thing only. This war.” The grin of triumph she’d been decent enough to hide broke over her mouth. “And you’re going to tell her who you really are, now? There’ll be no need for him to wait. You’ll be dead as soon as you open your mouth.”

“I have to try.”

“You *don’t*. You don’t have to do anything. I told you once before.” She had hold of his hand and she was tugging his face closer. He wanted to reach out and slap the devotion from her, but he steadied his laboured breath and made himself listen. “You don’t have to go back to them. Neither of you do. You’re not slaves any more. Up here, in these mountains, there will be *fortunes* to be made. We can be royalty. We can make our own world.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Don’t think. Just leave. Now. Come away with me. We can do this.” She was pleading. “We can be great together. This is a time made for us, for people like you and me.” She turned toward Edan, pleading. “You don’t have to go back.”

Edan stood like a colossus, unmoved and unmoving, with his arms crossed across his chest and evil in his eyes. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but if I survive this, I’m going to beat the shite out of you. If you were any other man, I’d do it now.”

“It won’t take long. Just get your horse and mine and get onto the track out of here.”

“Leave her, Antony. Please.” Ula was wheedling now, and her eyes had filled with tears. “Don’t you die for her, too. Not you too.”

“Go up to the roundhouse,” he said with forced calm. “Take everything you can shove in a saddlebag. If they left gold up there for Brin, it just became yours. But go. I’ll make it out if I can.”

Ula reached up to kiss him lightly on the mouth and turned to vanish into the crowd. Edan spared him one last look of thorough disgust, hugged him violently, and turned to follow to his horse.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN.

Brinnie stood silently at the altar stone beside the leaders of the cause.

The fire’s heat was high and the full moon had climbed overhead, lighting the whole area like murky daylight. Everything was tinged in blues and mauves and it seemed forces moved in the shadows, about to be seen but shy of recognition.

The tent she had left remained huddled into its own deep shadows and she couldn’t see if Antony waited there for her or not. Part of her hoped he had gone. He wouldn’t be gone. He would be waiting for her. He loved her.

As the priests drew the spirits of the air into conformation, their droning five-note song began to wane. One by one the voices dropped from the cadence, and one by one they turned to kneel before their chosen stone.

Silence filled the whole arena, and raised voices in the crowd dropped to whispers as necks craned forward, wondering at the next phase of the cycle. When it began, a low murmur spread, and Brin twisted to try to find the source of their wonder.

From the trees, where the circle moved up close enough to touch the base of the mountain, a line of men was led.

Each was naked. Each was painted as the priests were.

Each wore a small votive buckler hanging on chains from his neck. Like the cattle their faces were numb, their eyes glazed and unfocused. The very best each tribe had to offer. Some had been beaten. If they had been honoured by their part in the ceremony, it seemed they had also been less than pleased. Slowly their lines were led forward, one man left to kneel beside the prayerful priest installed at each stone.

Brin went cold.

The cattle had died without a sound, their blood carried in lavers and dripped onto rocks and thrown into the fire. The blood of the stag was dripping from Calgacus' chest. Now it seemed the blood of these men, too, would cover the stones.

There were so many. All around her, men knelt at the ceremonial stones, each with his face down, rocking on unsteady knees. The last to be pushed into position was brought right before her and dropped to his knees in front of the altar.

The dance was done. The next song began and every note carried a burden of sadness into the night. The sound was liquid pathos, but it didn't justify the intention it described. When the song was finished, each tribal priest took a handful of hair on the crown of the man in front of him, pulled back his head, and cut his throat.

Brin opened her eyes. Tears blurred her vision and her empty stomach had tightened, but she focused on the man who knelt, still, before the altar stone. She had no interest in what the priests and clan chiefs did behind her now; she only watched to see what fresh horror waited.

All the assembled leaders congregated at the side of the great pillar, taking up ropes and preparing to haul it into place. Men moved from the crowd, anxious to join their muscles and will to the cause. In the silent anticipation of the close of the ceremony, the closing of the circle, a priest stepped up and stood the sacrifice onto his feet. The crowd began a chant.

He was huge. A giant. Any sane general would want this man on his front line. Yet here he stood, about to meet his death. The chilled night air caught at his ragged mane of hair, tussling its chestnut length, flicking it back to show the clear blue lines tattooed over his throat, his cheeks and ears.

As the crowd noise rose to a crescendo, the high priest shoved ungraciously from behind, and Belus fell awkwardly, but without complaint, into the prepared pit. And the assembled leaders set to work dragging the monolith into place on his body.

This was the price of victory. The death of their very best. Brin was disgusted from her core to her goosefleshed skin. Appalled. But silent.

It was done.

Midnight was close, and more blood than enough had already been spilled. More would spill in the morning. Brave men and warriors fell to their deaths, while farmers were readied to take up their swords. As soon as the numbers were rallied, and the clans brought into formation, they would march, now, to the battleground.

By sun-up this massive army would be installed and Rome would shake in her boots at the sight.

Weakened by deprivation and disgust, Brin walked with Calgacus back to the tent where Antony waited. She wanted to lie in his arms and to sob. To cry out all the bloodshed and to be rid of all the fears the morning would bring. She wanted to rest against his chest, warmed by his love and understanding.

Brin was paler still. Her heart had snatched its blood back and her cheeks had become translucent; her dark eyes peered from a death mask. She was near to exhaustion. And as Antony watched her move closer, trembling seized his fingers and his heart pounded at his temples. His knees were weak, and the breath that had been

hard to draw eluded him entirely.

He had nothing to offer her.

"So," Calgacus broke the tense silence, but Antony didn't look at him.

Brinnie seemed to strain towards him, her flesh reaching from her bones to try to find a way to be nearer to him and he stepped closer, his aching arms longing to reach out to hold her. She swayed on her feet as if she might faint, weak with horror and a cold dread that shone from her face.

"You took Eirbrin into a Roman city?"

"Aye," he answered, reluctantly pulling his gaze up to the man who addressed him.

"That was risky. Too risky. Even though she tells me it was her idea. I can't believe Eugenein would have allowed it. I think he would have killed you and brought her here, as he intended."

Antony shrugged. He could think what he liked.

"No Pict could walk into a Roman city."

Antony tapped his cheek, his courage. "I did," he said.

"You're a spy," Calgacus announced. Only Arlen stood beside him now. And Brin. His men had discretely vanished into the celebration, knowing their leader needed no seconds to do what needed doing.

"He's not." Brinnie stood forward, between them but to the side. The sort of fire he'd seen rise in her before had kindled and was raging, colouring her cheeks and ears, flaring in her eyes. "Of all the things he might be, the one and only thing I was sure of before we left Inbhir Nis is that he is not a Roman spy. He had everything he needed to know then, and everything he needs to know now. If he was a spy he'd be gone from here by now."

"You're certain, Brinnie?" Calgacus looked at her with an indulgent smile, but his eyes stayed flint hard. "You should never be certain of anything in this war. Nothing."

"I want to speak to him, now. Alone," she said. "If you're not certain of me, then kill us both now. I'm already sick to the stomach of bloodshed. If you want more blood, then add mine to the sacrifice."

Antony watched the rebel leader, seeing lights of doubt in his eyes. Whatever Brin had already told him, it was enough to make him doubt her now. Did he love her? Did he *need* her enough to give her this discretion? It appeared so. He nodded slowly.

"You can talk to him, Eirbrin. Here in this tent. I'll wait out here, and then he will leave. Alone."

She nodded and slipped through the flap of the tent.

"A little space, gentlemen," Antony spat at the rebel leaders. If Brinnie had chosen this, if she was going stay and cleave to this man and his cause, then Antony wanted at least to feel she was his for one more moment.

He stood face to face with the whole driving force of the resistance. He would have backed his own skill enough to know he'd have Calgacus dead before his general could defend. But he kept his hand still and ducked under the flap to follow her into the shadowed space.

She fell against his chest, desperate fingers clutching at the fabric of his tunic.

The smell of his skin filled her up and buoyed her flagging spirits and his arms around her gave her strength to stand. "Why did you leave me up there alone?" she cried, the question surprising even her. It was not what she'd intended to say, but it was the tip of her fears. Only the tip. Below it was a mountain.

"Because I have to leave. But I can't go without you."

"No. No," she agreed hesitantly. "I want to come. Why are you leaving now?" The nausea that had risen for poor Belus rose again, dragging the muscles of her throat tight.

She felt so tired, so terribly weak and shaky. Her pulse was rushing in her ears, and she couldn't think straight, couldn't concentrate.

"Why do you have to leave?" She raised her face and stared at him, demanding he speak and stop her fears from rising. They were too big; they were cold and hard and they were filling her chest. "It was never going to be safe here, but we could have stayed with Vettona and waited for the world to fall apart around us, there."

"I love you Brin," he said. "I love you with all my heart and soul and I need you to trust me just once more. Trust that love. Come with me."

It was hard to breathe. She had to step back so she could see him; her vision was darkening. "Trust you?" she repeated weakly. The words were hard to form; irrational laughter was knotting in her throat. "I trust you. Why would you ask me to trust you, now?"

The laughter turned into a groan. It was a howl but she didn't have the air or the strength to let it free. "Why wouldn't I trust you? What have you done?" Her knees were weak, barely able to hold her up, and she held onto his arms. All the answers she had not wanted to hear were worse than she'd imagined. The only thing she could not stand to hear, the only thing she could not stomach, was the thing he wouldn't say. "You have to tell me, now. Now." He wouldn't say it. He would not say it.

"I'm not staying for the battle. It is a foregone conclusion. They can't match untrained men against the Roman infantry. These men will be slaughtered. When they flee, they'll have nowhere to go and no food. There'll be no glorious kingdom, no unified tribes. The war will end tomorrow, and if you stay here you will die with them."

"Don't." She forced a smile onto her mouth that didn't reach her eyes and touched her fingertips to his lips. "Don't give me a forecast. Tell me the truth."

"That is the truth. That is the whole truth that matters."

"No it's not. Tell me what it was you couldn't tell me before. Tell me who you are and why you are here."

"I'm here because I love you. That's what I want you to know. That's why I couldn't leave you in Inbhir Nis. It's why I wanted to leave you with Vettona. It's why I am here now, begging you to come with me. Begging you."

Tears filled her eyes and rolled down her cheeks but she had no interest in trying to halt their flow. "Go with you where?" she whispered. "Back behind the Roman lines?"

"Aye."

Pain flared in her chest like a fire burning up her soul. It almost pulled her double and she moaned, sobbing as she stepped back from him again, pulling herself from his grasp. "Oh no," she sobbed. "No, no, no. Why? Why didn't you tell me? Why did you do this? You lied to me."

"I tried not to lie. And I wanted to tell you." He tried to catch her arms, but she spun from his fingers, stumbling back across the cramped space.

"Tried not to lie? Tried? You are a lie. Everything about you is a lie. Every single word you ever said was just another lie." Ula's words came ringing back with a vengeance, and she laughed through her tears again. "I am so stupid. Great gods how you must laugh to yourself."

"Stop it, Brin. Stop. It wasn't lies. Nothing that matters was a lie." He caught her arm and pulled her closer. "I love you. That's not a lie. I need you and I'm here, risking my life to take you with me, because you mean more to me than life."

She clasped her hands to her brow, trying to force back the crushing noise of emotion and reason. "The truth," she demanded. "You and your brothers are spies?"

He nodded.

"You came to the roundhouse that night for information."

Again, he nodded.

"You followed me home because you wanted me to bring you to Calgacus."

"No. I had no idea you were associated with him. None."

"Then, why?" Another groan, and now the air around her pulsed with shadows, its rhythm sickening, her gut heaving over the shock of realisation. Antony caught her shoulders, and she grasped his wrists and pulled his hands up to her face.

The terrible *déjà vu*. Antony's hands, his strong fingers pressed against her throat. Him holding her face in the darkness outside the crannog, saying 'I'm not a priest. I'm a soldier.' The awful panic had its origins there, that night. "You were going to kill me."

"Aye." She could barely hear him. "I couldn't. Euguein gave me the idea to bring you down here. To him."

She pushed his hands harder against the side of her throat and choked on tears as she tried to speak. "Do it now, or I'll call them in here."

"No."

"You'll die. Do it to save your own life."

"No."

"But you would have killed me. Why?"

"You recognised me."

All the answers he'd already given were soft and dull with resignation, but when he said these words, something in his voice broke, and she brought her brimming eyes up to his. He hadn't even known what she'd thought when she saw him that night. All her hopes had risen and collapsed, because she thought he had seen her destiny and knew her pain. He'd seen nothing but innocence.

He hadn't remembered where he'd seen her before. He had no idea how important that night had been for her. He hadn't known Cam had died and she had traded her self-respect for shame. He hadn't known any of it, and yet he'd have killed her because she recognised him? Because she knew he'd been there at the fort?

She pushed his hands from her shoulders and turned awkwardly, trying to keep the world around her still. Without his steady hands to hold her, it was too hard. She couldn't make herself focus. "Don't touch me," she whined, her own voice too far away to be sure she'd made any sound. Her knees were too weak to hold her up and her throat was too dry to say 'It was you.'

He had taken the warning to the Roman reinforcements. He had called in the men who'd killed Cam. The accusation rattled about in her head like it was hollow, echoing in the rush of her own blood. The sound was black movement and she watched it spin in numb silence.

Antony jumped forward to catch her as she fell, pushing his face down into her shoulder. "Brinnie," he whispered, but she'd taken herself as far from him as the tiny tent allowed and she wasn't coming back. She couldn't flee further if she had the world to run in. She wanted nothing to do with him. Nothing.

Carefully he lifted her, ducking under the flap of the tent as he carried her into the moonlight. Arlen rushed forward and Antony gently handed her into his arms. "She's exhausted," he said. There was more he wanted to say, he would have told them to keep her safe, but he couldn't make his throat work.

Calgacus was beside him, behind him, dangerous, but he didn't try to turn or defend himself. What he wanted was to lift the knife from his calf and cut the bastard's throat, but he was the only hope there was for Brinnie's world. Her cause. Her war.

"You're leaving," he said into Antony's ear, and he nodded.

The rebel leader's tone was vicious; there was no doubt he wanted Antony dead. "Tell me," he hissed, and the fear that drove his need for blood rose into his words. "Did

she get it wrong? Did my Eirbrin bring a spy into this camp?”

Sick laughter burned in Antony’s chest, but his throat and brows clenched painfully over the sound. It was all he could do to force out a single syllable. “No.”

“Good.” He was reassured but tormented. Trusting Brin or killing off threats. Doubts rasped up his throat, but to trust her, to be seen to trust her, was more important than this one small risk. His fears filled the night. She was his certainty. “Go back to Gaul, or Germania, or somewhere else where a man with no home can make blood money. She belongs here.”

Again Antony nodded. He had no interest in a debate, but Calgacus had more to vent.

“I told her you could go. She’d never know, now, if you didn’t make it out of this camp alive. But here’s the thing. Here’s what I want you to remember. If you are Roman scum, take a good look around. See everything. Remember everything. Tell them we’re coming, and tell them we will not be beaten.”

Antony stood silently, waiting to be sure he had the message *in toto*, then stepped away. Tav’s horse stood patiently at the side of the tent, and he climbed stiffly into the saddle. Without looking one way or the other, he turned the horse’s face to the road running out of the camp and followed route he’d given Edan and Ula.

Maybe they were waiting. Antony didn’t care.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN.

Ula had second thoughts about riding into a Roman army camp as a lone woman, but she’d been placated with the knowledge she’d be given the Commander’s protection. She had no second thoughts about her horse. Edan rode Antony’s mount and Antony rode Tav’s. Ula rode the black, and Edan’s mood was no better when they crossed the sentry lines into the marching camp.

A line of camps ran back toward the coast. Runners were sent out immediately, mobilising all three legions and their attendant auxiliary cohorts, non-combat forces and wagons. As dawn light stole across the sky, the forward arm of the Roman army in Britannia marched into their enemy’s chosen field of combat.

Under the noses of the Caledonians, arrayed as they were on the hillside above the wide circular arena, Rome began to dig in. To the vast native army sitting high, she seemed a paltry thing, indeed. Scarcely ten thousand men. Under-strength to meet the resistance. Digging trenches on the riverside flats. Erecting the tents of a temporary city. It seemed ridiculous to the watchers that a battle fought in one afternoon should be preceded by so many man-hours of useless preparation. Trenches, tents, walls. They would all fall with the night. But what was it to them if the Romans spent the strength of their sword arms on these useless preparations.

As Governor and commander, Agricola knew his men and he knew battle strategy. He was weary of these provincial rebels, and weary of wars that kept him from a more comfortable life with his family. What he wanted now from Caledonia was a swift resolution, a decisive victory, so he could take himself back to Rome once and for all.

And the Caledonians had rallied their forces from all over their land, claiming they would die before they would live under Rome’s dominion. He accepted those terms.

And he wanted a victory that cost no Roman blood. If this battle went to plan, he would have it written into glorious history and leave these barbarians to themselves.

Here they stood, spread above him in their glory, with their chariots circling the central plain ahead, waiting, on a site that suited his boys perfectly. So be it.

He held the Roman blood in his legions in reserve. Spreading his auxiliary infantry cohorts wide in the centre and his cavalry units to the wings, he ordered the first barrage of missiles as an invitation to war.

Antony watched the battle begin with cold detachment. It seemed a long way off. Even his own hands appeared to belong to someone else. He was cold, and he hunched over like he already nursed a fatal belly wound.

The enemy chariots churned up the field rushing useless circles, and he mumbled strategy corrections at them under his breath and shook his head in disbelief. The camp, the ceremony, the food and supplies, had all been so expertly handled he'd begun to believe there would be a change of plan by the light of day. There was none. This disaster was written in the fates, and it was all going to play out as written.

With the first missile barrages, neither side took many hits, but it spurred the Caledonians into the fray. They sent cavalry and chariots racing forward into the compact lines of Roman infantry. The result was chaos.

The cohorts caved at the first run, but the Caledonian horses, crowded by attackers from behind and unable to make headway against the Roman troops, panicked and turned back on themselves, loosing riderless horses and vehicles to wreak havoc across their own field of men.

The Roman infantry held their lines, and the Caledonians pushed forward against a solid wall. These were fierce men; there were skilled swordsmen among them, men used to single combat or village skirmishes. In close quarters, against an unbreakable line, their long heavy broadswords were a hindrance, their swings impeded by the proximity of their own men.

As the bloodbath unfolded, the cavalry stood, as ordered, and watched.

Hours dragged as more of the glittering hordes from the mountain slope were drawn down into the fight; the Roman infantry in armour, the Celts in cloth and mail. Rome held her lines as she moved forward. As she always did. As she always would.

Antony felt an uneasy sense of regret that these brave men and women had been so horribly misled. He felt a kinship with them and sadness for the blood that spilled in such bright profusion.

By late afternoon, the cavalry still stood waiting, but orders had come down to spread wider on the wings. It carried the brothers a little further from the clear brutal face of this victory.

When finally they were ordered forward, Edan grabbed his shoulder, hauling him around hard in his seat. "Wake up!" he bellowed. "I'm not leaving you out there, not on a day like this. Get your mind on what we're doing."

"I'm all right," Antony snapped back, kicking his horse up and dropping the short reins over its neck. He drew the sword from over his shoulder, and picked the line he would take through the onrushing foe.

Their horses knew the steps of this dance, hardened professionals, both of them. Before them the disheartened natives fought a rear-guard action, trying to hold their lines as they were forced backwards up the hill.

Sweat slicked his face, his back ached, and his clothes clung to his body when the darkening day was finally handed to the Roman victors. With one final forward surge, the Caledonian lines broke before them and moved in retreat into the high groves of forest and began to disperse.

From the cover of trees, some dauntless or heartbroken men turned back, firing arrows and pikes at the celebrating Roman troops, and a last wave of cavalry was

ordered into the forest to root out the snipers.

Antony rode in low, running after the fleeing men, weaving the war horse through the trees, his attention fixed on a group of archers higher on the slope.

In an instant he had no breath. The raw taste of blood filled his mouth and the curses he screamed rolled around in his head, silent for want of air. The pain was excruciating, and he instinctively curled, pulling himself lower. Gods!

An arrow from behind caught him high on his back, passing between ribs, and he glanced down at the sparkling tip protruding from his chest just below his right shoulder. Hauling back, he stood his horse on its haunches. The sniper's nest was only twenty yards ahead and he dragged the horse around, intent on making it back to clear ground before he fell unconscious or took a fatal shot.

In the murk of the forest, with night gathering around them, the horse scrabbled and slipped in the wet shale and litter, and Antony took its full weight on one side as it fell. His pelvis and thigh went white with pain, burned like lightning had struck deep inside his hip, and then mercifully went numb. With one useless arm, he had no hope of regaining his seat, and he sank into a bloody wash of pain.

In the darkness he dreamed of Eirbrin.

At times he watched her face fill with cold revulsion, and her eyes fill with hatred. In those dreams he howled, keening soul deep pain and frustration. He tore his clothes until his chest and fingers bled, but he couldn't fight his way out of his own skin.

And sometimes she smiled. He watched her, sometimes near, sometimes from a distance, but she turned to him and smiled and the pain in his chest drove him closer and closer to the light outside his eyes. When consciousness threatened and the vast reality of pain began to make itself known, once again he fled.

There was a subtle war, no less dangerous for its silence, being waged in his mind and body. Outside, the real and present pain was something he preferred to ignore and he stayed in the half-life of unconsciousness. But inside his head, where he relived his time with Brinnie and he left her behind, again and again, the pain was too big to escape and too irrefutable to survive. He wanted an end to thought. At times he wanted death.

The fates were crueller than he could have imagined, though. They brought him back to face his injuries. Back to the real world where he would have to survive without her.

Brinnie had watched the battle from the command bunker high on the hill.

She'd watched disaster begin, bud, bloom and fruit into violence and bloodshed the likes of which she could never have imagined. The sheer volume of gore was not to be believed. The whole field was awash with blood. And corpses.

In the evening when the war was lost, she joined the ranks of women combing the field for their wounded. The tiny Roman force had cheered and cavorted among the dead, whooping like men elated by the work of their hands. They had collected their own men and returned behind their lines for a riotous party.

Was it kindness or the ultimate act of indifference that they left the Celtic warriors alive in their blood for the women and the wounded to carry back?

She'd been alone when she found him and she wept, even when she had believed there were no more tears to shed. When the worst of the sobbing passed, she rose to find a small wagon, settling on a loose chariot with its gore-stained team still in harness, watched as he was dragged onto its blackening floor, and then drove the team silently into the darkness of the hills. Into the ruins.

Antony moaned and she shook off the weight of sleeplessness, pulling her cloak tighter but not moving any closer to where he lay. She had nothing to give him if he woke. No herbs for the pain, no food. She had a fire, its endless hunger fed by slowly cannibalising the hut around her. And she had water. Below them the river offered an abundance of ice cold fresh water.

Everywhere around, every house and village had been levelled by the fleeing Celts. Not an animal was left behind. Not a stalk of grain or silo. Not a vegetable. And no pot or kettle, no bed or blanket.

He moved again, and she began to weep silently. Whenever he moved, a fresh gout of blood welled up from the wound in his shoulder. She had broken the arrow and pulled it through, but she had nothing other than her tunic to strip and fold into clean wads to dress the hole.

And as she'd hoped and feared, he opened his eyes. He stared at the roof above, his eyes glittering with pain. While she was silent, he didn't appear to know she was near. He moved his left hand, held it up in front of his face as if to be sure he could see, then rubbed his eyes hard. He slipped his hand across the floor, turned his face a little toward the fire.

She pulled her cape in against her frigid skin, and sensing the movement he raised his head. He groaned and dropped it back. "Brin, come a little bit closer."

She tucked her feet tighter into her huddle and didn't move.

"Where are we?" he asked, then coughed weakly and spat blood.

Fresh tears rushed up but she made no sound.

"Is this my vigil? Are you going to wait and watch me die?" He smiled and nodded, closing his eyes.

When it seemed he had gone back to sleep, or slipped again into unconsciousness, she whispered, "I don't know what to do."

"Come closer," he said. "I need to see you."

Slowly, dreading the grey pain and the smell of blood, she crept closer. "We have water. Nothing else."

"Water's good. But it's you I need."

The cup she had was cracked, but it held a ladle of cool water, and she held it to his lips while he sipped.

"How long have I been here?"

"It's midmorning. Just the night. Everywhere is burnt. This place was only left because it's falling down."

"They've gone?"

"Aye. Just as you said. It was a disaster. So many men dead."

"The Roman lines?"

"I don't know."

He moved his hand, reached to her cheek and wiped a finger over the blood and soot staining her skin. "They'll come. Either the lines will keep advancing behind the retreat, or Edan will come looking for me. The horse will have gone back to the camp. He'll look for a corpse. He'll keep looking as long as their camp is in place."

Her tears were flowing so freely now that she barely noticed their formation or their fall. "You need a surgeon. I should have left you in the forest. He would have come for you and you'd be in the camp, safe, by now."

He smiled. "I'm so sorry Brin."

"What do we do?" It was a question she'd been asking herself since she'd dragged him to the floor of this falling down house and begun to wait.

"Come here; let me hold you while I sleep. We can wait."

That plan had holes she could see right through. No one looking for a corpse was likely to come this far to look in an abandoned village. He could wait here for days and a corpse was all they would find. But she had the sense that he didn't care. He needed a physician now, but he was content to wait.

"I have to go back and find them," she said. "I would have tried to find help before, but I thought they'd kill me."

"Ula might."

"Ula is with you?"

"Was. With Edan. I don't want you to leave me. Not again. Not this time."

He needed help, help she could never give, and she bit her lip hard to keep it from trembling. Even if she could find Edan as soon as she walked out the door, it might still be too late to do anything to save his life. Blood had stained a wide dark circle under his back and he really didn't care.

"Are you tired?" His eyes were heavy, each blink took energy to force his lids apart and he nodded slowly. "Then sleep," she whispered, and stretched to lie beside him. Her cheek was on his chest, her tears pushing out from between closed lids, pooling at the bridge of her nose and falling to soak into the dirty fabric of his tunic.

"I got it wrong again." Her words were small sounds, lost and hopeless. "You came to let me redeem myself. You let me choose my path again, when I was stronger and smarter, and I still got it wrong."

Listening to his breathing took all of her strength. It was shallow and full of pain, bubbling and catching, but he moved his hand softly over her shoulder.

"I love you and I promised myself I would follow your fates. I promised I would put you first. But I didn't. It wasn't the past repeating, was it? Just the same war and the same impossible battle lost. And now I don't know what to do."

"It's all right," he said. "Go south west, away from the coast. That must be where he was hoarding the food stocks. Get your strength back and then go north, as hard and as far as you can."

He was silent a moment, and Brinnie smeared her wet cheeks. She had no strength to travel anywhere and no family or home to go to.

Blood-loss and pain made his words a hiss, barely audible. "Tell them, Brin. Tell them to stay in the mountains. That's their strength. Untrained men can't win in open combat."

The time to tell them these truths had long passed. The time to remind Cam he was a farmer, not a soldier, a gentle soul who tended and nurtured life, had gone. The war and all the talk of freedom and death had come down to nothing but blood and brutality. The strong among them, the canny, the soldiers, were alive now and fleeing for the hills. Was their leader among them? Would he sell his cause again?

"I never loved him," she whispered. There were secrets she had never shared, and things that once had seemed irrelevant were suddenly important. She needed Antony to understand. "I only went to him because I believed I had to. I stayed because I could see no other choice. But I never loved him. I only," she searched for words that burned her less with the shame of uttering them, "submitted to him. That's all."

Their small fire made the room warm enough, but under her cheek he was shivering, and Brinnie lifted her face to watch him. "I love you," she whispered. "Don't leave me here alone." She trailed a slow finger over his lips and chin but there was nothing to suggest he noticed the touch. Carefully she slipped back from under his arm and moved to the door.

In the late morning sun, she stood for a moment breathing, trying to clear her head. Her sinuses were clogged, her eyes swollen and raw, and her brain a whirl of fog. She

had to get back to the battlefield. The horses were not saddle horses, and she had no gear, not any sort of bridle she could use. Riding was too risky, she had to run.

She couldn't remember the last full meal she'd eaten. Her stomach was sunken and her legs trembled with any exertion, but she had to try to get to the searchers. She had driven cross-country, in the dark, and had no idea what fates had guided her. But, she reasoned, they were on the riverbank; the river ran through the valley; the Roman camp was on the river flat. If she followed the river, it had to take her back to where the Romans had camped. As she jogged, she tried to remember how long she'd driven the team. Was it hours? Moments? It wasn't so very long. Hoisting her skirts, she forced her weak legs to cover the rocky ground.

When the arena eventually opened beside her, it caught her by surprise. She struggled around one last hillock, and there was the source of the foul smell, the smoke and the reek of death. Teams of men moved over the field, collecting corpses for burial and burning broken weapons.

Leaning on the trunk of an ancient pine, she dragged dry breaths into her chest and then pushed herself off up the hill into the trees, toward the place she'd found him lying. The forest trails were empty, the bodies cleared away, no horses or men moved through the dense murk, and desperation began to wail in her head. She had no more need for caution. If the men below wanted her dead, or worse, then so be it. Antony had once promised her she would not be alone, and if he died there in that broken place, she would be alone forever. Calling up the last of her strength, she turned back into the trees, and called at the top of her lungs, "Edan!"

She staggered further. "Ula!"

Men in the field below looked up from their labours, but she faced them down the slope and called again, and again, and again. They consulted among themselves, pointing up to where she stood, calling back in Latin and laughing at their own humour.

Before her helpless tears could fall again, hoof beats sounded from higher in the trees, and she watched as two horses converged on where she stood. She knew the men who rode them, like a cry and its echo. "I know where he is," she cried, stumbling up the slope to meet them.

The second twin turned his horse down the slope, riding hard for the camp and the help they would need. "Please hurry," she whispered to where he had been.

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CHAPTER TWENTY.

Brinnie dozed beside the camp cot, resting her head on her crossed arms. She woke when she felt fingers touching her hair. All the braids and foiled beads were gone, and the curls spread over her arms and down onto the pillow she shared.

"You're still here?" he whispered without opening his eyes, and she nodded. "How?"

"You've been sleeping a lot. We're in the Roman marching camp. They're about to move everything back to Inchtuthil."

"We're not moving forward?"

"No. Your general has declared a victory over all of Caledonia, paraded his prisoners of war and dumped them into slave stalls. Now he's moving everything south."

Antony laughed weakly, and the effort pulled pain into his face. "He hasn't set foot

in more than half the country. I told you they don't want it." He opened his eyes to look at her. "Why are you walking around free?"

"Edan bought me." She swallowed the gall, but she'd carried burdens heavier than slavery. And there was a lighter side. "He used Ula's gold and she's not very happy."

"Whose citizenship did he use? He can't own a slave."

"Your father's. I need more money, Antony. Before they move these people too far south or send them into slave markets. I know them. I can't let them be led away."

He shook his head to clear it; trying to concentrate was taking its toll. "How much gold did Ula get? It was all yours anyway. Steal it back from her."

"She wasn't even arrested, you know. She was handed her freedom for helping you two to escape."

"War, huh. It would be funny if it wasn't so tragic." He fixed his eyes on hers.

"I'm sorry Brinnie. I don't know why you're here or how you could forgive me."

She touched her fingers to his lips and shook her head gently. "I thought you were going to die, just like Cam. And just like then, I put this war, these people ahead of the man I loved."

"Duty," he slurred.

"No. I kept trying to serve the cause to somehow make everything up to Cam, but it was never his fight. He never loved it. He was a farmer, and he died because he believed the lies. We all believed the lies. We all believed we could win against Rome, and now all our best men are dead."

"Brinnie, that's war. That's what it is. Men who believe they can fight other men. Nothing changes, nothing gets better, and it's only the whip that changes hands."

"But you saw it. You could look at all we had and you could say no chance. No one told us that. No one said, Rome will win anyway. The people we trusted lied to us all." Everybody lied. Everybody jostled for position. None of them cared about freedom; they cared about seizing power and holding power.

"What will you do?" he asked, and she smiled.

"I'm your slave. Your get well present."

"You're free." As if he saw a host of threats leap up behind her, he added, "Stay close to Tavish and Edan. They're rough, but they will keep you safe out there."

She had stayed close to Tav. Every eye leered; all the soldiers behaved as if she was a camp follower, as if she was there for them to take at will. "I want to stay with you. Can I? Is that possible?"

He didn't answer straight away, but frowned at a future he seemed to dread. "Aye, you can stay. I want you to stay. But I have no home to give you. I've got seven more years of this. Seven years of leaving you alone in a fort village somewhere, where you have no rights and no money. There can be no formal Roman marriage, our children...."

"I'll take it," she smiled and pressed a kiss lightly on his lips. "I'm not Roman; I don't need a Roman marriage. Our children will be beautiful. And as for being alone with no money, I'd bet there's a good market for Roman luxuries in the villages. I know what it was like trying to get anything we needed at Craig Phadrig."

"You're already planning to be a black marketeer?"

"And a spy."

"And my wife? My virgin queen?"

"If that's what you want." She leaned close against his ear so her words were his alone, her breath warm on his cheek, her tongue darting out to touch his earlobe.

"Should I lie there, still and trembling, and beg you to be gentle with me, husband?"

He grinned, trying not to let the threatening chuckles pull up into the wound in his chest.

“Should I whimper and turn away and cry, ‘mercy sir please, that will surely never fit’?”

Laughter rose despite his best efforts. “Aye, that sounds good to me. You are a bad, bad woman.”

“Then get well. Come back to me soon.” The fun ran out of her, and she clasped his hand tight. “I was so afraid you would die. I couldn’t stand to be alone like that again.”

“You won’t be.”

“No. The gods turned the world upside down to bring you to me. They would never take you away again.”

-END-

About the author:

Letitia Coyne is alive and well and living in Australia. She writes, paints, draws, sews, plays with old wooden furniture, revives jewellery and sings very loudly. She also feeds animals and adolescents. And sleeps.

Discover other titles by Letitia Coyne at Obooko.com:

Britannia – Book One.

Maia and her step-brother Cilo were raised in an opulent but isolated villa in the Seine Valley. At fifteen Cilo escaped to the army in Britannia, leaving Maia alone and afraid.

Lucius, Luc, is commander of an auxiliary cavalry unit of *Legio XX, Valeria Victrix*. The son of a Caledonian mercenary who joined Rome, he and his four brothers are soldiers of renowned ability and bravery. At twenty-five he has served ten years, has another fifteen to serve, and has had enough of killing. Exhausted and battle fatigued after the brutal AD77 Cambrian campaign, he has been weighing up his chances of survival as a deserter.

As a matter of convenience, Maia is married off to her stepbrother, and once again abandoned when he returns to his post. Seizing her one chance to escape, she joins an exclusive group of travelling prostitutes on their way to Britannia. With them, she finds herself moving through a complex web of lies and deceptions, where everyone knows more than they will say and everyone she meets has their own agenda.

If she can trust Lucius, he will take her to her husband. But everything she knows about the world will change -- if she can survive the journey.

Hispania – Book Two.

Although the siege of Numantia in 133BC marked the end of organized resistance to Rome, the Celtiberian tribes of northern Spain maintained their heritage of warrior elites -- and their hatred of Rome. They accepted the comforts, infrastructure and the benefits of Empire, while remaining independent tribal city-states under the control of noble families.

Marella was the daughter of one such family.

Falsely accused by a vile and corrupt Druidic high priest, she is set to be executed. Her rescuer is Marcus, a Roman deserter from Britannia who has made his home in the Gallego valley above Caesaraugusta.

Finding no purpose in the life he leads, bored and frustrated, he relishes the chance to face the challenges that come with saving the life of this young noblewoman. Her best chance of survival lies in travelling across the province to Numantia, and her only chance of survival is to do that with Marc.

Somehow they must stay ahead of High Priest Leucetius and the priests of a Romanised and corrupted temple; Marella's noble brother Taran and his standing army; and the army of Rome itself.

Away from the capital, the Roman world was a complex, sometimes bloody, blend and clash of cultures. The people were not stereotypical Roman ladies and gents consumed by the politics of Caesar's court. Hispania is a glimpse into the less well known lives of Rome.

Petra – Book Four

Petra, Arabia Provincia, 120AD

Aya grew as a filthy scavenger, trailing the Bedouin caravans that crossed the Nafud wastes and the Rub' al Khali. Bought from the arena as a young man, his new life as Sethos, the adopted son of a wealthy Roman merchant, is stained by the stigma of his past.

Jaida and her sisters were raised in luxurious slavery, destined to be the virgin oracles of Isis at provincial temples throughout the Roman Empire. When the fall of a dice brings the girls' future into question, it is Seth who must define freedom and slavery, life or liberty – for himself and for them.

He has money, strength and cunning. She has no more than her faith.

Touchstone.

“You are the fool, boy. How long have you believed your war would end and you would bring that midden home to me? How long? Really, I want you to tell me. Because I want you to think carefully about how long it is you’ve loved her while she never loved you back.”

From the author of Britannia and Petra comes a brand new historical tragedy...

War is hell. Then it starts to hurt.

When war is all you've ever known, the promise of peace is more terrifying than any battle.

For Freya, there is no life worth remembering before the army, and none worth imagining after. Born to the lowest caste of a brutally bigoted society, she's found no more horror on the battlefield than she knew on the streets.

And she's earned a lot more respect with a sword in her hand.

As a young man, Dragan was blooded on the rush of adrenaline and sated by the euphoria of victory. With Freya beside him as his partner, he was indestructible. But age and mortality are gaining ground, and cracks have started to appear.

He's had fifteen years of war and he's earned his retirement.

Together they survived the war. But can they survive peace when it means different things to each of them?

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