



Juliet Landon



SLAVE PRINCESS



Mills & Boon Historical

Juliet Landon

Slave Princess

«HarperCollins»

Landon J.

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SHACKLED TO A SLAVE! For ex-cavalry officer Quintus Tiberius Martial duty always comes first. His task to escort the Roman emperor's latest captive should be easy. But one look at his fiery slave and Quintus wants to put his own desires before everything else...For Princess Brigid, her powerful, battle-honed captor has her head in conflict with her heart. Bound by a new-found bondage of emotions, it's not long before Brigid wonders whether she wants to come out of this perilous journey to Aquae Sulis with her virtue intact...!

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Praise for Juliet Landon

THE RAKE'S UNCONVENTIONAL MISTRESS 'Landon's understanding of the social mores and language of the era flows through the pages ...' —*RT Book Reviews*

A SCANDALOUS MISTRESS '.sensual and emotion-filled read.' —*RT Book Reviews*

HIS DUTY, HER DESTINY 'Landon has written a titillating and entertaining battle of the sexes, one in which readers cannot help but take sides—both of them.' —*RT Book Reviews*

THE BOUGHT BRIDE 'Landon carefully creates the atmosphere of the eleventh century, incorporating intriguing historical details.' —*RT Book Reviews*

THE KNIGHT'S CONQUEST 'A feisty heroine, a heroic knight, an entertaining battle of wills and plenty of colourful history flavour this tale, making it a delightful one-night read.' —*RT Book Reviews*

'Captives are rarely in a position to bargain about their future, and you're no different, princess or not. You *are* my slave. Better get used to it.'

'Then it would have been better to let me die at Eboracum with my maid, Roman. That way I would have been free.' Throwing off the blanket, she stood up in one swift unbending of her body, intending to put more distance between them.

The soft mattress hampered her feet—the curve of the canvas was not designed for her height—and the long reach of Quintus's arm caught her wrist in an iron grip, pulling her off-balance. Furiously she tried to throw him off, her eyes blazing with green fire. 'No man may *touch* me!' she yelled, competing with the roar outside.

'Then that's another thing you'd better get used to, Princess High and Mighty.'

About the Author

JULIET LANDON's keen interest in art and history, both of which she used to teach, combined with a fertile imagination, make writing historical novels a favourite occupation. She is particularly interested in researching the early medieval and Regency periods, and the problems encountered by women in a man's world. Her heart's home is in her native North Yorkshire, but now she lives happily in a Hampshire village close to her family. Her first books, which were on embroidery and design, were published under her own name of Jan Messent.

Previous novels by the same author:

ONE NIGHT IN PARADISE** THE WIDOW'S BARGAIN THE BOUGHT BRIDE
HIS DUTY, HER DESTINY THE WARLORD'S MISTRESS A SCANDALOUS MISTRESS*
DISHONOUR AND DESIRE* THE RAKE'S UNCONVENTIONAL MISTRESS* MARRYING
THE MISTRESS SCANDALOUS INNOCENT (collaboration with the National Trust)

* *Ladies of Paradise Road*

**linked to *Ladies of Paradise Road* trilogy

Author Note

For many years I longed to set a story in Bath, one of England's most ancient and beautiful cities in the West Country, developed by the Romans for its famous natural hot springs. Like other natural phenomena, the springs were venerated by earlier Celtic tribes, but after the Roman invasion the place became known as *Aquae Sulis* (Waters of Sulis, the presiding Celtic god). Excavations have revealed exactly how the Romans built temples and healing pools to channel the waters, creating a spa for visitors from far and wide to bathe and make offerings in return for all kinds of help. It must have been an early example of a tourist town, with all amenities. The name of Minerva, the Roman goddess of healing, was then linked to that of Sulis (as *Sulis Minerva*) so as not to offend the local deities, of whom the northern goddess Brigantia is yet another counterpart.

Tracing the history of places back through the ages—like Bath, Lincoln and York, for instance—can be both fascinating and rewarding when so much has been discovered through archaeology to show us how people lived. The social history is what I find most interesting—particularly the various ways in which ordinary people sought cures for their ills through nature, in discoveries that reveal how closely their daily needs and hopes resembled our own. I hope that my story of how Romans and Celts co-existed during those difficult times of occupation will be the beginning of deeper research by the reader.

The Roman army packed up and left England two hundred years after this story, leaving our island with Latinised place-names that have since changed to the ones we know today. So *Eboracum* is now York, *Danum* is Doncaster, *Lindum* is Lincoln, *Corinium Dobunorum* is Cirencester, *Aquae Sulis* is Bath, and *Corieltauvorum* is Leicester. Other places mentioned, like *Margidunum*, have now disappeared, being little more than staging-posts along the main highway.

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Chapter One

Eboracum—A. D. 208

The slapping of cupped hands on oiled skin echoed off the stone walls of the gymnasium like lukewarm applause. It was interrupted, however, by a bad-tempered grunt. ‘Steady, man! That’s still sore.’

Fingertips explored a pink scar streaking diagonally like a ribbon across the muscled shoulder. It was healing well. ‘Where, sir? Just there?’ The fingers fondled.

‘Ouch! Yes, you imbecile!’

The slave grinned and continued his kneading.

‘If you were not such a good masseur, I’d have you flogged,’ the deep voice grumbled into the towelled pillow.

‘Yes, sir,’ the slave replied, hearing a smile in the empty threat. Quintus Tiberius Martial was not a soft touch in any sense, but nor was he given to floggings and beatings. Florian had been in the Tribune’s service since he was twelve years old and so far had only suffered tongue-lashings for his misdemeanours.

The Tribune’s back was long, tapering and sculpted, divided by a valley with hills and mounds of hard muscle rising on each side, the Titanic shoulders extending to arms as strong as tree branches.

His dice-playing towel-wrapped companions looked up from their game to smile at the tetchiness. ‘Time you had some exercise,’ one of them volunteered, softly.

From the slab, Quintus opened one dark eye to glare at his friend. ‘I’ve been exercising all morning, if you recall. Where were you?’

‘Not that kind,’ the friend said, winking at his partner.

The partner moved one of the pieces on the board and shuffled himself deeper into his towel. ‘Horizontal, he means,’ he said, helpfully.

‘Yes ... well ... this is probably as horizontal as I’m going to get until I’m properly mended,’ Quintus mumbled, crossly.

‘Rubbish!’ said the friend, wiping the sweat from his face with one forearm. ‘You *are* mended. Isn’t he, Florian?’

‘Indeed, sir. I believe our forthcoming trip to the hot springs in the south will complete the cure, but I see no reason why the Tribune should not take—’

‘Oh, spare me the lecture and get on with your pummelling, lad,’ Quintus returned sharply. ‘One punishment at a time, for pity’s sake.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Florian, lifting the towel from his master’s brawny thighs. ‘Will you turn, sir, if you please?’

Quintus obliged, staring up at the thick cloud of steam that hung in the curve of the vaulted ceiling. There were sounds of splashing and the deep bellow of men’s voices, the grunts of effort as heavy weights hit the floor, a distant laugh, the patter of bare feet on stone and the accompanying pants as two men wrestled over on the other side of the steaming pool. He caught the whiff of almond and lavender oil as Florian set to work on his chest. He closed his eyes, knowing that his two companions, Tullus and Lucan, would not let the matter rest there. His shoulder had responded well to treatment, but the damage to his knee was more serious, and it was that which had concluded his brilliant career as a military tribune and steered him instead towards administration. His abilities as an expert in the imperial system of record-keeping, accounting and taxes had been recognised even before he was fully recovered, and in record time the Emperor Severus had placed him in his personal service as Provincial Procurator directly responsible to him, not to the Governor of the northern provinces whose hospitality they were at present both using and abusing.

As a respected and successful cavalry officer, Quintus had wanted nothing more than a soldier's life, and although his new position was both challenging and demanding, and lucrative, it could never compare to the heady excitement of command, continuous movement and brotherhood.

'We have your best interests at heart, Quintus my friend,' said Lucan. 'This expedition down to Aquae Sulis will take quite a few days, and you know what will happen every time we're offered a night's hospitality.'

'I've never known you to protest at an excess of hospitality,' Quintus said, gruffly. 'The girls you're offered are never refused, if my memory serves me. What's the problem?'

'You are,' Lucan said. 'How many ways do you know of refusing? No, thank you. Not tonight. Too tired. My leg hurts. My shoulder is sore.'

'You're bound to give some offence,' said Tullus, nodding.

The two friends were Assistant Procurators, junior administrators in Quintus's office of scribes, secretaries and accountants. Younger by a few years than his thirty, they had no plans for marriage, mainly due to the roving nature of the job, but their experience of women from the countries through which they had passed in the Emperor's service was, to say the least, extensive. No one understood better than they how hospitality worked on long journeys, how it was always assumed that a single male guest would need a companion for the night. Slaves were an ever-present commodity to be used at the master's discretion, and for Quintus to be continually plied with this amenity while he was away could become something of a nuisance.

In his army days, he would have thought nothing of it, but these last few months had been physically hampered by pain and some anger at the turn of events, and though his recuperation had involved a punishing regime of exercises to tone his body, he had allowed himself no rewards. Not even the trip to Aquae Sulis was solely for his health; there was some investigating to be done, too.

'Giving offence,' he responded, 'has never kept me awake at night.' Flinging aside the hip-covering towel, he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the slab, causing Florian to skip to one side. He ran a hand through his damp dark hair and scowled at his feet. 'I'll take a woman when I'm ready,' he said. 'I shall not be stuck for excuses.'

Lucan was tall and as lithe as a panther, his nose handsomely hooked, his mouth wide and often smiling, his Greek ancestry enchantingly obvious. Unwinding himself from his towel, he stood up to face his friend, giving the towel a kick, his eyes laughing with a distinct lack of sympathy. 'You won't need any excuses if you take a woman with you,' he said. 'She doesn't have to be anyone in particular. Just for show. A slave will do, as long as she's well bred. One you can pass off as your woman. A companion. She needn't sleep with you if you don't wish it. You just let it be known that you're provided for, thank you very much. No more offers. No refusals. No offence. Everyone happy.'

Ready to dismiss the suggestion out of hand, Quintus held his tongue, recognising an element of good advice. Apart from a few romantic encounters, the hospitality to which Lucan referred had never been an issue in the army where women were taken, paid for and left on a more business-like basis than in civilian life. Outside the barracks, any single, wealthy, good-looking man of equestrian rank with the personal friendship of the Emperor, injured or not, was quickly regarded as husband material for the daughters, nieces and widows of good family. Already Quintus Tiberius Martial had attracted some attention from the women of the royal court surrounding Julia Domna, wife of the Emperor Severus. Clearly his two friends were beginning to think he was using his injuries as an excuse, though the fact was that his knee gave him more trouble than he would admit, and when the prestigious office had been offered, he had taken it immediately rather than see it given to someone else. The demands of such a high position were of a different order from the demands of making love, and Quintus had no wish to start making a fool of himself in a department at which he had always excelled.

Tullus pushed the game-board aside in disgust and stood up, vigorously tousling his nut-brown hair with the towel, emerging red-faced and serious. 'He's right,' he said, eyeing his superior's long

limbs, noting how he sidled off the slab, gingerly testing the knee with the swollen joint. This man, Tullus thought, was a prime specimen, almost in the peak of fitness, with an intellect as bright as any he'd ever worked with, darkly good looking with a heavy-lidded insolence and steady eyes that made women blush and stammer. He would not be chaste for much longer, thought Tullus. 'The Empress has some high-class slaves in her service,' he said. 'You have only to ask her. Just for the trip to Aquae Sulis and back. We shall be off tomorrow.'

'I shan't have time,' Quintus said, dismissing Florian with a nod. 'The Emperor wants to see me this afternoon. More instructions.'

'More? I thought everything was arranged,' said Tullus over his shoulder. He was poised on the edge of the pool, studying the ripples and reflections.

'So did I,' said Quintus, joining him. 'He was pleased to be mysterious, but I believe he wants someone else to join the party.'

Standing between them, Lucan groaned. 'Oh, Jupiter! Not another aged cripple with wobbly knees who needs spa treatment. We'll never get there if we're on escort duty to—' His protest was cut short by a bellow as he was shoved unceremoniously into the water, hitting it with a loud smack and having no time to surface before two hefty male bodies landed on top of him, sending a tidal wave over the floor to wash Florian's toes. Steam swirled around flailing limbs, engulfing them.

'The Tribune Quintus Tiberius Martial,' snapped the guard, opening the door of the Emperor's newly whitewashed office.

Quintus stepped forward, his nose wrinkling at the pungent smell of medication that clung to the soldierly white-haired man who, despite the warmth of the April day, wore a fur-lined cloak and a pair of white-and-brown striped socks. 'Your Excellency,' Quintus said, bowing and waiting for the Emperor's attention to lift from the scroll he was reading.

The tube of papyrus sprang upwards with a rattle. 'Ah, Quintus! All prepared? Right,' he went on, not waiting for any denial, 'so I've had funds set aside for you in that box over there ...' he pointed with the scroll to a wooden brass-bound chest '... and there'll be a two-man guard on it while you're in transit. That's for expenses. And here's the final list of names and residences for the journey. They're expecting you all the way from here to Lindum, Corinium, Aquae Sulis and all points in between, but it's for you to decide the pace and where to pitch camp for the night.'

'Thank you, my lord.'

Quintus had been in the Emperor's inner sanctum many times since their arrival at Eboracum earlier in the year and was used to the sparse functional surroundings favoured by him and his two sons. As a Lybian, Severus found the harsh British climate not at all to his liking, but since his recent visit to Hadrian's Wall, even further north, his chest complaint had been responding to treatment. Something, thought Quintus, must have agreed with him, apart from victory.

'How's the knee today?'

'Bearable, sir, I thank you.'

'Good. So you won't mind taking along an extra passenger tomorrow, I take it.'

As if the entourage was not big enough already with attendants and aides, servants and slaves, bodyguards and bald Greek lawyers. 'Just the one, sir?'

'Ah ... no. She'll probably want to take her maid along with her, too.'

Inwardly, Quintus groaned. 'A woman, sir? Not the Lady Julia Domna, surely?'

Severus sighed and rested his behind on a white marble table with gilded lions' legs, his dark eyes straying briefly to the door and back to his sandals. 'No, not my wife.' His voice was subdued. The Empress would not have approved of his plan.

Quintus wondered whether there would be any point in objecting, but suspected not. Women always slowed a journey down, one reason why he'd been disinclined to accept his friends' suggestion.

The Emperor wriggled his toes. 'That battle last week,' he said. 'Remember?'

'Indeed I do, sir. You killed the chieftain. It was well done.'

‘And if he’d been the *only* chieftain, Quintus, it would have been even better. But as you know, the Brigantes are the biggest and most powerful collection of tribes in Britain, even scrapping amongst themselves for dominance, and as soon as we remove one chieftain, another springs up in his place like bloody mushrooms. This time we have two of them. Sons of the last one. But we took the daughter captive.’

‘I didn’t know that, sir.’

The Governor of the northern province where the massive Brigantian tribes made such a nuisance of themselves had sent to the Emperor of Rome for help to put them in their place, once and for all. Severus, his sons, wife and a huge army had come post-haste from victories in Gaul and had already achieved some success.

‘I kept it quiet,’ Severus replied. ‘On the night the chieftain was killed, a party of our men sneaked up to their hill-fort to torch it while their backs were turned. They came back with the daughter and her maid. But I can’t keep them here indefinitely, Quintus. My eldest son is eager to bait them in the arena, but that would be asking for more trouble than they’re worth. I’d have the whole of the Brigantes united against us like a pack of ravening wolves. Subduing them one at a time is enough without provoking them still further. I wish he’d understand that.’

Imprisonment, Quintus knew only too well, was not an alternative form of punishment generally favoured by the Romans. Captives were either sold as slaves or killed. To keep them was an unnecessary burden on the state. High-status captives were sometimes taken in chains to Rome, displayed as trophies, but there was rarely a role for women in all this.

‘Would the two brothers not search for her, sir?’

‘Perhaps. But they’ll have a good idea of where she is, and anyway they’ll have their hands full sorting things out after their father’s death. I have reliable spies in Eboracum. Nothing has been seen of them after the battle. But I have to get rid of her, now, immediately.’ He leaned back, taking a deep breath. ‘Besides, there’s another reason.’

‘Sir?’

‘This woman’s tribe recently received a deputation from the Dobunni tribe down in the south. The spa Aquae Sulis is in their territory.’

Quintus was already beginning to understand. ‘Ah,’ he said.

‘A chieftain’s son, apparently. I’m told that it’s his father who favours an alliance with the local Brigantes, sending his son up here to make an offer for the daughter. I’m told she’s been promised.’

‘To the Dobunnii.’

‘Yes. It’s the kind of alliance that would give him some clout in the south.’

‘So he needs the Brigantes’s help. Is this the same troublemaker who’s building up a resistance army down there, sir?’

‘I believe it is. These impetuous young things take on all the advantages we’ve offered over the best part of two hundred years, all the trappings of Roman citizenship, but the one thing they can’t accept is that they’re expected to pay for our protection. One of these days they’re going to get a shock when we all go back to Rome and leave them to it, Quintus. But it always boils down to the tax problem. And this young renegade, so I’m told, has been recruiting young rebels to be trained for his resistance army.’

‘Jupiter!’

‘Quite. If he’s not stopped very soon, we’ll have more to do here in Britain than we thought. I don’t want to be stuck up here for years and have no wish to die here, either. We have to find this ringleader and put him out of action.’

‘So he’s disappeared, sir?’

‘Yes. We believe he was up here a week ago to make his offer, but now he’s fled, leaving the intended bride to eat her heart out in captivity. Not a very committed type. He obviously saw no

reason to stay after the father was lost and the village destroyed. Perhaps the two sons are not so keen on an alliance. I don't know.'

'We're sure he's gone, then? Not in hiding? Waiting for a chance?'

'Can't be sure. But what I believe is that, if the woman is taken down to his neck of the woods, she'll surely try to make contact with him. My hope is that she'll lead you to him.'

'Or he'll learn of her whereabouts and try for a rescue.'

'Then it's up to you to watch and take him. Bring him back here with you or, if you have to, kill him. We'd have taken him earlier if we'd thought he'd abandon the mission. We thought he'd stay and fight with them, but he didn't.'

'And the woman?'

'Oh, do whatever you like with her, lad. Just keep her from under my feet.'

'Willing or not,' murmured Quintus.

But Severus heard and threw back his head in a bark of laughter that was not wholly solicitous. 'Hah! She'll not be willing, I can promise you that. She's the most unwilling wench I've ever ... no ... I should not say any more. I can see the idea of carting her off down to Aquae Sulis doesn't exactly thrill you to the core, does it?'

'I would rather convey a raging bullock, sir, if you wouldn't mind.'

'Unfortunately, that would not be quite so effective, Quintus. You going down there tomorrow happens to fill the bill perfectly. Besides, between you and me, I would rather my son was denied access to her. His manner of dispatching captives lacks finesse, I find.'

Quintus nodded, being too diplomatic to speak out loud on the sensitive issue of Caracalla's disgraceful behaviour, even towards his own brother. 'And the other business, sir? The tax fraud?'

'That must be investigated thoroughly, once you reach the spa,' said Severus. 'The tax officials are expecting you, and they'll give you all the assistance you need. You'll have plenty of time for the healing and rest. No hurry. I want you to come back refreshed and ready for duty.'

Privately, Quintus saw his recuperation being gnawed away by a package of extra duties he'd hoped to be spared, the notion of being refreshed growing dimmer by the hour. 'Thank you, sir,' he said. 'Any instructions about the woman?'

'Oh, her! Well, she's apparently known as a princess, according to the maid, so she'll certainly regard you as an inferior, Quintus. Very high status.'

'Hmm! Does she understand our tongue, sir?'

'So far, we haven't had a word from her in any tongue, but I think she has a fair understanding of what's being said. You can take her along as your slave, if you wish, or you may prefer to sell her to a merchant when she's fulfilled her purpose. It's up to you. You'd get a good price. She'll have knowledge of cures and such. These tribal women often do, you know. She might even be quite useful to you, but just get her away from here. Far away.'

Quintus was puzzled. Where was the catch? There had to be one. 'Would she be of no use to the Lady Julia Domna?' he said, grasping at straws.

'No,' said Severus, irritably. 'None at all.'

'Does she ride, sir?'

The frown disappeared as the Emperor passed the scroll to Quintus and scratched into his curling beard. His white bushy brows, stark against the dark skin, lifted and lowered in time to the opening and closing of his mouth; Quintus saw that he'd been about to say something else about the captive before thinking better of it. He began to shuffle through a pile of scrolls, quickly losing interest. 'On that score I have no suggestions to offer,' he said, callously. 'You may have to drag her there by the hair. Have you ever had the pleasure of trying to make one of these tribal women do something they don't want to?'

'No, sir. Not yet.'

‘Well, then, I have high hopes of you, lad. If a Tribune of equestrian rank can’t do it, I shall eat one of my socks.’

‘Only one, sir?’

Severus kept on shuffling. ‘Only one.’ He smiled. ‘Get somebody to take you down there. And don’t let me hear the rumpus.’

Quintus bowed. ‘Do we know her name, sir?’

The Emperor looked up with an unusually blank stare. ‘Damned if I know,’ he said. ‘See if the maid will tell you.’

No matter what standard of accommodation the captive had been given, it would not have found favour with her, for the heavy door was locked, confining her to four walls and depriving her of every Brigantian woman’s right: freedom. The room was, in fact, generous as prisons go, plastered walls, red-tiled floor, a barred window above head height, a low wooden sleeping-bench with a few blankets. That was all, apart from heaps of broken earthenware in the corners and one whole pottery beaker towards which one skinny arm was waving in the hope of attracting attention.

‘Please,’ a faint voice whispered. ‘Please?’

The bench had been pulled up below the window with the curled-up body of a young maid lying motionless at one end, covered with a rich cloak. Trying not to stand on her, her regal mistress of the Briganti tribe balanced on the tips of her toes to see out of the window where the spring sun beamed between scudding clouds, showing her that she was facing home, miles away to the north of Eboracum. The princess, a tall slender woman of twenty-two summers, swayed dangerously as she let go of the bar with one hand to look down at the poor waif. ‘Wait,’ she whispered.

The movement made her dizzy and faint, her legs trembling with the effort of reaching up, her usual robust energy sapped by hunger. Warily, she began her descent, clenching her teeth, commanding her feet to tread where they would do no further damage. In mid-step, she let go of the window-bar as the echoing rattle of a key in the door held her, poised and swaying like a reed, narrowing her eyes in anger at the intrusion. Every time the guard brought food, she was aware of the room’s appalling smell of unwashed bodies, rats, sickness and despair, the very idea of eating almost turning her stomach.

But this time, the armour-plated guard stood back to allow a stranger to enter, a tall white-clad man, obviously an official, who frowned at the sight of the young woman in the belted green tunic with a head of bright copper-coloured hair some way above his, glowing like a halo with the sun behind it. Her lips parted, then closed again quickly. The angry expression remained.

Years of discipline held Quintus’s initial reaction where it would not show, yet his eyes faced the sun and the captive Brigantian caught that first fleeting glimpse of shock before the haughty lids came down like shutters. Clearly, he would have preferred it if she’d been on his level, or even lower, but he took the opportunity her position afforded him to take in the intricately woven green-and-heather plaid, the borders of gold-thread embroidery, the tooled leather shoes and patterned girdle. There was heavy gold on her wrists and neck, a wink of red garnets through the hair, and the cords that wrapped her thick plait were twisted with glass beads from the Norse countries, cornelians and lapis from the other side of the world.

Pretending to ignore her perilous position, Quintus glanced round the room. ‘What’s been happening here?’ he said to the guard, indicating the broken pottery.

‘Her food, sir,’ said the man, expressionless. ‘Everything I bring in gets thrown against the wall. The rats like it well enough.’

‘How long?’

‘Since she set foot in the place, sir. The maid’s ready to pack it in, by the look of things. All she gets is water. Tyrannical, I call it, sir.’

‘Seven ... eight days?’

‘Aye, sir. Look ‘ere.’ The guard pointed to his bruised cheek. ‘She threw a bowl at me. They can starve for all I care.’

‘That’s what you get if you don’t wear your helmet,’ Quintus said, dismissively. No wonder the Emperor wants rid of her, he thought. He’d not want her death here in Eboracum. Miles away, perhaps, but not here under his roof. Another glance up at the captive’s face, however, alerted him to the probability of that fate if something was not done immediately to reverse it. She was swaying dangerously, her eyes half-closed in pain.

‘Come down,’ he said, sternly. ‘Take my arm. Come on.’

The guard looked dubious. ‘She’ll not let you touch her, sir.’

But the stern command had reached through a cold haze as if from a long way away, and the hand she put out to steady herself touched something firm and warm that supported her, keeping her from falling. Not for the world would she willingly have allowed any Roman to touch her, nor would she have touched one, but now she found herself being placed carefully upon the floor and helped to sit unsteadily beside her maid’s feet that stuck out from beneath the gold fringe of a cloak. Seated on the edge of the bed, she felt her head being pushed slowly down between her knees in a most undignified manner.

‘Let me up!’ she gasped. ‘I’m all right.’

The guard let out a yelp. ‘Ye gods! That’s the first time she’s said a word, sir. Honest. We all thought she was word-struck!’

‘There’s something to be said for it, in a woman,’ Quintus remarked, removing his hand from her head, ‘but I have a suspicion we shall hear a lot more of it before we’re much older.’ Bending, he picked up the beaker of water from the floor and placed it in the woman’s hand. ‘Take a sip of that,’ he said. ‘Then you’d better listen to me.’

She refused his command, preferring instead to place a hand under her maid’s head and offer the water to her parched lips. With closed eyes sunk deep into brown sockets, the girl could take only a sip before bubbling the rest of it away down her chin, coughing weakly.

‘Are you going to let her die, then?’ said Quintus. ‘Can you not see she has no strength? *You* may be able to last out a few more weeks, but *she* won’t. Do you want her death on your hands? No one regards your protest, woman. You’re wasting life for no good reason.’

The captive pulled herself up straight, her back like a ramrod, a token of inflexibility. Her hands trembled around the beaker of water, her mouth panting.

‘Listen to me,’ Quintus said. ‘I’ve come to offer you a choice. Either you come with me and give your maid a chance to recover, or you allow her to die through your own neglect. No good mistress would do that to her maid.’

‘It is not how you think, Roman,’ the captive whispered. ‘That fool knows nothing. My maid is not neglected. She is mine.’ Her hand rested tenderly on the maid’s hip, then slid down to take the claw-like fingers in her own. She was close to desperation, knowing that although her voice was weak, the hard edge of physical effort had been mistaken for a mistress’s authority and ownership. Already she had decided that the death of her maid would coincide with her own, using the window-bars and her tablet-woven girdle to speed her into the next world. Tears in her proud eyes sparkled in the sunlight, tears that had been suppressed during days and nights of isolation, unwelcome, shaming tears to be brushed away impatiently with one flick of the wrist.

Quintus kept up the pressure. ‘Correction!’ he snapped. ‘She is *not* yours. She is mine, as you both are. You belong to me now. Yes, you, too.’

The woman’s gasp was audible as she jerked her head up to look him full in the face, her eyes blazing with furious tears like watery blue-green gems. The very notion of being owned by a Roman was impossible for her even to contemplate. ‘Never! *Never!*’ she growled, her voice raw with fury. ‘I belong to no one except my father, the chieftain of our tribe. Leave me, Roman. *Get out!*’ With an astonishing resurgence of energy, she glared at Quintus with all the contempt she could summon,

not having the slightest notion, in her trembling rage, what a picture of sheer animal loveliness she presented as the sun caught the edges of the blazing red hair surrounding her face. Like the sheen on water, her skin was almost translucent, her mouth wide and pale, her eyes dark-lashed. Too large, and too full of rage.

A frail hand caught at her sleeve, tugging gently. 'Please, mistress,' the maid whispered, her voice almost too low to hear. 'We should go, for your father's sake.'

'Don't *shame* me,' the woman whispered back, angrily. 'Where is your pride? You think my father would want us to belong to a *Roman*? Rather we should die first.'

The little hand fell away. 'It could not be worse than this,' the girl said on a sigh of resignation. 'Accept his offer.'

'Well?' said Quintus. 'I'm not going to carry you out of here kicking and screaming. If you're determined to stay ...' He turned towards the door, signalling the guard to go.

'No. *wait!*' The woman held out a hand to him. 'Save her. Take her with you. She can go. There's just a chance.?'

'It's both of you, or neither. Make up your mind.'

'You don't understand,' she replied, trying not to plead. 'I cannot be owned. I cannot be so shamed. I am a chieftain's only daughter.'

'And I'm not ecstatic about having to take you where I'm going either, if you must know. I have neither the time nor the inclination to act as nursemaid to two women intent on self-harm when there are thousands out there trying to find cures and enough food to keep themselves alive. I suppose you think your deaths would be an heroic gesture, do you? Well, I think it'd be a bit of a waste when you could help others to stay alive, but the decision is yours. Either you accompany me down to the south, or you stay here and—'

'What? *South*, did you say?'

'That's what I said. Tomorrow I'm off down to the healing spa at Aquae Sulis. Not exactly in your direction, is it?'

The captive princess stood up. Too quickly. Unfocused, her eyes swam, fighting the sudden pain in her head. 'I'll come,' she whispered, swaying.

'Then you'd better tell me your name. I cannot keep on calling you Woman.'

Her knees melted and the growing roar in her ears brought with it a cold blackness to envelop her in a drowning tide. 'Brigid,' she said.

Quickly, he caught up the sinking body in his arms, wincing at the twinge in his knee. 'What in the name of Hades have I let myself in for?' he asked of no one in particular. 'Go on,' he said to the guard. 'You carry the maid and I'll take this one.' Still frowning, he looked down at the limp figure in his arms, at the mass of red hair on his shoulder and the angelic face deep into her swoon, and briefly he wondered why they could not have captured some worn-out old crone who would not last out the journey instead of this high-flown goddess.

Chapter Two

The wagon swayed and jolted without mercy as Brighid tried once more to pack another sheepskin beneath her aching limbs, falling back against the pile of cushions as the effort took its toll of her, reminding her yet again of her weakness.

Her obvious discomfort alerted her travelling companion, who sat easily on a pile of skins at the open end of the wagon, jauntily riding out each bump without a care. He turned, reaching her on his hands and knees over the blankets, flopping by her side without ceremony. Then, taking a cushion, he thumped it and placed it behind her head, lifting her shoulders with his other arm. He was a slave. His touch did not matter. 'Better?' he said, cheekily. 'Ready for some more milk?'

Brighid shook her head. 'I can't keep it down,' she said.

'It doesn't matter,' he said. 'Some of it stays. There now. That's better. Try to sleep again.' Pulling the blanket over her, he tucked her feet in and continued his role as the nurse his master had declared, quite loudly, that *he* had no intention of being. To which Florian had replied, well out of range, that the Tribune would probably be as bad a nurse as he was a patient.

The departure from Eboracum had been delayed for an hour while the body of the little maid was hastily buried and flowers found to adorn her favourite shrine. There were prayers to be said, and small rituals to observe. After that they could spare no more time, because the Tribune had said, impatiently, they'd never reach their first stop before nightfall. Now, lying in the well-padded wagon while staring up at the flapping canvas cover, Brighid knew that the lass would never have survived the first mile.

Her conscience was not troubling her on that score. Death had been a release longed for by the maid since the birth of her baby only a few weeks ago. Fathered on the fourteen-year-old slave by Brighid's own father, the baby had been a girl and of no use to the tribe; even before the maid had begun to recover from her fever, the village elders had taken it away to be exposed. It had broken the maid's heart, but the chieftain preferred to sire males and his word was law. The mother had pined and weakened, and was barely starting to recover when a band of Roman soldiers attacked the village while the warriors were away fighting, setting fire to the thatches, killing those who fled and capturing Brighid and the maid as saleable goods for the Emperor's delight.

He was not delighted, for the high-status woman was a liability and her maid was sick, and the rough capture had done her no good at all. Brighid had more than the usual knowledge of remedies for all kinds of ills, but with no access to her herbs and a maid determined to go to her ancestors, what kind of protest could any woman make except to refuse to eat? At the very least it gave her some control over her own life. And death. In charge of their welfare, the guard had at first tried to bully them into eating, but had soon discovered how aggressively defensive his prisoner could be. After that, there was nothing to be done—the barrack-block at Eboracum was not designed to house women.

Shapes moved across the wagon's tail-board, horses tossing heads, riders crossing, a blur of buildings with red roof tops, the white town walls and the great arch of the gate. A mounted man rode up close to take a long look inside, his cloak thrown over one shoulder, his bare arms brown against a white tunic. His eyes narrowed against the dimness. Thick straight hair lifted in the wind, grown longer since leaving the army, his mouth unsmiling as his gaze met that of his new charge. For a space of time they tried to read however much, or little, the other would reveal, then he nodded and moved away, his cheeks tightening, accepting the inevitable with undisguised sourness.

'Churl!' she whispered. 'I don't want to be here, either.'

But one good thing might yet come out of this, she thought, closing her eyes. They were heading south towards the territory of the Dobunni, the tribe to which Helm belonged, and though her knowledge of Britain's geography was very limited, the name *Aquae Sulis* had been spoken often enough, while Helm was negotiating with her father, to convince her that the spa was in Dobunni

country. So if, in fact, Helm had returned home believing that all his plans had fallen through, she would surely be able to send him a message that she was nearby, not out of his reach. If she was allowed some freedom, she might even be able to find him herself.

Naturally, she had not been allowed to get to know the young warrior at all well. Her thoughts on the matter were unimportant and of no consequence to the success of the agreement. Had she been an ordinary member of the tribe, she might have demanded some say in her future, might even have been allowed to live with a man of her choice for a trial year before taking the final step. Even then, she could divorce him if he proved disappointing. But Brighid was far from ordinary, more of a bargaining tool for her father, a woman of class who would bind tribes in mutual co-operation, and this she had always known. Nevertheless, that did not prevent her from taking an interest in the man who had travelled for days, even weeks, to buy her from her family and when on the few occasions she had been presented, always from a distance, she had taken in every detail as avidly as any woman on the verge of such a commitment.

She had been impressed by what she saw, a brawny confident young man of her own height, clear of eye and tongue, bold of step and with a commanding manner that was always a sign of a future leader. There was little doubt that she could come to like him, eventually, though her two older brothers had reservations that counted for nothing. A young braggart, one of them had said in her hearing, and not the only fish in the sea for their high-born sister.

In the circumstances, it was disturbing to her that Helm had completely disappeared without getting a message of hope to her. Nor had her brothers made contact, or her father, either by direct representation or by more devious means. Slaves were open to bribery and a chieftain had his ways. The feeling of abandonment had grown daily, and now she was being left to her own devices with no inkling of what to expect from the man who thought he owned her, and not even a name to put to him. Yesterday, he had left her completely in the hands of women who were, apparently, the Empress's own slaves.

Yesterday had been a blur of helplessness. Between bouts of sickness and fainting, she had been too weak to say what she needed, too impotent to protest at being handled, undressed, bathed, combed and re-clothed as if she were an infant. She had ceased to care when the slave called Florian installed himself as her new maid, telling her with great disrespect that she had better come down off her high horse because they were all slaves together, including her, except that he was indispensable and she was quite the opposite. Which did nothing for her peace of mind, however well meant.

They cleaned the little maid up, too, but she lapsed into a deep sleep and did not wake again, and by morning she was cold and still, and at peace with her loved ones. Brighid had wept bitterly for her, and again for the sweet infant they had both loved and lost. How many more losses would there be, she wondered, before a gain? Did she have anything more to lose?

She had slept, waking when the wagon bounced softly over grass and came to a halt with shouted commands all round and a dimness under the canvas that indicated dusk, overhanging trees and a stop for the night. Florian came to her, smiling as always. 'Good,' he said. 'Long sleep. No sickness. Now for something nourishing. Give me a few moments while they get the fires going. Need to make yourself comfortable? Right, here's a pot. I'll leave it to you. Keep it covered. Flies, you know.' He grinned, scrabbling away and vaulting over the tailboard like an athlete.

Her head was clear, and she felt hunger for the first time in days.

Instructions followed to the letter, she stood up to take stock of her surroundings. She noticed that she was wearing a long tunic of unbleached linen and that all her own clothes were nowhere to be seen. Her hair had been replaited tidily except for wisps loosened by sleep, yet her neck, arms and hair were bare of ornament, another loss that generated a tidal wave of indignation and a different kind of bereavement. Those precious pieces meant everything to her, made for her alone, never worn by anyone else, and never a day passed without her wearing them. The awful feeling of vulnerability hit her like a physical pain.

Throwing a woollen shawl around her shoulders, she took tottering steps to reach the tail-board, determined to find out where they had put her property, already reciting in her head the form her inquisition would take. But from the far end of the wagon, she had not seen the two-man guard who stood at each side of the opening, and now their shining helmets and broad metal-plated backs stopped her in her tracks, warning her that although Florian could come and go, she was still a prisoner.

Biting back the angry tears, she held the shawl tightly across her as a cool breeze lifted the underside of the oak leaves above them, lending a sense of urgency to the unloading and carrying, the pegging out of canvas, the tethering and feeding of horses, always the first to be tended. Fires were being kindled with the fuel they carried with them, every man to his task, working like cogs in a machine. Other wagons had been unhitched and arranged like a fortress, and she saw that they were loaded with baggage with no space inside for sleeping, like hers. She hoped it would be like this every night, with a view of the sky through the doorway.

From round one side of the wagon strode three men, a white-fringed cloak identifying the one who had released her at Eboracum, whose name she would not ask. Over his shoulder he glanced her way, then, pausing in his stride, he turned for a longer look with an expression that gave nothing away except that he had taken in every detail of her appearance. Nodding his approval to the two guards, he rejoined his two companions, their questions raising a deep laugh from all three, setting up Brighid's hackles for no good reason except guesswork. It had been her chance to demand the return of her possessions and she had not taken it.

Cursing herself, she turned her back on the scene and began to tidy her bed, folding the blankets and arranging the cushions the way the little maid had been used to doing. Some of the limited space was taken up by a stout wooden chest, locked, bolted and barred. She sat on it and waited, listening to the activities outside, her eyes darkening to grey-blue in the fading light.

It was the first time she had taken a good look at the man, their first meeting having been disadvantaged in every way. Now she had seen the full length of him wearing a short tunic instead of the longer purple-banded toga that had given her a hint of his rank. Only senators, tribunes and knights, and a few others, were allowed that privilege. She doubted if he was old enough to be a senator, nor did she think one of that rank would be camping out under rain-filled clouds, but rather in some luxurious villa with all the bowing and scraping of overwhelmed hosts and their wives. She judged him to be less than thirty, obviously a military man, going by his close leather breeches that clung to muscled calves and thighs, stopping short of his ankles. He looked as if the day's riding suited him well, for his thick hair was windswept across his forehead like an unruly mop of silk with the gloss of a raven's wing. He was, she admitted reluctantly, much better looking than Helm; had the two men changed places, she could quickly have learned to like him and to suffer his hands on her body. But now there was no room in her life for that kind of sentiment, nor had there ever been since she realised the political nature of her position.

If only she knew what the future held for her. If only her possessions had not been removed, then an attempt at escape might have been worth planning. But without shoes and only a linen tunic and a shawl to her name, no identifying ornaments, and no idea where she was, any plans would have to wait.

'Where are my clothes?' she said as soon as Florian climbed in, balancing a bowl of steaming broth in one hand.

His smile remained. 'You're sitting on them,' he said.

'What?' She swivelled on the chest. 'In here? And my ornaments, too?'

'In there, with your shoes and clothes. Yes.'

'I want to wear them.'

'I expect you will, when my master decides.' He took a spoon from inside his tunic, passed it to her and told her to eat while it was still warm. It was the first solid food she had eaten for over a week and, by its comforting warmth, the questions uppermost in her mind were released. Presumably to

make sure she ate it, Florian stayed with her as the sky darkened ominously, the only source of light being the crackling fire outside that sent flickering shadows to dance across the canvas cover.

‘Who is he, your master?’ she said, passing the bowl back to him.

He spooned up the last leftover mouthful and fed it to her like a mother bird. ‘He is Quintus Tiberius Martial,’ he said, proudly rolling the words around his tongue. ‘Tribune of Equestrian rank—that’s quite high, you know—Provincial Procurator in the service of the Roman Emperor Septimus Severus. And before you ask me any more questions, young lady, you had better know that I am duty bound to report them to my master. I am the Tribune’s masseur, and I’ve been told to offer you my services, should you wish it.’

‘Thank you, Florian. It may be a little too soon for that.’

‘An apple, then?’ He pulled one out of his tunic where the spoon had come from, like a magician. She shook her head, watching him unfurl, reminding her of a fern in spring.

‘It will rain tonight. Don’t worry about the canvas. It won’t leak.’ He looked round the wagon. ‘I’m impressed. You’ve been tidying up. We’ll make a handy slave out of you yet, I believe.’

‘That is one thing I shall never be, believe me,’ she said, severely.

‘Then try convincing the Tribune,’ he said, heading for the opening. ‘I think he’s rather set on the idea. But I told you that yesterday. Goodnight, Princess.’

She would like to have hurled the apple at his head, but a sudden wave of tiredness swept over her and it was all she could do to fall on to her pile of sheepskins and close her eyes against the murmurs and laughter outside.

The roar of rain upon canvas woke her. That, and the dim yellow glow inside the wagon, and the feeling that she was not alone. Instantly awake, her hand searched for the dagger that was always beside her. The habit died hard. It was not there.

‘Sit up,’ said a deep voice. ‘I need to talk to you.’

He was sitting on the chest, the smooth bronzed skin of his body almost aflame in the light from the lantern, his arms resting along his thighs, great shoulders hunched behind the head that hung low between them, his face turned in her direction. It was clear he’d been studying her for some time, for now he straightened up and stretched like a cat. He wore calf-length under-breeches of white linen, and his hair was damp-black as if the rain had caught him. And in the confined space of the wagon, he was much too close for comfort.

Grabbing at the blanket, Brigid pulled it to her chin and hauled herself up against the cushion. ‘I don’t wish to talk to you,’ she retorted, breathlessly.

‘I was hoping you wouldn’t. *I* need to talk to *you*,’ he repeated.

‘Yes, you *do* have some explaining to do. How long does this journey last? And when can I have my possessions returned?’

‘I don’t need to explain myself to slaves,’ he replied, looking her over again, measuring her up with his insolent eyes.

‘I am *not* a slave!’

‘Oh, don’t let’s hear all that again. Florian’s had enough of it and I don’t intend to hear it. The facts are, woman, that you have no choice in the matter. The Emperor has ordered me to take you off his hands and to do what I like with you; as far as I’m concerned, that means selling you on to the next slave merchant we meet on the way.’

‘You wouldn’t do that! No ... you *couldn’t*!’ she cried.

‘I assure you, lass, I would and I can. I don’t have a place for high-and-mighty princesses in my line of work and I don’t intend you to spoil my holiday, either. Lindum will be the end of the line for you. Our next stop down the road. We’ll be there by this time tomorrow.’

The blood ran cold along Brigid’s arms. He wanted rid of her. She had seen the slave merchants and their shocking filthy tricks, the humiliated women, the wealthy leering buyers. Of all fates, that would be the most shaming. Her teeth chattered as she tried desperately to keep a tight hold on her

dignity, not to show her stark fear. She was a chieftain's daughter. She would not plead. Not even for this.

'If the Emperor wanted me off his hands, Roman, then why did he have me taken in the first place? Does your Emperor not know what he wants, these days? Could he not have ransomed me?'

'His men were too eager. It's common enough. They thought he'd have a use for you. He doesn't. Not for a woman of your rank whose death would be on his hands in a month or so, if you had your way. He's not come all the way to Britain to *make* trouble, but to stop it. Nor is he interested in ransoms. Of what worth is a woman?'

At one time, she thought, she was worth plenty. Now, very little. With pride, she was about to tell him how the Dobunni tribe had wanted to buy her and how Helm and her father had discussed deep into the night how much gold, how many cows, pigs and sheep must change hands for her. But that was pointless, and in the past, and the less this man knew about her, the better. But she must do something, *say* something to make him keep her with him until they reached the south. 'I would have thought, Roman, that as soon as my disappearance was discovered, the trouble the Emperor wishes to avoid will double or treble in the next week or two. Does that not concern you?'

'Why should it? All the more reason why you should be out of the way as fast as possible. Has anyone come to find you? No messages?'

She did not need to answer when her face reflected her despair.

'Tell me something,' he said, leaning forwards again, glancing up at the sound of thunder. 'Do all chieftains have their daughters taught to speak as the Romans do? You have a good accent. You'd fetch a good price as a noblewoman's maid.'

'The Briganti know that high-born women are most sought after by other tribes if they speak in the Roman tongue. It's useful to them. We are not the barbarians you think us to be, Roman. My brothers and I were taught well.'

'And have *you* been sought after?' he asked, softly.

'Yes.'

'By whom? Are you married to him?'

'No. You ask me too many questions, sir,' she said, holding her burning cheek.

'You may think so, but the question a slave merchant will ask *me* is whether you are a maid or not. Are you?'

Subconsciously, in a gesture of crushing fear, she drew her knees up to her chin and laid her cheek upon them, turning her burning face away from his scrutiny. 'No one except my kin may ask me that,' she whispered.

'I can soon find out,' he said.

'No ... no, please! I've had nothing to do with a man. It was never allowed. Other girls of the village, other women, but not me. I would be worthless, otherwise. Besides, there was no one.' Her voice tailed away, her mind turning somersaults over the hurdles of pride versus safety. He needed to know how much she'd fetch on the market, not how much use she'd be to him personally, which is what she'd thought earlier. And now she would have to change his mind, offer him something to keep her with him all the way to the Dobunni territory. She would have to plead, if necessary. It was something she was unused to, except to the gods. 'Give me more time,' she said, 'until I'm stronger. Until we get to wherever we're going. I'll keep well out of your way. I shall cause you no trouble.'

The rain drummed on the canvas as he said nothing in reply, until he straightened up again as if he'd come to a decision. 'I wonder what you'd look like in Roman dress,' he said, thoughtfully.

Hope flared briefly in Brigid's breast. 'I'd look like a Roman citizen,' she said. 'And I'd behave like one, if I thought my life depended on it. Is that what concerns you? My clothes? My appearance?'

'*Would* you behave like one? I have my doubts.'

Her head lifted, poised elegantly upon the long neck, while her hands fell away from her knees and rested in graceful curves upon the blanket. 'Try me,' she said. 'Give me a chance. I don't want to be sold. I'm not ready to be anyone's slave. Whatever else you wish, but not that.'

'Your readiness is not my concern, lass,' he said, yawning as he stood up. 'Captives are rarely in a position to bargain about their future, and you're no different, princess or not. You *are* my slave. Better get used to it. I'm tired. We'll decide on this in the morning.'

'Then it would have been better to let me die at Eboracum with my maid, Roman. That way, I would have been free.' Throwing off the blanket, she stood up in one swift unbend of her body, intending to put more distance between them. Earlier that day she had felt a reason to stay alive, to seek the help of the man who had wanted her, even though he would never have been her choice if she'd been less high born. Now, the tables were turned, and it looked as if her flimsy plan had all but vanished.

The soft mattress hampered her feet, the curve of the canvas was not designed for her height, and the long reach of Quintus's arm caught her wrist in an iron grip, pulling her off balance. Furiously, she tried to throw him off, her eyes blazing with green fire. 'No man may *touch* me!' she yelled, competing with the roar outside.

'Then that's another thing you'd better get used to, Princess High and Mighty. And if this show of temper is meant to convince me that you can behave in a civilised manner, then you've fallen at the first jump, haven't you? And mind that lamp, for Jove's sake!' His swinging her round sent her sprawling against the chest. 'Any more nonsense, woman, and you'll find yourself shackled to a slave-merchant's line-up at Lindum. If you doubt me, just try it. I have no taste for ill-tempered barbarian women.'

She knew it was a mistake. Righting herself, she pulled her legs under her, covering them with the linen tunic that was not quite long enough, bowing her head submissively. 'Forgive me,' she whispered. 'I feel my losses deeply. If I lost my freedom once more, permanently, I would take my own life and forfeit the protection of the goddess Brigantia, after whom I am named. She is angered that I no longer wear her gifts, nor have I offered at her shrine since my capture. I am not the bad-tempered barbarian you think me. I grieve for my maid, her lost child and for my family, but I have no way to relieve it, Roman.' With downcast eyes, she could only feel the pad of his bare feet as he took a stride across the mattress to lower himself between her and the side of the wagon, only a hand's reach away. Thunder still crashed overhead. 'She's angry,' she whispered. 'Very angry.'

'I thought goddesses were more understanding than that. Your Brigantia must be a very vengeful dame. They mean so much to you, do they? Your ornaments?'

'She gave them to me when I was born. I began to wear them when I became a woman,' she said, plying and unplying the fringe of the blanket. 'They are a part of me. If I lose them, I lose who I am. That's the reason, I suppose.'

'The reason?'

'The reason why I'm losing myself. I shall be someone else's property, not my own woman. I do not know if my spirit can rise above it. I have yet to find out.'

'So what if you were to wear them again?'

Her head lifted at that. 'You would allow it?'

Quintus blinked at the gaze she fixed on him, moved by the strange unearthly power of blue-green waters that shimmered off the coastline of his beloved home, Hispania. He saw the sun and sea, vineyards and villas, warmth and good friends who asked for nothing but friendship. He saw it all in her eyes, felt her grief, as if her losses were his losses also. 'Tomorrow morning you shall have them. Meanwhile, they're in there and you're sleeping next to them. Your goddess surely won't mind that so much.'

'Thank you, Roman. Oh ... thank you!' Her fists clenched over the fringe. 'I must not weep,' she whispered. 'I must *not* weep. I am strong.'

‘And perhaps we’ll find a way of making a portable shrine to Brigantia. Wait till we reach Lindum. There’s sure to be something on the market. ‘Tis a terrible thing to lose touch with your own deity.’

‘Then you’ll allow me to stay with you? Not sell me?’

‘For the moment.’ He yawned again, covering his white teeth with the back of his hand. ‘But let’s get one thing straight, shall we? Whether you wear Brigantia’s gifts or not, whether you think of yourself as your own woman or not, that fact is that you remain *my* property. I have orders to get rid of you, and that’s what I shall do. It’s all a matter of how and when. I doubt whether your goddess will approve, but that’s how things are. Understand that from the beginning and your chances of staying alive will improve. You’ll have to learn to adapt, Princess. You’re not very good at that, are you?’

‘I will try,’ she said. ‘I can learn. Truly, I *will* learn, Roman.’

‘So learn to address me with respect, if you will. To you, I am Tribune.’

‘Yes. And I am known as Brighid, sir.’ She pronounced it ‘Bridget’.

Quintus, however, did not. ‘To me, you’ll be known as Princess. It suits my purposes,’ he said, curtly.

Ah, she thought. More saleable. As with the gold ornaments. These Romans so love display, don’t they? Especially on a woman.

Bending across to where the lantern stood in one corner, he opened the shutter and nipped the wick, plunging the wagon into complete darkness that seemed to intensify the rattling of the rain on all sides. The blanket was pulled out of her hands as he held it to open the bed, and his sharp command, ‘Lie down!’ took her completely by surprise as his legs burrowed downwards and a cushion was pulled from behind her.

‘What!’ she yelped. ‘No ... no, sir! You cannot stay here!’

His arm came heavily across her, but the chest was at her side and there was no way out of the predicament. ‘Listen, woman,’ he said. ‘Either I sleep in here, or I get those two guards to take my place. They’ll be warm and dry at the moment, and I doubt they’ll be too honoured to spend the night cramped up in here. You choose.’

‘You don’t understand, sir,’ she said, trying to prise his arm away. ‘I have never slept with a man.’

‘Then don’t sleep. Stay awake, if you prefer. This will be another new experience for you to learn. Come on. Wriggle down. You’ll be quite safe.’

The notion of keeping her distance had to be abandoned as she slid down beside the warm bulk that took up more than half the mattress, the only room for protest being to turn her back on him. But he wrapped the blanket over her, pulling her into the bend of his body and resting his arm on the gentle swell of her hip, and though it was not an uncomfortable ordeal for her, her whole being was alive to his intimate closeness, his warmth along her back from neck to ankle, the disturbing male scent of him, his strange contours. She had seen the village men naked, half-naked and all stages in between for there was no privacy to speak of at home in the communal huts. But she had seen no man’s body as beautifully crafted as this one’s, honed to perfection, pampered by his personal masseur, probably adored and satisfied by countless women. He was unwilling to have a woman of her kind in tow, even for the novelty value of owning a Brigantian slave, yet she had neither seen nor heard any other woman in the cavalcade.

‘Don’t you have a woman to go to?’ she muttered, resent fully.

‘Yes,’ said the voice, rumbling into the cushion. ‘I’m with her. Go to sleep. We have to be away by dawn if we’re to reach Lindum tomorrow.’

The beating of the rain lulled her to sleep long before she heard the thunder pass on to disturb other miscreants. Once she woke to hear the gentle hiss of rain, when she reached out a hand to touch the chest where her treasures lay, and fell back into sleep. The next time, there was silence except for the soft breathing of the man behind her. She wanted to turn, but her tunic was caught under him and she could not free it without waking him.

‘What is it?’ he whispered.

‘You’re lying on my tunic. And my hair.’

There was a huff of amusement as his hand delved and freed her hair, then, before she knew what he meant to do, he hauled on the other side of her tunic, rolling her over to face him, to be enclosed in his arms, her mouth against his firm jaw, her legs pressed against him. Her breasts lay upon the great mound of his chest, taking the heat of him through the linen, and when he laid her thick plait across his own neck like a winter muffler, she knew he intended her to stay and to sleep again, safe in his arms.

But sleep was hard to recapture when her head was being held in the crook of his neck, his mouth only inches away from hers, his arm cradling the soft red mass of her hair. Carefully, to ease it, she laid her leg over his, thus unwittingly inviting his free hand to slide gently over the roundness of her buttock and along her thigh, eventually sliding under the linen to find her silken skin.

She made a grab at his hand. ‘Please ... Tribune ... no!’ she said, fiercely. ‘I cannot ... will not ... do this with you. You told me I was safe.’

She felt his smile on her forehead as his lips brushed against it. ‘Then what was all that about learning to adapt?’ he said.

‘For pity’s sake, give me more time,’ she said, clinging to his hand.

‘Let go, lass. Time enough.’

But would there be time enough? she wondered, as she listened to the camp begin to stir outside. Would she still be a maid when she found Helm, or would he reject the used goods she had travelled all that way to offer him, all at the Tribune’s whim?

Chapter Three

‘So, my friend,’ said Tullus, rather smugly, ‘you took our advice, I see.’ His cheek bulged as he chewed hungrily on his loaf while he searched in the pan for another piece of bacon to follow it.

‘You see nothing of the sort,’ Quintus replied, holding out his beaker to be filled. ‘If I had not slept there, who would?’

That was too much for Lucan. His loud laugh turned heads in their direction. ‘Oho, the martyr!’ he chortled. ‘You had only to ask us. One of us would have obliged, to save you the discomfort.’

‘Well, save yourselves any more speculation. She has to stay virginal for the Dobunni lad to want her still. If she’s not, she’ll be of no use either to him or us, will she? That’s the first thing he’ll want to know.’

Tullus nodded agreement. He was the more serious of the two juniors, with an attractive contemplative quality that intrigued his female friends, especially when his deep grey eyes studied them with a flattering intensity. Unlike the feline grace of his friend, Tullus was built more like a wrestler who tones his body with weights, swimming and riding as much as his office work would allow. Quintus liked them both for their superior accounting skills and for their loyalty to him, putting up with their banter as an elder brother with his siblings. ‘Does she know about her father yet?’ said Tullus, licking his fingers.

‘No,’ said Quintus, sharply. ‘It’s not a good time to tell her when she’s just lost her maid.’

Lucan looked at him and waited. None of this was good timing when they were looking forward to some time off. ‘She’s accepted the situation, then?’ he said, hoping for some clarification.

‘Far from it. I’ve told her I’ll sell her before we reach Aquae Sulis if she doesn’t toe the line.’

‘But you wouldn’t, would you?’

‘Of course not. But she doesn’t know that,’ Quintus said, wiping a finger round his pewter dish. ‘But nor can we cart her through our hosts’ houses looking like something from the back woods. That would take more explaining than it’s worth. She’s going to have to dress up.’

‘Like a Roman citizen? That should be interesting.’

‘It will be. This is where I need your support.’

‘Go ahead,’ said Tullus.

‘Except for one, our hosts don’t know us. I just happen to own a slave who’s a Brigantian princess. Right?’

‘Unusual, but I don’t see why not,’ said Lucan. ‘Go on.’

‘Well, that’s it, really. I shall not present her. She’ll stay in the background in my room with Florian. She’ll be safe enough with him.’

Lucan and Tullus nodded, smiling in unison. ‘And how long has this ... er ... relationship been going on? In case we’re asked?’ said Lucan, innocently.

Quintus stood, brushing the crumbs from his lap. ‘Since a few days ago, I suppose. But I don’t see why anyone needs to know. I’ll get some proper clothes for her at the next market.’ He stood still for a moment with a pensive look in his eye.

‘What?’ said Tullus. ‘You doubt she’ll accept them?’

‘Nothing more certain. Find a barber before we reach Lindum, both of you. Now let’s get this lot moving. Come on.’ He strode away, shouting orders.

Lucan released his grin at last. ‘Halfway there,’ he whispered.

‘Oh, I think that’s rather too optimistic, my friend,’ Tullus replied. ‘From what I’ve seen of her, I’d say she’ll keep him on the hop for a while yet. What’s going to happen when she hears about her father?’

‘Expect all Hades to be let loose. Do I really need a barber?’ Lucan wiped a hand round his blue jaw.

‘If the boss says shave, we shave. We owe it to our hostess. D’ye know, I’m looking forward to a decent bed.’

‘As will our boss be. He’s pretending, you know, that she’s a bit of a nuisance—I believe he’s quite taken with her.’

‘That’s the impression I’m getting too. There’s a new spring in his step.’

‘As there would be in yours, young Tullus, after a night with the Princess.’

Brighid was shaken out of her sleep by a gentle hand on her arm. ‘It’s late,’ Florian was saying in her ear. ‘The camp is already packing up. Wake, or you’ll get no food. Did the Tribune keep you awake all night?’

She rolled herself upright, pushing away her loose hair. ‘Mind your own business,’ she said. ‘What’s all that din?’

‘We’re almost ready to leave. What do Brigantian princesses eat for breakfast these days?’ he said with a knowing grin.

‘Porridge, and a thin slice of masseur’s tongue, if you’d be so kind.’

‘Tongue’s off,’ he quipped, ‘but I’ll find you some stodge, if you insist.’

‘Clear off while I get dressed. Where can I go and bathe?’

Florian paused at the tail-board. ‘Bathe, *domina*? I would not recommend it. Not here. Not unless you want an audience.’

‘Then how am I ever going to get cleaned up?’

‘Better do it in here until we reach our lodgings. Wait. I’ll bring some water.’

The extraordinary events of the night came back to her as she unravelled the blankets and saw the pillow with the dent in it close to her own. He had left without disturbing her, she who always woke at the slightest sound. Even more remarkable was his opening of the chest beside her where now her treasures lay in a row on top of her folded clothes, set out for inspection like a soldier’s kit.

Even by Roman standards, the pieces were of the highest craftsmanship, technically perfect. The most impressive was a flat crescent-shaped neck-collar with a raised pattern of sinuous spirals studded with cornelians and lapis lazuli, and inlaid with coloured champleve enamel. One bracelet was a wide band of beaten gold with triskeles, sun discs and lunar crescents in relief, the other was fashioned like a coiled serpent with rock crystals for eyes. Her earrings were the delicate heads of birds with garnet eyes, spheres hanging from their beaks chased with spirals, as intricate as man could devise. There was a pile of anklets of twisted gold, a belt with a gold enamelled buckle, several brooches and long hairpins with gemstone tops. Gathering them on to her lap, she fondled them lovingly.

The horses were being hitched to her wagon by the time Florian brought her the porridge and a bucket of water in which to wash, and by the time the wheels were back on the road she had sluiced away the scents of the night that clung to her skin, leaving her only partly refreshed and longing to bathe at leisure. However, her clothes were clean; she could only assume that someone had washed them and laid them out to dry overnight, ready for her to use.

She dressed, clothes and ornaments alternately, ears, ankles and wrists, brooches fastening front to back, the belt buckled in a tighter notch. Without a mirror, she could not know how the starving had hollowed her cheeks, or how the violent events of the past week had diluted the girlish bloom given her by sun, breeze and ice-cold stream. Unable to see the fastening beneath her chin, she found it impossible to manage the hinge of the neck-plate at the front. But as she held it, the canvas flap was lifted to admit a leather-covered leg, then the other, then wide shoulders ducking underneath.

She turned her face away, suddenly unnerved as her body responded to his nearness, recalling his bold searching hands and the male warmth of his skin. Guiltily, she realised that the memory had scarcely left her since waking, sneaking into every thought, relevant or not, just to taunt her.

‘You slept late,’ he said, poking upwards at the puddles of rainwater on the canvas, tipping the last drops away.

‘I hardly slept at all.’

‘You’ll get used to it.’

‘I don’t intend to.’

He chuckled, a deep throaty murmur as meaningful as any argument. ‘Here, give that to me. Turn round this way.’

She stood up to face him, lifting her hair for him to place it round her neck and to bring the broad edges together. ‘The rivet?’ he said, softly.

She held it up for him to slip through the precise dovetails, aware of his fingers upon her skin. Quickly, she stepped back, almost losing her balance as the wagon jolted over a rut. ‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘For these, too. Where are we?’

Like a colossus, he braced himself against one of the wooden ribs. ‘Next stop will be a small place called Danum. I shall send Florian out to purchase some stuff to make you something after the Roman fashion, and, before you start to protest, let me remind you that you promised to adapt.’

‘I didn’t promise to apply for Roman citizenship, Tribune.’

‘You won’t *be* a Roman, will you, wearing Brigantia’s wealth round your neck and arms? How could anyone possibly mistake you for a Roman citizen, woman?’

‘So what’s wrong with my own clothes? Are we out to confuse everybody?’

‘Sit down before you fall over. Now listen. We shall be staying at the home of a retired legionary commander and his wife in Lindum, and I don’t intend to spend my evening explaining the presence of a wild red-headed Brigantian captive in my baggage when they know I’m on my way to a health spa for treatment. It will save me much tedium if it’s simply known that I have a Brigantian princess with me whose appearance will cause no comment.’

‘Except, of course, that I am quite obviously the only female in your party and I wear my own adornments. You really believe that will cause no comment, do you?’

‘Very well,’ he said, taking a step towards the exit, ‘if you don’t like the sound of that, the solution is simple.’

She knew what he meant. ‘No ... stop ... Tribune! Please. I didn’t mean to ...’ Leaping to her feet, she staggered across the wobbling floor, intending to catch him before it was too late. ‘I *will* adapt. I *will* go along with you. Whatever it looks like.’

He took an arm to steady her, steeling himself against the deep luminous green of her eyes that would have made any mortal man forget his own name. At that moment, she was the fierce tribal princess to whom he was suggesting a change of identity, which, naturally, she resented. ‘I’m not about to change who you are,’ he replied, hoping to convince her. ‘I doubt anyone could do that just by having you dress the Roman way. But I would rather our host and hostess regarded you as my woman than a barbarian captive I’m dragging along for some mysterious reason of my own. The choice is yours, Princess. Take it or leave it.’

‘As your woman? But I’m not...’

‘Then pretend! Adapt. You told me you could do it.’

The moss-green eyes blazed with fear, stirring him to a recklessness he’d intended never to show. But she needed to be convinced, an incentive to play the part, for he had nothing genuine with which to threaten her, and the safety he had promised her last night was already wearing thin. As if to hold her against the rocking of the wagon, he grasped her shoulders before she could tell danger from safety, pulling her hard against him with a groan of sudden desire. ‘Then this may help,’ he said, taking a handful of the red hair, tilting her face to his own.

Brigid felt his kiss flood through her, melting her limbs, reaching her thighs. She ought to have fought him. But when it ended, instead of railing at him that a woman like her must not be treated in that manner, she stood silent, swaying to the wagon’s motion, her hand over her lips, watching him disappear in one leap through the canvas flaps.

‘Divine Brigantia,’ she whispered behind her fingers, ‘don’t let it happen to me, or I shall be worthless. I am promised, goddess. You know that I am.’ Even so, her body did not share in the same high-mindedness, for although the Tribune would probably think nothing of this kind of thing, she had been taken one step deeper into the forbidden dream that had haunted her throughout the night. It would be difficult enough for her to escape from captivity, but even more so to run from the bondage of her newest emotions.

Unplaiting her hair, fingers and thoughts working furiously together, realising too late that she lacked a comb, she finger-raked it back into a bunch and fixed it on top of her head with her pins. But help was not far away, for the small town of Danum was only a few miles down the road and already bustling with market traders and all the chaos of early morning preparations. The clamour reached her as the wagon came to a standstill, bringing her to the tail-board where Florian’s black curly head was coming up to her level.

‘We’re stopping on the edge of a marketplace,’ he told her. ‘and I have to go and find you something to wear. I doubt if they’ll have much to offer, so no point in telling me what colour you want. I’ll have to take what I can get. What size sandals do I buy?’

With resignation, she placed her foot on the edge of the tail-board. ‘There. Take a look. Buy whatever you like, Florian. Size, colour, shape, fabric—anything. But I need a comb. And the Tribune said I might have a small shrine. The small portable kind for travellers. Brigantia is the one to look for, though we may have passed out of the Brigantes territory by now, for all I know.’

Florian’s eyes followed her as she turned away, his eyes showing some surprise. ‘Oh dear,’ he said, sympathetically. ‘Still not quite yourself, are you? Go and lie down a while, *domina*. I’ll do my best for you.’

Florian did his best, and more, although it took him longer than the allotted time, for which he received the sharp end of his master’s tongue. Throwing his purchases up into the wagon even as it was moving off, he passed the last package more carefully into Brighid’s hands. ‘Careful with that. Hope it’s the right one. Too late to change it,’ he panted.

She felt its weight and saw the bright metallic gleam before recognising the hand-high figurine of Brigantia, a helmet-wearing version symbolising her warrior-wisdom, a wise owl on one arm, a spear in the crook of the other. The goddess stood proudly inside an arched niche, her name inscribed in Roman capitals on the pedestal.

‘Polished pewter,’ said Florian. ‘And here are the scented candles to set at each side of her, and a garland of flowers I begged from the temple flower-girl.’ He took these from his black curls and passed them to her. ‘Sweet violet, borage and crocus. There. You can set her up wherever we are. Feel better now?’

‘You did well, Florian. Thank you. Much better. I’ll set her over here where she’ll not fall over.’ Her thanks were genuine. The solace of having her deity close at hand was something she had missed greatly since her capture as much as the loss of her family. Brighid had not had a mother since she was eleven, so it had always been to her goddess she had turned more than to the older village women who would have claimed an intimacy more for status than genuine fondness. Friendships and rivalries were thickly intertwined in her incestuous society, and to stay on the edge was often safer.

Florian was setting out his other purchases for her inspection, delighting in each item as much as if they were for himself. He shook out lengths of linen much finer than anything Brighid had ever worn, soft, sumptuous, flowing rivers of fabric in white and cream, blue-green and palest madder-dyed pink. Draping them over her shoulders to judge them against her hair, he tilted his head to one side, then threw a heap of scarves over them to add sparkle, a deeper tone, a texture of fringes and tassels. ‘Do you know, *domina*,’ he said, ‘with that jewellery, this is going to look amazing. Quite unique. Nobody will be able to copy this look. Nobody.’

At last, Brighid began to see what the Tribune had seen from the start. At her father’s insistence, she had adopted other aspects of the Roman life, the language and learning, but never the appearance.

Not until now, when nothing of her woollen plaid showed under the shimmer of fine linen, had she realised what the effect would be. As Florian continued to ply her with ribbons and braids, goat-kid purses and pairs of soft openwork sandals, the Tribune himself climbed aboard to see how his *denarii* had been spent, making Brighid's heart leap to see his admiration, quickly concealed, and to hear his restrained compliment that she would surely raise a few eyebrows at Lindum.

'Is that what you aim for, Tribune? To raise a few eyebrows?' she asked, striking a graceful pose with arms full of cloth.

'Yes, Princess. Why not? Better to be unique.'

Florian agreed. 'But that's exactly what I said, sir. Unique.'

Lazily, Quintus glanced at him without a smile. 'Yes, my lad. And when you've finished in here, you can come and tell me what you've spent and how many extras you purchased while you were about it.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Including that lad you brought back with you. He seems to think he's a fixture. What's he for, exactly?'

Florian coloured up, his eyes darting over the fabrics. 'He's ... er ... for me, sir. He helped me to choose the *domina's* shrine and explained to me which one was Brigantia. And then we found that ... well ... that we liked each other. Sir. He's very well spoken. Travelling down to Aquae Sulis, like us. I didn't think you'd mind.' His expression seemed to turn inwards. 'And I don't like sharing my mattress with people I don't like. And if you're going to be with.' He glanced at Brighid.

'Enough! You're a rascal, Florian. I ought to beat you.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Give him something to do. I don't want hangers-on in my party. He can stay as far as there and no further, so don't get too attached to him. He'll have to work his passage.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Now you and the Princess had better cobble something together before we reach Lindum. Use the green. Did you buy threads?'

'I bought a workbox for the *domina*, sir. She has nothing.'

'Hmmm! Right.'

It appeared, after Quintus's departure, that Florian's purchases were rather more extensive than he had implied, for the workbox contained several extras for Brighid's personal use: scissors and tweezers, hanks of threads and needles, two brass mirrors, one large and one small for her purse, combs of bone and ivory, a pair of coloured glass bottles with stoppers, a pot of lip salve, two horn spoons and a bone-handled knife, two pewter dishes and bowls, a silk cushion, and her own Samian-ware beaker with hares chasing round the sides. And a basket-woven stool with a lid, to keep things in.

For her under- and over-gowns, no shaping was needed, each piece being little more than an oblong fastened together along shoulders and arms with small clasps, gathered into the waist with long ribbons that crossed over and under the breasts in a most seductive fashion. It being so different from her usual baggy shapeless garment, Brighid felt compelled to conceal various personal assets under the casual drape of a scarf. But Florian pulled it away, insisting that she need not be so coy when every fashionable matron would gladly show off what Brighid had, and more. 'They bind themselves up,' he said, admiring Brighid's beautiful firm bosom, 'to keep them from falling all over the place.'

'Florian ... *please!*'

'It's true. You go in and come out in all the right places. Why hide it?'

The notion was not unfamiliar. There had been women in the village who hid very little, women taken noisily to her father's bed by night and condemned by day for their whores' tricks. Yet his daughter he had always kept close and safe from all censure. Here, well away from his influence, he could neither approve or disapprove of how she looked. Here, she could be a woman at last. Now, it would be what the Tribune wanted, and secretly what she wanted too. The admission shocked her.

Taking the largest mirror of polished brass, which must have cost a good deal, she studied the transformation, the blue-green reflected in her eyes, the poised and shapely figure swathed in clinging folds, the gold-edged bands outlining her form, the fine white *palla* draped over her shoulder. ‘Good, Florian,’ she said, with a shy smile.

‘Like it?’

‘Except for the hair. That won’t do, will it?’

‘No. Sit over here by the light. We can soon fix it. Hold the mirror.’

With the heaps of cast-off clothes, fabrics and accessories piled around her feet, she sat and watched how he combed her waist-length hair, taking two fine plaits away from her temples to join the rest which he pulled into a large thick braid twined with ribbons. His hands were deft, and it was obvious that the art of dressing a woman’s hair was well known to him, and soon the braid was being coiled and pinned on top of her head in a sleek bun that accentuated the length of her neck. More than ever, the exquisite structure of her face and head were revealed, adding another layer of refinement to what was already graceful.

She knew without being told that, as a slave, she would not be dining with the Tribune or taking any part in the socialising. But from a distance she would be recognised as his woman, and she had agreed to play the part, whatever the cost to her pride. She would not shame herself by forgetting that she was a high-born Brigantian, for that was what he wanted her to be. A Princess. A prize worth having. Owned by him. Envied by others. Unique and rare. It was a compromise she never thought she might have to make when the man from the Dobunni had sought her for his wife only a few weeks ago.

Once she was alone again and the clutter of dressmaking packed away, Brighid turned her attention to her shrine, devoting the next slow mile to the one whose grace she felt had been forfeited for too long. In this, she exaggerated the situation, for Brigantia’s attributes were not only great wisdom but also the gentle arts of healing, culture, poetry and all things domestic, and surely there was no goddess better placed to look with pity upon her subjects than this northern deity whose Roman counterpart was the esteemed Minerva. Brighid herself knew of this exalted connection, but in the hillfort beyond Eboracum, it had meant little to her. She had been born on her goddess’s feast day, Imbolc, the first day of February, when any kind of Roman connection had been too far away to contemplate. Then, the goddess had been offered prestigious sacrifices as thanks. Now, Brighid had nothing to offer except the flowers and her devotion.

It seemed to be enough, for the peace that came with the goddess’s approval brought both tears and smiles to Brighid’s eyes as she blew out the candles for safety’s sake and then sat to consider her immediate future as well as possible uses for the tweezers. There was a limit to which this Romanising fiasco could go, she told herself, placing them at the bottom of her drawstring purse.

As mile after mile of flat land and vast skies flowed sluggishly past, putting time and space between everything that was dear to her, Brighid regretted the loss of the high tors, the fells and ghylls, and the wild moorland that was her home. So she was surprised to find that, as the sun began to dip into an orange-and-purple horizon, the wagon was rumbling slowly uphill towards a sizeable town spreading over a spur set high above the plain. This, Florian told her, was Lindum.

‘You’ve been here before, have you?’

‘We came this way to York, *domina*. I expect we’ll be staying at the legate’s house again. He’s quite a harmless old thing.’ Legates were not known for being harmless; they were of senatorial rank and very powerful. Florian saw the blank expression and laughed. ‘We shall not see much of him or his wife, I don’t suppose,’ he said, kindly. ‘We’ll stay behind the scenes until we’re needed.’

‘Is Lindum like Eboracum?’ Brighid said, trying to push away the thought that she might be needed.

‘Not now. There used to be a legionary fortress here, but that’s gone. They’ve re-used the buildings for retired army officers, so now they sit over their dining tables, reminiscing about their battles and showing off their scars and appointing themselves as local governors. All veterans, the lot

of them. Quite harmless unless you happen to own a bit of land they want to build a basilica or a bath house on. Then they're not.' There was a distinctly bitter tone to Florian's profile of Lindum's senior citizens that Brighid chose not to enquire into. She did not intend to stay longer than she must with either Florian or his master, so there was little point in being curious, she told herself. Most slaves harboured some resentments.

Seated at the back of the wagon, she was herself an object of curiosity, at first from those following who were intrigued by the transformation, then by those they passed on the busy road into the town. Quintus was also fascinated by the elegant young woman whose combination of tribal and Roman was not only unusual but rather more sensational than even he had anticipated, and Brighid could hardly help but notice how he and his two friends rode immediately behind the guards where they could keep her in view as they passed under the great arch of the north gate. The Tribune had expressed no opinion of Florian's handiwork, but both slaves had recognised in his eyes a lingering approval as every detail was noted, though his curt nod was the only tangible sign he gave.

Florian had been accurate in his assessment of the elderly legate at whose mansion they arrived after a laborious jostle through the crowds. He had not, however, passed a similar opinion about the legate's wife who, just as elderly as her husband, had striven for many hours to remove the years from her well-worn face and figure. Sadly, her attempts had not had the desired effect, worst of all being the elaborate black wig that sat too far down on her brow, the knots of which were clearly visible. Left alone, her age-wrinkles would have made a fascinating map of emotion and experience, but the Lady Aurelia's decision to fill them in with lead-based powder made Brighid pity her and Florian to mutter under his breath that it looked as if she'd fallen into the flour bin again. It was beyond funny, Brighid thought, standing well back behind the Tribune's two personal slaves, noting at the first glance how the lady's eyes dwelt greedily upon his handsome face, caressing him with melting looks.

'Welcome, Tribune,' she said. 'Restored to health, I see. You were far from well when we saw you last. The Emperor has looked after you. And Tullus and Lucan, welcome.'

They went to stand in the atrium of the legate's mansion, now expanded and made more beautiful with painted columns and a tiled floor. A fountain caught the late afternoon sun before sparkling into the green pool; it was the cool lure of water that held Brighid's attention as Florian nudged her into awareness. 'Follow,' he whispered. 'Keep up. And keep your eyes lowered.'

'She's staring at me.'

'So's the old man, but you know better than to stare back.'

Gliding ahead in a swirl of orange-and-yellow silks, the Lady Aurelia led her guests along cool corridors, past doorways that had once been offices and round to the far side of the block where rooms had been set aside for Quintus's retinue. Brighid tried hard to make herself invisible against the green-painted walls, but the high-pitched voice of their hostess was meant to reach her ears as well as the Tribune's. 'There's a room upstairs for your slaves,' she said. 'There'll be food for them in the kitchen after we've eaten. We shall be ready to dine as soon as you've bathed, Tribune, and I can find a task for the girl, if you've finished with her for the day.'

'Thank you, my lady,' said Quintus, 'but I shall be keeping her with me.' There was an authority in his voice with which even the Lady Aurelia chose not to argue and, with a lift of her eyebrows and a stony stare sent like a dart in Brighid's direction, she left the room with Tullus and Lucan, leaving a faint vinegary smell in her wake. Quintus put the back of his hand to his nose, but whether to cover a smile or to stifle the smell no one could tell. He did, however, glance at Brighid, his dark brooding expression making her wonder what thoughts were passing through his mind, and whether his sigh was one of relief or annoyance.

Since he appeared to have all the assistance he needed, she decided to sit out of the way on a small day-bed by the wall and to take out her sewing, of which there was still plenty. It had not been easy to ply a needle in a jolting wagon, and here was a chance to make use of the last daylight hour. The Tribune's order to one of his slaves took her by surprise. 'Find your way to the kitchen and

request a tray of food for the Princess. She's not going to wait till midnight before she gets a bite to eat. And fresh milk, not wine. I want it in here by the time I've bathed. See to it.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Florian, you stay here with the Princess and prepare my clothes. You come with me, lad,' he said to the other one. 'You, Princess, will stay in this room. No exploring.' She knew he must have read her mind, for the baths would be abandoned when the guests went in to dine. She doubted if Florian would stay here all that time, with a new friend waiting for him.

The new friend had not been inclined to wait, and he found a way to the Tribune's room soon after the guests had assembled and the sound of laughter had floated away into the spacious triclinium where the aroma of food mingled with the perfumed hems of robes. Brigid was eating ravenously, hardly bothering to look up as the discreet knock on the door broke the silence. Florian was on his feet immediately, as if that was what he'd been hoping for.

'Come inside quickly,' he whispered. 'You can't stay.'

'I know.'

At the sound of the voice, Brigid almost cried out and, had her mouth not been full of food, she might well have done so at the secretive half-smile sent over Florian's shoulder. So, she had not been abandoned after all. Her prayers had been answered.

Math, she whispered. Dearest brother. You came for me.

But Math frowned her to silence as Florian turned to introduce him and her smile had to be reined in before the joy and relief showed in her eyes.

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