

"Gripping. I didn't want it to end."

OBOOKO REVIEW

BRITANNIA

BOOK ONE

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The Story –

Maia and her step-brother Cilo were raised in an opulent but isolated villa in the Seine Valley. At fifteen Cilo escaped to the army in Britannia, leaving Maia alone and afraid.

Lucius, Luc, is commander of an auxiliary cavalry unit of *Legio XX, Valeria Victrix*. The son of a Caledonian mercenary who joined Rome, he and his four brothers are soldiers of renowned ability and bravery. At twenty-five he has served ten years, has another fifteen to serve, and has had enough of killing. Exhausted and battle fatigued after the brutal AD77 Cambrian campaign, he has been weighing up his chances of survival as a deserter.

As a matter of convenience, Maia is married off to her stepbrother and once again abandoned when he returns to his post. Seizing her one chance to escape, she joins an exclusive group of travelling prostitutes on their way to Britannia. With them, she finds herself moving through a complex web of lies and deceptions, where everyone knows more than they will say and everyone she meets has their own agenda.

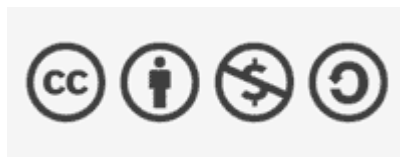
If she can trust Lucius, he will take her to her husband. But everything she knows about the world will change -- if she can survive the journey.

BRITANNIA
Book One.
Letitia Coyne

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OBOOKO EDITION

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Table of Contents

[Chapter One.](#)
[Chapter Two.](#)
[Chapter Three.](#)
[Chapter Four.](#)
[Chapter Five.](#)
[Chapter Six.](#)
[Chapter Seven.](#)
[Chapter Eight.](#)
[Chapter Nine.](#)
[Chapter Ten.](#)
[Chapter Eleven.](#)
[Chapter Twelve.](#)
[Chapter Thirteen.](#)
[Chapter Fourteen.](#)
[Chapter Fifteen.](#)
[Chapter Sixteen.](#)
[Chapter Seventeen.](#)

[Glossary.](#)

CHAPTER ONE.

Gallia Belgica AD77

Lyvia made a brief, critical study of the bride. In a soft, pale blue *tunica*, with her hair parted and bound in knots of red muslin and her *flammeum* veiling her head, the girl was presentable. At least she looked clean, and her breeding was irrelevant to the niche history would set for her. She would do well enough.

Maia rubbed at imagined stains on her palms. She had eaten little over the last few days and slept even less. Now her quaking knees woke tremors that rippled through her, breaking across her skin in a prickling rash of sweat and jostling her empty stomach.

It wasn't excitement, and it was not fear that caused her discomfort. She had no fear of a union with Cilo. She loved him dearly; as she had from the first day they'd met, and as she had while they'd grown up together. She had always loved him, and she had grieved for his company when he'd joined the army so many years ago, when he'd left her there alone. She had counted off the days and prayed for the gods to bring him home to her again. If he was feared by reputation as a soldier, she had known only his love, his protection, and his ready laugh.

But neither was it joy. As much as she loved him, it was as she had always known

him. She loved him as her brother.

“Why are you just standing there, child?” Her stepmother’s words were sharp.

Slow tears formed along Maia’s lower lashes and she blinked them away. She wanted to say ‘I wish my mother was with me’, but her mother had gone, too, and she was alone. This cold contempt now passed for a mother’s love. “Has Cilo dressed?” she asked instead.

“Of course. He and the lads are still celebrating the new vintage. If you aren’t soon ready there’ll be none left for the feast.”

That was unlikely. Lyvia had planned this day too well. Even its inauspicious coincidence with the festival of *Vinalia Rustica* had been slated well before the shocking news was broken to the bride.

Maia slipped on her russet sandals and tried for the hundredth time to straighten the knot at her waist. She needed to wash her hands again, but there was no water nearby. Lifting her circlet of wild dianthus and amaranths, she set it carefully so it held the veil in place over the massed intricacies of her hair. “Go on out, then,” she said. “I’m ready.”

Lyvia needed no second prompt. She swept from the room leaving small breezes to giggle in her perfumed wake.

Maia felt for the tiny leather pouch hidden at her breast and drew out a small silver coin. Her mother had placed this same coin in her own shoe on the day she’d married Bassus. She had no clear recall of the custom or its meaning, she was too long away from her homeland, but it was a tie, a tiny gesture that brought her mother’s memory closer on this special day.

Lifting the hem of her long, narrow *tunica*, she slipped the little coin into her sandal, under her heel, and gathered herself to walk through the door into her wedding, alone.

Cilo might have dressed formally at some time that morning, but the day’s celebrations had left him more than moderately dishevelled. His hair was a wild mass of black curls that knotted over his ears and tumbled down the leather of his ornamental cuirass. He was in uniform, although technically he was no longer a soldier, and he was breathtaking.

He stood when he saw his bride enter the hall. His full lips, for which he had long ago been named Cilo, parted as he smiled tight reassurance at her, and teeth as white as new chalk shone against his sun-brown skin. But the smile did not reach his serious green eyes or touch the frown that was set above them.

Maia froze in the doorway. No part of her would move. Dread made her feel fragile, her bones brittle and her joints unreliable. Her feet seemed to have set into the hard baked clay of the tiles, then her trembling knees and her hips.

All eyes came to her as an expectant hush filled the room. Standing alone, she could see all the faces before her: hard, earth-brown men in battle dress. Lyvia and Bassus were among them, too; him with a broad smile over many proud chins, and her with the sharp efficiency of flesh that showed her meanness of spirit as clearly as volume showed the generosity of his.

The rush of blood in her ears was deafening. Her chest was tight, as if her ribs were iron bands, cold and constricting. Her cheeks burned. A whimper escaped and she forced her sticky palms down her thigh, smoothing the soft flannel of her *tunica*.

Tiberia stood across the room at a low table, her broad smile pleading, willing Maia to step forward and take her place for the ceremony. A servant as *pronuba*, another of Lyvia’s slights, but not one Maia could take too much to heart. The old domestic was kind and warm, as matronly as anyone Maia had known.

And Cilo stepped forward with his hand extended as if his touch would compensate for her inadequacies. Listing slightly to the left, he steadied himself on the edge of a table and walked to where she stood.

“You look beautiful.” He kissed the back of her fingers where the iron band of their engagement lay, dark against her pale skin, then brought his eyes up to hers, pleading. In the instant they met Maia glimpsed despair, but he bowed his head, and black curls shook away the moment of crisis as he led her toward the dais.

Given her chance at last, Tiberia seized their joined hands. Joy trembled through all the comfortable excess of her aging frame, and as carefully as her bursting joy permitted, she spoke her solemn words aloud. “Do you come willingly to your husband?” Her eyebrows leapt up her forehead and she bobbed her face at Maia in an exaggerated encouragement to speak.

Maia studied the man beside her. In Rome, or at home in Pompeii, they would make mosaics to capture his image. He was glorious, godlike, and he held himself taut, his determined profile offering her no reassurance. They had both come to this ceremony willingly, and yet there was no mistaking the desperation that moved behind his eyes.

He was her hope for happiness, and the knowledge that he came to her despondent, maybe even resentful, trampled the last bits of her courage into dust. It lay thick and bitter on her tongue, drying all her dreams of escape and freedom. Slow breaths dragged into her chest. She could not have forced herself to run if there had been another sanctuary to find.

He was her only hope, and she was tethered to him there as surely as if the ring she wore was still the iron shackle of a slave. He was her rock, her only safe place. With her hand crushed into his by Tiberia’s eager claw, she forced her throat to work, saying, “When and where you are Gaius, then and there I am Gaia.”

The matron of honour could control her delight no longer. Surging forward she deluged the couple, crushing Maia between the warmth of an old servant’s ample bosom and her husband’s hard leanness. Her ears were red hot, burning with old shames, and a persistent hum droned the sounds from around her. Somewhere deep inside, her soul sang an ancient keening song in a language she could not quite recall. Against the silent strength of her husband’s grip, she felt herself gently rocking.

The Auspex was an older man; Maia did not recall having seen his face in the days since the garrison had arrived. He wore the insignia of the Twentieth Legion and his bearing was slow and deeply serious. He cleared his throat to hurry Tiberia from her place in the middle of the ceremony and then solemnly mumbled his way through the incantations to Jupiter. He offered the grain cakes, broke them and presented them to the bride and groom to eat.

From her fingers Cilo ate the offering and she from his, but when she searched his face for empathy, or some kind of strength or courage she could borrow, she saw only wine addled emotion which could have been pain or humiliation.

He refused to meet her eyes, fixing his blurred vision on the Auspex as he brought out the *Tabulae Nuptiales* and placed it before them to sign. Then in his graceful hand, the script of a man destined to be senator, he crafted his name. Oppius Pompeius Bassus. Beside his words she set the stylus, trying to breathe calmly enough to settle her nerves and steady her trembling fingers, and wrote: Maia Pompeia. His wife, eternally.

When he brought his face to hers again at last, his lovely eyes were brimming over. It was done, and the tension that had kept him so rigidly upright gave way suddenly. He seemed to sag briefly, then he caught himself, smiled and squeezed her hand as he drew her to himself slowly and kissed her lightly on the lips.

He smiled again, not at her but at the crowd. In an instant he remade himself and he pulled her tight against his side. One strong arm rested on her shoulder; the other thrust high in the air in defiance or salute as the crowd raised a wild cheer and rushed forward in celebration.

First witness to sign was not Lyvia or Bassus as she expected, but Gnaeus Julius Agricola, consul of Gallia Aquitania, Pontifex, Commander of *Legio XX Valeria Victrix*, now to be Governor of Britannia. Cilo's commanding officer.

Lyvia's feast was as sumptuous as the provincial markets allowed: rich meats, peacocks and other game fowl, sucking pigs, and the best of the autumn harvest. Dignitaries had come down river from Lutetia, and the families of freemen from the farms and villages along the Seine valley had joined the celebration, but soldiers far outnumbered the other guests.

Among them Cilo seemed to rise above his sadness as the hours passed. He had chosen duty. He had chosen compliance and obedience to the future set for him. A future in Rome, far from the battlefield, with Maia as his wife. This future starting now, surrounded by those he loved, carousing loudly, feasting and singing as if each bird, each goblet, each song might be his last.

But as their wedding reception progressed, Maia sat quietly alone, seeing little and caring less. Her ears and eyes turned inward to the memory of an ancient song. It resembled pipes, soft and hollow, but as she studied the melody she recognized in it a woman's cry. It was the song of her mother's fathomless grieving for a life lost, and her own.

Her body made no real demands upon her attention, and the irritation of the little silver coin was barely noticeable unless she stood. She drained her glass of new wine and refilled it, taking a seat again at the side of the banquet hall. On an empty stomach the fog of wine was comforting, soothing away hunger and easing stresses from her neck and shoulders. It helped her float toward the song, carried her back to another world, another life.

She could see her mother's face on the day she'd married Bassus, speaking important truths about fate and happiness. About courage. She remembered standing between her stepbrothers, Appius and Oppius, feeling small and so exposed, but clinging tightly to hands that had promised her protection.

So much was gone, but not Cilo. Not the big brother who loved her and who'd sheltered her through losses too painful to bear. Not Cilo; surely he could never be ashamed of her. Turning her attention out, she found him in the crowd and watched him laughing. He was her only hope. What she needed now was her mother's courage. The courage to stand beside him, no matter what, and together, somehow, they would find joy in their union.

But still the night wore on, and the time to form the *Pompa*, their procession to the marriage bed, came and went. Tiberia had been ordered back to the kitchens and was clearing and serving still, so she had no matron to stand with her. That which should have been a mother was conspicuously elsewhere, intent on leaving Maia to suffer her humiliation alone, while she herself accomplished a masterpiece in colonial entertainment.

Alone then, she approached her husband. "Cilo, we have to go now. Some of the guests have already had to leave."

"It's all right." He pulled her against his side, under his arm, as if she belonged there with his comrades, as a miniature or mascot for the troops. "There is plenty of time, angel. Here, have some wine."

"No, no more wine." She took the goblet he pushed into her hand. "Your

commander has gone out to the barracks, did you notice? That's bad protocol, Cilo. If he goes, shouldn't all these men go back to the barracks too?"

"He's a good man. And fair. He would never stop a wedding celebration. And I'm his tribune, he trusts my judgment."

"But we have to go, don't you see? Even if every other part of this celebration has been a farce, this we have to do. We have to light the white torches and make the procession. You know that."

"A farce? This has been the best celebration ever. Our dear stepmother has seen to that. Look at her over there, slithering around her guests."

"Cilo, stop it! Not so loud, she'll hear you."

"Yes, she'll hear me and call up the Furies. Oh, too late. There's one now."

"Cilo!" Maia warned, uselessly.

"Serpent hair and eyes of blood, looks like her to me. What do you think?"

"Stop it. You'll make trouble for us."

"Trouble? My angel, you can't guess at the trouble we've made for ourselves, you and me. Drink. Toast our glorious future." He wiped a finger down her cheek and the smile slid away from his lips. "You have no idea the price the fates have demanded. And that's as it should be. Here, drink up."

His weight was growing uncomfortable on her neck and reasoning with him was useless. She took a gulp of wine against the burning in her throat, and turning, she slipped from under his arm and trudged sadly to where a small group of guests was preparing to leave.

At last, as servants began to clear away some of the chaos, Bassus hugged her gently. "My darling, why aren't you smiling? What a feast! Word of tonight will be heard in Rome." He laughed, delighted. "These boys will sing songs about tonight for years to come." He looked at her kindly, turning her face up to his with thick sausage fingers. "Are you so sad? What a wedding. What a husband! Though I'm biased. And such a bride. Look at you, my sweet girl. How could the day have been any better?"

Maia tried a smile but it twitched uncertainly under Lyvia's predatory sneer. How many ways could she count? "Well Papa, I might have come with a dowry. Anything I could have called my own."

"Oh!" Bassus was obviously struck. "I never thought," he began.

Lyvia cut him off. "Nonsense, girl. Surely you bring all your mother left you."

"Yes," the old man agreed. "When I married your dear mother all I own became hers, and through her, yours. You take whatever you like. Anything you want." Happy with this thought, he turned to find his son, to share his blessings as he retired.

Lyvia stayed long enough to spit, "I was thinking much smaller, more intimate. What was it your mother brought with her to the slave stalls? Apart from you." Her small eyes narrowed, watching to see her words hit their mark.

Maia swallowed the burn. She refused to blink dry eyes and forced her bottom lip to be still. Only her nostrils flared slightly as she hissed an answer. "Courage."

Her stepmother stood, wary, her face expressionless as she studied the girl before her. She searched every feature, every shade in Maia's golden eyes, hunted through the fatigue and emotional wreckage of the night and probed for any hint of threat. Then she laughed. Flicking long fingers dismissively in Maia's face, she threw her head back and laughed. She turned her back and followed her husband out into the night, laughing.

Maia rubbed determinedly at her hands, forcing one palm against the other in an attempt to grind away the filth. Tiny muscles near her eyes and in her chin ticked and tugged until her face fell into an uncertain frown.

Her mother had been a warrior; she had fought beside her father and seen him fall.

She had kept her small daughter alive through the filth of the slave stalls, through miles of snow, across vast plains where she'd begged for water. To a new land, a new life. A new name.

All Maia had of her mother was a rough silver coin and that was burying itself deeper into her heel as she stood.

"Did you toast the goddess?" The unfamiliar voice was quiet, only slightly slurred by wine. When she refused to raise her eyes, a glass of wine passed under her face and into view. "I'm to be your escort, in domum mariti."

"I've got only one escort then, not three? And no matron either?"

"No, there are three of us. But I'm not sure how much help those two will be." The wineglass drew her eyes across, pointing to where two soldiers propped each other up through a loudly forgotten song. It returned to within her reach, held by a strong hand and sun-browned arm covered with fine fair hair.

"You're foreign." She looked up into grey eyes. Deep, intense eyes.

He smiled. "Foreign to where? I'm not local, no. And I'm not Roman. Not from Gallia Aquitania either, but we've been stationed there for three years."

"You're a Briton."

"Aye. But more exotic yet. Caledonian. Or my father was. Is. Lucius." He offered a hand. "Luc."

Cilo appeared at the young man's shoulder. "He eats babies," her husband slurred, laughing and clapping the soldier on the shoulder as much for support as camaraderie. "So watch out for him, he's"

Maia ignored his warnings, stepping forward to slip herself under her groom's free arm. "Come on, we really do have to go, Cilo. Can you walk?"

"No!" He pushed her back less than gently. "Sorry, sorry. Gotta get, and go with..." He waved an arm vaguely toward the contingent who should march him to his wedding bungalow ahead of his bride.

"Yes, go. You've got to go with them. Please."

He leaned unsteadily toward her, but Lucius stepped between them and successfully turned him around. "Right my friend, we're away." Luc raised his voice to the room. "Let's go."

The staggering rabble launched itself toward the doors, still singing. No one lit the white torches that would carry the fire from her father's hearth to her own, and that may have been a blessing. With them the whole villa might have been reduced to ash and despair.

In the time it took for darkness to cover the line, as Maia looked around at the litter of bodies wet with wine and vomit, she moved from sadness into quiet resignation. When Lucius returned, she managed a small smile. "Not three escorts after all? Just you?"

"Seems so." They alone were conscious.

"Not one auspicious omen. Not one. It's not even my day is it, it's the harvest festival. Will Venus forgive me for using her day, do you think?" She looked up bleakly.

Luc looked at his feet. "I don't know. I'm no more than a poor barbarian from the outer extremes of empire. I've not much time for gods and goddesses; it seems they've never made much time for me."

"Hush." She stamped a foot. "Do you want to make it worse?"

"It could get worse than this?" he asked seriously. She was silent, and he quickly felt for the pouch at his hip. "Well there's this. I brought some walnuts to throw." He showed her a handful of brown nuts.

Maia tried to smile, but the expression drew her back toward tears. "Should they

still be in their shells?"

"I don't know. Here. For luck, then, hey?" He pressed the woody lumps into her hand.

"For luck," she echoed, and they walked out into the dark courtyard.

Outside her bungalow, she stood with Luc as her only witness as she took the prepared bowl of lard scented with lavender oil and smeared it around her doorway. Then as steadily as she could, she lifted a torch from its sconce beside the path and stood before her marital dwelling. "When and where you are Gaius, then and there I am Gaia." She spoke clearly, forcing herself to repeat the heartbreaking words of her oath. But she could not make herself move forward through the door.

She stamped her foot again and her mother's courage bit deeper into her heel. "Ow," she whimpered, her lip beginning to tremble. "I will not," she hissed defiantly, holding her torch forward like a threat, "walk over this threshold!"

"No." Lucius cast about himself for a moment. In the dark silence, as predawn breezes brushed her cheeks, catching her perfume and teasing it over his taut nerves, he hesitated. There were no rules for this; he had no idea how best to approach. Reluctantly, he stepped close and pulled the hand that held her torch around his shoulder. Then he bent and lifted her, and stepped carefully through the door and into the open bedchamber where Cilo lay, spread-eagled and unaware.

Setting her carefully onto her feet, he took the torch from her fingers and laid it into the waiting grate of kindling. Squatting silently there in the darkness, he waited until the fire caught enough to light the room around them, then returned with the torch to where Maia stood, her face blank and still.

"He is a good man," he said soberly. "The best." In the moving shadows of the torchlight, she seemed no more than a child. Wide golden eyes filled with tears that caught the flame and threw it back like starlight. "There will be better days for you." He took the small hand that clutched her lumpy cluster of walnuts, wanting to reassure her, to make it true for her.

"You seem sure," she whispered, looking past him at the man snoring softly on the low bed before them.

"I am sure. A man who has no time for gods knows for sure you can make your own luck." Turning so shadows dressed the tight frown growing across his face, he straightened his arms, then crossed them against his chest. There was a slight shake of his head as he turned to leave. "You've no matron to help you with," he paused self-consciously, "but I don't think you'll need her help tonight."

"No."

"I'll take this out, will I?" He lifted the torch.

No excited crowd waited for her to throw it to them, so she nodded silently.

Frowning again at an unwarranted frustration and annoyance, Lucius pulled the door closed behind him and crossed the dark courtyard with Maia's hearth fire to light his way.

"Cilo?" Maia sat gently onto her wedding couch. She slipped a finger into her sandal and eased it from her foot, then the second, and she doubled over to better reach the blister under her heel. It wasn't serious, just a little tender. She pulled her knees up sideways, the narrow tube of her floor-length *tunica* making any movement awkward. "Cilo?" She tried gently shaking his shoulder.

Drawing up onto her knees, Maia lifted the wildflower wreath, now limp and grey, from her head, freeing the *flammeum* so she could fold it over her arms. "Cilo, wake

up!” Still no response.

Without a mirror it was no easy task to untangle the twists and fastenings of her *tutulus*. Six separate locks of hair had been knotted and woven together into a high cone, and the discipline required to slowly undo it all forced her body to calm and her mind to clear. With the last strands freed, she scratched at the itches on her scalp then used her fingers to comb the long tresses back over her shoulders.

“Cilo, it’s our wedding night. You have to wake up.” Leaning closer over his face she held his chin in her hand. There was no sign he had heard her. “All right. Maybe you should sleep a while.”

Rolling sideways, she struggled to her feet. The day had been long, and she wanted to wash and to sleep almost as badly as he did. Standing in the light of her hearth she tried to undress.

A shank of unspun wool, her Bride’s Knot, held the *tunica* in at her slim waist. All day it had hung oddly and she had often tugged and twisted at it. Now the fibres were matted and tangled and she had no husband to untie it.

Dropping back to sit on the low couch, Maia let her tears come. She was silent, her face still, as sorrow gathered, swelled in her eyes, and ran down her cheeks in unbroken lines. She let her hair fall forward, as if there was someone to hide her weeping from, while the last hours of darkness drained away. As the room around her greyed and paled with the coming dawn, her hearth fire died to ashy coals.

At long last, one deep, trembling breath drew some form of resolution into her breast, and Maia scraped her hair back to survey the room. Dutifully, she stood and piled some wood and kindling onto the fire. Then she bit a nick in the neckline of her wedding dress, gripped each side, and tore it in two down its front.

Shrugging, she freed her shoulders and then dragged it down under the knotted cord at her waist. Moving neither slowly nor with any unnecessary speed, she dipped a rough linen cloth into her wash bowl, scrubbed her hands, and polished the skin of her face until it was tingling.

As the dawn’s first light ventured more confidently into the bungalow, she climbed into her wedding bed.

Stretching out beside Cilo she arched uncomfortably, felt for a lump under her hip and pulled out a walnut. She was nineteen years old, there had to be better days for her. Clutching her woody lump of luck, close up beside her husband, she fell into exhausted sleep.

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CHAPTER TWO.

Insects whined incessantly and Maia pulled fabric up over her ears, but it was too hot and too hard to breathe. As these small irritations burrowed their way into her dreamless sleep, the clatter and bang of movement outside stirred a basal alarm, flooding her with adrenaline and wakefulness.

Sitting upright, she scoured the room for the source of this sense of panic. Bright sunlight promised candour, but it told her nothing of what was happening around her. She was already struggling to her feet, pushing off the heavy cover of Cilo’s cloak.

With nothing more than an arm across her chest to affect modesty, she hung back from the windows, trying to see out without being seen. The garrison was decamping.

Deep voices called in truncated bellows, stock stamped restlessly, loads were being shifted on creaking bullock wagons. And Maia was alone.

As she stepped back, she searched the room. When she saw it her racing heart stopped sharply, as if it had hit fear as solid as any mortared wall. He'd left a note. Cilo was gone, and he'd left her a note.

She stared in silent horror, barely breathing, afraid to move forward, afraid to leave the plaque unread. Frustration and disbelief seemed to break her heart open. Was she abandoned? Again?

Shaking so that her knees refused to hold her, she staggered forward, lifted the little wax tablet from the bedside and read. When she crumbled down onto the bed, her grief was too profound for tears. She was blank. Numb.

Panic slapped her face.

On shelves beside the wash basin, her linen sat in neatly folded lines. Snatching a loose summer *tunica*, she punched her arms up through it, dragging it down around her body. She pulled the length a saffron *palla* up over her undressed hair and ran barefoot into the daylight outside.

Everywhere was movement, but too sparse. Heavy equipment. Wagons. Horses. The Governor's belongings. Some stock. But few men. Maybe thirty. All the cavalry horses were cleared from the fields. Agricola had moved his cohort out and only the trailing vehicles remained.

Maia groaned. She had no idea where to look. If Cilo was still here, where would he be? Clutching the fabric of her shawl up under her chin she ran for the main house, Lyvia's house, and in, uninvited.

"Cilo!"

There was no answer. Silence echoed everywhere and she turned back for the door, confused. Hobbling over gravel that bit into her feet, she retraced her steps through the glare and confusion.

A shout snagged her attention. A tall bay horse skittered sideways as its rider leaned to steady the head of a draft team. A load too far back on the tray had raised the shaft and jerked at the traces. The rider called curt orders as three men rushed to climb onto the front of the wagon, to balance the weight and calm the team.

"Lucius!" She crossed the drive, stepping awkwardly. "Lucius, where is he?"

"Gone. They left hours ago. I can't talk to you now; I have to get this lot rolling."

"No. Stop." She ran under the horse's chin, grabbing a rein and leaning her small weight against the bay's broad chest and neck as he tried to shoulder past her. "He's finished his term. He's not going back. He's married now and staying with me."

"Pull that bale up and lash it, if we get those armament boxes forward they'll balance it all up. You! Roll this one forward, bring it up now." He stopped shouting as his horse danced around her small form. "Maia, they left. Agricola moved out for his post in Britannia at daybreak. Cilo is with him. He's re-enlisted; he's serving this season at least. I thought you would know."

He called again, over her head, "There's only this produce now. Get the sacks on and cover them. That's the last of it. Make it fit."

"He wouldn't just leave me like this. Not now. It will be winter soon; campaign season is nearly over. Why are they going north? Why has he done this?"

"I'm sorry, I am, but it's none of my business. I can't say why he said nothing to you. I have to go." Snatching his bridle free, he wheeled the old war horse back before it could step on her or bite her out of spite and cantered toward the back of the last wagon.

Maia turned to watch him, her arms rising at her sides, silently questioning the

fates as frustration and disbelief reopened the dark places in her heart. From where she stood in the black shade of her portico, Lyvia turned to re-enter her home. Even the crunch of the wheels on gravel and the groan of the beasts as they forced the load to move past could not cover the gales of her laughter.

Maia completed her turn, watching the last wagon make its slow progress out of the villa as it moved off toward far distant lands. When it cleared the ironwork at the gates, she saw Lucius kick his horse up to a gallop and run for the head of the convoy. To be abandoned by her husband and only ally was unbearable; to be left here again and humiliated in front of her stepmother was more than she could survive.

Without any conscious decision, without any thought at all, Maia found herself running, running hard, ignoring the gravel and the consequences. Ten yards outside the walls she caught the rear wagon and pulled herself onto its tailgate. There was no space for her, no way to force a nook in which she could settle to hide, but she was able to pull the corner of the cover over herself and, laying still, she willed herself invisible.

Luc slapped the short rein down the shoulder of his horse, annoyance and frustration making his hands harsher than they needed to be. Cilo had re-enlisted. It would be for another five-year term as *Tribune Laticlavus*, and the fact had taken Luc as much by surprise as it had Cilo's bride. The consequences would be as bleak for both of them.

How many times had he heard Cilo speak of her? His angel. His precious sister named for the goddess. To hear him speak, Luc would have believed her exempt from the sort of manipulation and disrespect she'd been shown today. She alone, he would have thought, Cilo held too far above his petty games and power plays.

Obviously that was not the case.

An image of her despair, frozen in the cold light of her hearth-fire, haunted his heart, burning in his chest and cramping in the muscle of his stomach and his jaw. Her eyes, full of fear and pleading that morning as they clung to him and begged him to help her to understand, drove his heels harder into the old horse's flank.

What was there to understand? Cilo had turned his back on this incomparable jewel. He'd chosen blood and cold and death over a life of comfort in the capital with this delicate beauty beside him. There was nothing to explain it.

Every rock and ditch jarred bone against bone, bruising, until Maia groaned with every shudder of the cart. Her empty stomach growled its discontent, her bladder burned, and she ached to stretch her legs free of the cramped restrictions of her hole. She tried to follow the drivers' indistinct conversations, but they were garbled and too quiet to understand. For what seemed hours she debated her next move.

What could she do next?

These supply vehicles would be caught up to the troop. Where ever the bulk of the cohort made camp, eventually she would be taken to them. And Cilo would be there. She couldn't stay at the villa alone. If it meant living in army camps for the rest of the season, then so be it. She only needed to get to her brother.

Louder voices called and horses cantered back toward her wagon. The drivers called the all's well and she crushed herself tighter against the wretched barrels at her back. One horse kept coming, riding a circuit of the wagon, and she held her breath.

"Luc! D'you want to look at this?" A second horse cantered back and moved too

close; she could hear its hard breath and its tread keeping time beside her.

"Hold! Hold up, boys." Her cover leapt back, exposing her to faces that held not the slightest suggestion of humour. "What the ...? Do you ...? Get out!"

There was nothing she could say. As she struggled to her feet, trying to stand on a sack of something hard, she saw the bright yellow of her *palla* trailing down and dragging in the tracks behind the wheels. Guiltily, she gathered it up across her arm and held out a hand to steady her jump to the ground.

"Maia, damn it all, have you any idea what this means? We've already lost half the day and now I have to take you back." Luc pulled a shaking hand down over the frown that cut his forehead. He looked sick, or in pain. As the horse skittered and spun she looked away from his muttered curses.

"I'm not going back."

"Good. Stay here then. We're going north and you're not coming with us." To the wagon drivers he called, "Roll on!" and the beasts humphed and strained to get the wheels rolling again. As Luc rode away with his team, Maia looked up at the second horseman, sitting, apparently stunned by her sudden appearance. Caught staring, he nodded sharply, pulled his horse aside and said, "Ma'am," as he too kicked on up toward the front of the convoy.

For the second time that day, Maia found herself numb and hopeless, staring at the back end of this wagon. Barefoot, barely dressed, with her hair trailing in a ragged mess around her face, and with nothing to her name, she stood in the bright late summer sunlight with nowhere to go.

Yellow meadowland opened all around her, dotted with the wild dianthus she had collected for her wedding coronet. A half-mile or so to the east the valley rose slightly, and there it wore an easy burden of low green woods. To the west, the distant curve of the river cut its ancient runnel through the earth. Nothing spoke of guidance. The progress of the vehicles had trampled the earth and mowed a wide swath of grass flat. The track traced its way doggedly from the south and the villa and her old shames, and then passed her on its way to follow the slow, relentless, forbidden wagons. And from that direction a lone rider came.

"What are you going to do?" Luc's words were clipped, sharpened by annoyance and frustration, but he spoke quietly.

"I don't know." Looking up at him hurt. The bright sun shone behind him, glaring in the fair lights of his hair and flaring from his broad shoulders like the wings of a god. His brown kilt spread back over the horse's rump, and the worn suede of long brecks showed above tight laced *caligai*.

"You can't just stand here."

"No." The same sun burned sweat from her crown, melting her scalp and itching in her hair.

"And Cilo will kill me if I leave you standing in the middle of a field." He shook his head. "You deserve better than this, but I don't have a choice. I have to take you back."

"There's nothing for me there. I hate it. She hates me."

"There's nowhere else you can go. Where did you think you would live? Where on earth did you think you'd get to?"

"I thought I'd go with him, live, somehow, near the barracks in Britannia. I never got the chance to talk to him about it. I didn't even get the chance to think about it. I just followed." She turned her gaze up to him and he refused to meet it.

"No one does that. Not Romans." The horse stamped impatiently and threw its head around, demanding someone do something, and soon. "Everyone with a good

family moves the other way, back to Rome, not out to the ends of the earth.”

“I’m not ‘good family’.”

“But you are, doubly so. Cilo is the family’s oldest son. He will be sent back to Rome whether he likes it or not. You need to be here, waiting for him.” He circled and came back to the spot, inevitably. “Look, you don’t have a choice either. I have to keep moving. I have to take this lot north and you have to go back to the villa. Come on; step up.” He stuck out his foot and leaned to clasp her arm.

Putting her bare foot on his, she grasped his wrist and stepped up as he hoisted her sideways onto the double horned pommel of his saddle. Maia bunched her fists against the hard leather cuirass over his chest. With her face scant inches below his, she said quietly, “Don’t take me back. Please. Give me a horse. Take me with you.”

There was no way to tell her what lay ahead of him; no words for the magnitude of the struggle he and Cilo were riding toward. Their commander had been charged with bringing a whole country to heel and there would be blood from one end of Britannia to the other before they were finished.

“I can’t Maia.” It was all he could say.

Silently she rolled her courage and her filthy *palla* onto her lap and turned her face away, as he kicked the old horse into a canter back along the track toward the villa.

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CHAPTER THREE.

“How many ways can you fail?” Lyvia’s fury shone, opalescent.

Maia tried to hang a wayward strand of hair behind her ear, but with her face downcast, it simply dropped again like an admission of incompetence. Dirt caked her fingernails and muddy marks showed where she had knelt on the soil. She had no answer. There were just too many ways to name.

“You have servants to dig vegetables. Use them. You have servants to dress your hair. Must you insist on looking like an urchin? Show me your hands.”

Maia held out her fingers and slipped into the small, safe place she kept inside where her stepmother’s words could do no more harm. She was quiet, biddable and patient while the wash of native shame ran over her, stopped her ears and misted her vision. Somewhere far off, she could hear a woman singing.

Lyvia’s foul mood had spread across the whole valley, damning even the hopeful as the clouds rained down thick grey bile on her behalf. Far over, the great river discretely dressed its banks in cascades and moved sedately by, making no mention of the runoff. But the drive, from gate to gate, south to north, became a torrent, gurgling and tripping where it curved past Maia’s front patio. She listened to its rush, watching past Lyvia’s arm as the water sparkled by.

“Get these oiled and neat and clean. You will have your hair dressed and curled and you will not, *will not*, work in the gardens like a peasant. How did I ever think you could be made decent enough for company? You are a barbarian, nothing more. How could I hope to have made you more than you were born?”

“Were you wrong, Mother?” It was barely whispered, hardly defiant.

“I am never wrong. Certainly never wrong about you. And I am not your mother. If you were mine I’d have drowned you at birth. Now go and get yourself clean, I can smell the filth on you.”

Maia could feel it. It seeped from every pore, caking on her skin and making her

palms clammy. She ground them together and pushed them down her thigh, trying to make them clean as the rain redoubled its effort, scouring the tiles above her head.

As she turned to leave, Lyvia shook her head with disgust. "Bassus will die of shame if you're seen like that."

Maia caught a sob at the back of her throat as heart leapt up reflexively. "He is not ashamed of me. He loves me. And he loved my mother."

"No. He married her. That's all. He was a young widower with small boys to raise. Noblemen are not used to life without a wife to manage their homes. He took what he could find out here."

"No." Tears welled up in her eyes. It was futile; she could never win this argument, yet she tried every time. No matter how often Lyvia stabbed her with this one barb, she could never learn to turn its pain aside. "She was brave and beautiful and he loved her."

"And you killed her, didn't you? Killed them all, you little barbarian."

"Well, he has me now and our son. If he was so proud of you don't you think he would have at least tried to make you a better wedding match? You and your brother, or is that husband, will have to make the best you can. At least *he* is Roman."

Cilo. Her husband, yes, but only in name. Under the loose cloth of her *tunica*, the grizzled shank of wool remained knotted securely. In the seven months since her wedding she had been careful to keep her wedding knot in place. Rolled against her skin day by day it had become a rope, a cord on which to hang her resolve. From it, also, hung a small, secret, leather pouch.

He would come back. Day after day she clung to that one hope. He was Bassus' son. Senatorial nobility by birth. Just as Luc had said, he had to come back and they would leave for Rome and his place in the senate. One day soon he would come back and take her away from this life of shame.

Bassus had extended her bungalow into a suite, complete with its own bathhouse and hot rooms, forming a whole new wing for the villa. Work had carried on through the winter, and now, as the Calends of March approached, bringing with it Spring and a New Year, her rooms stood ready for the day her husband would return to her.

As Lyvia swept from the room, Tiberia put an uncertain face around the door. Seeing the mistress of the house gone, she smiled more comfortably and waddled in. "Oh come on, little one." She hugged Maia into her vast softness. "You come and have a wash and we'll do your hair and your nails. By the time all these fine ladies get here you'll outshine them all. Your father will be so proud of you."

Maia wiped angrily at her tears and moved toward the baths with Tiberia in tow. "Who are these guests, does anyone know yet?"

"Well, no one knows, but the word is they must be harlots. Who else would be going north at this time of year? People are saying they are camp followers."

Maia frowned. "What harlots would have a military escort to the frontiers? And, more important, what sort of harlots would Lyvia host a banquet for?" She stripped off her dirty *tunica* and sat on a stone bench beside the pool. "Has anyone seen them?"

"No. They move between the tents, but they're wearing heavy capes, their faces are covered. They say they always camp on the garrison squares, just like the troops, not in the homes they pass." The old matron carried on in conspiratorial tones. "You know, I heard they were *Lupae*. That's why it's so important they're here for the *Lupercalia* feast."

"No!" Maia's eyes went wide at the thought that the visitors could be such exotic creatures as this. "Is it true, do you think? Are they able to change into wolves?"

"Who knows, I've never seen one but I've heard." Tiberia nodded sagely, reluctant to let her actual ignorance detract from so great a possibility.

“Anyway, looking at the stores the mistress has gotten in, she’s planning a big night. And not just lounges and buffets, either. Long trestles with stools down each side so people will be sitting facing each other over the food.”

“Maybe that’s so we can watch them, in case they do start to turn into wolves.” Maia laughed. “Lyvia would never be having a feast for harlots, though. Not even *Lupae*. It can’t be right. Not unless she doesn’t know.” The possibility grew into a wide grin as Maia took the rough linen washcloth and stepped down into the warm water of the baths.

“Do you know what I heard? They say they’re creatures of the night! How’s that? Resting all day so they can join the feast tonight.” The old servant bustled around, managing to appear busy. “But, creatures of the night? What does that tell you? We might see them change, yet, my angel. Why would people say they were wolves if they never were?”

“You know what else they are saying? They say there’s about fifteen of them, all women, and travelling in style. Their escort is Praetorian. *Praetorians* sent off to the frontiers with a group of women!” Tiberia nodded again. It was a mystery. It was the best gossip the villa had had in many years.

In her bedroom Maia dried off and dressed in a clean white *tunica*. As she sat to have her hair combed, she asked, “What do you think will happen if they are travelling prostitutes? And if they are, and they have the protection of someone so big in Rome that the travel with Praetorians, does my stepmother bow to the code of nobility and snobbery or the high moral code?”

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t like to guess, little one. Now, how do you want your hair? I think the mistress wants high curls, like hers.”

Tiberia oiled and positioned wayward curls. The polished silver of Maia’s hand mirror blurred edges and pushed disrespectful fingers of distortion through her reflection, making her wish she could do the same to her hair. The whole coiffure was heavy and uncomfortable. It felt as old and stodgy as it smelled, but Tiberia worked quickly and speculation about their guests was at least distracting.

“There now, I told you you’d look lovely, didn’t I?” A sound broke across the conversation, and both women caught a breath, turning together toward the open window. It continued over the steady drone of the rain and the wet rush of the runoff, the heavy, regular tramp of feet. Marching. Soldiers coming in through the northern gate.

Rushing to the side of the window, letting shadows take the place of decorum, the women stared into the rain. A small group, maybe twelve or thirteen men marched under the drum of the rain. Their capes were drawn about them but had long ago failed to keep anyone dry or warm. Two cavalymen, one at either side of the rear, rode equally dejectedly down the drive and on toward the south gate. The horses held their heads and tails down as if they no longer cared where they were going, only that they might soon stop.

As they watched, one of the riders peeled off to the side and approached the main portico, a greyed out figure without the energy to dismount. Leaning from the saddle, he spoke briefly to the house staff, then followed out the gate toward the barrack square.

“Who are they?” Maia was too excited to remain hidden. Leaning out of the window, she searched for any sign that would tell who these men might be. They carried no colours and their uniforms were hidden under the harsh blanket of rain as they dissolved into the distance. “Find out, quickly. Who’ll know?”

The old woman was already heading for the side door, haste making her progress ungainly. And Maia was left alone to wait.

Her hair was oiled and curled, piled into a top-heavy mass above her brow. It itched, and her neck was stiff from holding it at an unnatural angle. Her makeup was done and she had dressed; the heavy wool of her usual russet shawl was quietly comforting against her skin. A pale blue *stola* draped softly from her shoulders, and her *tunica*, scrubbed and bleached stark white, hung in soft folds over her knees.

Next to the window, she sat and watched as the rain slowly eased and cleared. She tried to sit with her back held straight. She wanted to be the wife Cilo would need, and her deportment was so rough, so colonial, she would make him a laughing stock in social circles. She wanted to be ready so he wouldn't be ashamed of her.

But she was bored. So bored. Outside the window each day, the weather was warming toward spring, and she longed to go out, to saddle a horse and sprint across the meadows as she had done when she and Cilo were children. She never rode now. Not since he'd joined the army at fifteen, ten long years ago. Ladies didn't ride across the colonies.

She walked quietly to her bed and lay down on Cilo's cloak, reaching for the small wax tablet she kept at the bedside. Reading his letter for the millionth time, she searched for some nuance, any small word of hope hidden in its cryptic blocks of text.

My dearest Maia.

I will let you sleep, there is nothing I can say this morning that will make this choice any easier to understand. I am a soldier. Whatever the Stepmother plans, I will always be a soldier first. There are loves greater than distance, greater than life. Greater even than death. As the day of our death is written the day we are born, so our loves are cast then, too, unchanging. You will be in my heart every day I am away, as you have always been.

Cilo.

No part of it had changed. No new truths were there to reveal themselves.

She stood again, pacing slow circles in her room, waiting until it was time to join Lyvia's feast. Across the courtyard, torches lit the paths clearly and Lyvia's portico was bright and welcoming. But the ground was still wet. Puddles trooped along the edges of the drive, urging the turf toward the gravel bed and stones. She would get mud all over her feet if she walked the paths.

If she went through the side door, she could follow the service ways down beside her suite and come to the main house without muddying her sandals. She could go discretely, like a servant. Or she could walk to the front door, slightly soiled, always slightly soiled, and without an escort. Her choices were grim; she didn't want Bassus to be ashamed of her.

Gathering a fistful of her shawl, she rubbed the sticky ooze of her past from her palms and walked to her washbasin to scrub them clean. Carefully, she rubbed the wet linen into the webs of each finger, turned her hand and scoured the palm, intent on removing any trace of filth.

The knock, when it came, startled her from her concentration. No one came forward to open her door. Every able bodied person in the villa was involved in the Mistress' carefully orchestrated feast arrangements and Maia's needs were the least of her considerations.

She walked silently down the hallway and stopped in the doorway across the entry from the front door. In Pompeii her entry would have been an atrium, high and open to the sun, but here it was no more than a wide marble-floored room, sparsely decorated and scarcely used. Gathering her courage with the folds of her skirt, she stepped into the

entryway, went to the door and pulled it open.

“Maia.” Grey eyes smiled as he dipped his head respectfully. “Are you well?”

She stared a moment into those eyes, pale and serious. “Lucius. Hello.” His face seemed as familiar, as golden and welcome, as the spring. “Come in, come in.”

“No, I shouldn’t.” As soon as his eyes touched her he knew he should have chosen his timing better. Her beauty was astonishing. He should have waited, spoken to her where there were other people, somewhere her presence didn’t burn against him. His protests went unheeded as she grabbed his hand and towed him through the entry hall, laughing and turning to face him, childlike with anticipation.

“What are you doing here? Do you have news?” Sudden dread choked the smile from her face. “Why have you come?”

“It’s all right.” The instant of fear in her eyes punched the air from his chest and he rushed to cover her concern. “There’s no bad news. We’re only here as escorts for your guests.” Her fingers, where they gripped his, were cool, their touch light and as compelling as her gaze. A nervous warmth seethed against the constant knot of nausea he carried, and he followed where she led.

One small pale hand rested against her stomach, and her eyes closed for a moment as she moved them to a couch. “Come over here. Sit. Tell me what you’ve been doing.”

Luc sat reluctantly, perched stiffly on the edge of the seat. He had never learned to feel comfortable in fine homes like this, and there was a growing awkwardness about being unchaperoned with this entrancing young woman.

There was something otherworldly about her. She was above him. Her wide, amber-coloured eyes held his with a direct frankness that was both disarming and irresistible. Her skin was translucent, as if there was no place in her soul for duplicity, no shadows or darkness. In the bright innocence of her spirit he saw quiet grace that could answer some of the horror his world had shown him. It was hard to know how much she should have to hear.

“I don’t know what to say. Cilo is well. Exhausted, we all are, but he’s well enough. We fought through this last winter.” He checked his hands in case they showed the stain of bloodshed, unclenching his fist to release the souls it held. “From the time we arrived at Glevum, we fought. Up through the territories of the Ordovices.” He flinched away from memories of bloody frozen battles, looking back into Maia’s uncomplicated reassurance.

“We were victorious. Our commander is one of the best. Determined. Unrelenting.” His tone lightened, but he paused too long, so his praise collected echoes of criticism. “And now we are in our permanent barracks at Viroconium and preparing to move again with the new season.”

“I can see it.” Maia’s words were quiet but resonant with compassion. “I can see in your face, it’s been a hard season. And one without an end, it seems.” She nodded, frowning. “No break, then. Maybe that’s why he didn’t come home.”

The touch of her hand on his was a softness that no soldier so long at war could bear, but he held it still against the impulse to tear it away from her. The endless shake that rattled in each of his fingers stilled a little while she held them. If she had moved to touch his cheek as softly, he might have wept. He looked back into her eyes, but they asked hard questions and he had no answers for her, so when the words came to her mouth, he watched her lips move around each one.

“Why did you come? I mean, why didn’t Cilo come? What stopped him from

coming here to me, now?" Her eyes glittered as if tears might form.

Luc stood in the breach, the tight, cramped burn of fatigue riding hard on his shoulders. "He couldn't leave. I was sent because, because..." There was no easy way to explain the complications of his own situation, and he was unwilling to open himself to questions he couldn't answer. "I wasn't needed at the front. He was." It could be put that simply, if he left out blood and screaming, and if he ignored power and manipulation. "I'm here to escort some people back to Britannia and to bring you this. It's from Cilo. He sent no letter with it. I'm just to give it to you. He seemed to think you would understand. I hope you do."

Maia looked down at a bangle as he handed it to her. Made from a rope of gold, it formed a broken oval, its open ends capped with silver spheres. Tracing around its flattened length another golden ribbon was affixed. It drew a complicated pattern of twists and turns, triangling under and over itself until it had covered the surface of the piece, then it turned back on its course, weaving back through all its complex turns until it rejoined itself at the starting point.

"Understand?" Her soft eyes met his again as she slipped the bangle over her wrist. "I recognize it. My mother drew these patterns with me when I was a child. This shows the knotted journey of fate. But how am I supposed to understand his fascination with destiny, his little cryptic messages about the ties that bind us? He seems so determined not to share our future, I wonder if the things he says are meant to show his devotion, or explain his absence.

"If I asked you what he meant by this gift, what would you say his answer would be?"

Luc tried to meet her open gaze squarely, but he found himself searching his scarred knuckles for clues to the kind of truth she deserved. "I would say ... he didn't tell me what he meant and I have no right to guess on his behalf."

"It's five years, isn't it? They won't talk about it here, like it's none of my business, but he re-signed as tribune for a full five years, didn't he." One of her small, pale fingers traced the patterns of her gift, and she watched its slow progress.

"Aye. It's five years." If there were words that could excuse or explain it further, he couldn't give them to her.

If she needed more, she had other concerns to occupy her and her next question caught him by surprise. "What do you know about our guests?" Her voice was flat, but she left her study of the bracelet and raised her face, grinding the palms of her hands together as she said, "There's been a lot of talk but I don't know anything for sure. How can a travelling band of women have a Praetorian guard to here and then have you sent back from Britannia to collect them?"

War and distance had eaten deep furrows under his eyes so the grey irises shone even more vividly from the shadow of his brow, stark and haunted by the memory of too many miles. He brought up two callused hands and rubbed his face against them, smearing his skin as if he could force his fingers through bone to rub away answers he no longer wanted to know. "You'll have to ask me questions I can answer. The ladies are travelling privately and they need an escort. That's all they want known."

"But they must know that intrigue like this is only going to make all the tongues wag louder."

He managed a small smile. "Yes. I'm sure they do. Intrigue is something these particular ladies enjoy." He stood, preparing to leave. "And I'm not in a position to say more. As I said, I'm only an escort."

Maia nodded, apparently satisfied with the answer. "Well, I have no escort to the feast. Can I walk with you to the front door of the house, through the mud and all? Yet

again I've got no partner. Or will you be my partner at this feast?"

Luc swallowed hard against a knot in his throat. "Partner, I can't promise, but I'd be happy to walk you to the door."

Maia looked harder at him as she took his hand. There was warmth and strength in the touch of his fingers that lifted the fine hairs at her nape like a breath. Deep lines cut his brow, but the tension in him seemed to ease when he smiled at her. She smiled back. It was all she needed to find the courage to stand and face the night ahead with all it threatened and promised.

No man had ever offered her his hand, except her brother. And no man, except Cilo, ever offered her his friendship. She tore her gaze down from his face and slipped her hand nervously over his arm. Even if she had no more than a borrowed moment of his time, and even if she had borrowed his friendship from her brother, it felt good to walk beside him to her stepmother's feast as if she had an ally after all.

When the front door of the main house opened, tension spilled into the night. Rumours had reached the Mistress' ears. Together they stepped into the atrium, and Maia was glad of the silent strength that helped her stand upright.

Bassus stepped forward and hugged her as the doors were closed behind them. "Maia."

"Papa. We're still having our feast, then? You know Lucius, come to stand in Cilo's place again, it seems."

"Ah, my son. Is he well?"

"Sir. He is well and sends you his love."

"And a knot for us to untie, Papa. He sent us a riddle. What does it mean?" She held up the gold on her wrist for his inspection.

"Knots is it?" Lyvia's look was colder and darker than the puddles outside. "Come in and stand over there." She pointed toward the side wall. "My guests will soon be here. Keep to the back." Her glare excised and discarded both of them. "I am receiving Roman guests."

Lyvia sounded sure, but she adjusted her robes with too much care and her characteristic grace gave way to jerky movements and odd ticks. Several times she straightened her neck, twisting her spine into resolve. There was no way to know how much she had heard or how she planned to deal with the possibilities, but when the sound of people moving over the patio became clearer, she visibly steeled herself for the meeting.

At the sound of footsteps, servants at either side drew back the heavy doors, revealing, at last, the knot of visitors. Standing close together were a group of figures caped in heavy black wool, with wide cowls falling forward over their faces. The robes dragged mud across Lyvia's marbled floor as one figure moved forward, a pale, slender hand extended in greeting.

Lyvia saw the mud and the hand, her breath drawing her up into icy resolve. She was reluctant to come forward, and the instant of gracious welcome dragged and distorted until Bassus stepped into the void. Seizing the outstretched hand, kissing it lightly and drawing his guests forward as one, he said, "Ladies. Welcome. Come in, we have a feast all set."

"We thank you, sir." The voice was smooth, heavily accented. "We are fortunate indeed to have such gracious hospitality for this auspicious night. I am Justicia, High Priestess of Luperca, and these are my maidens. Girls." The speaker moved forward,

reaching as she did to unclasp her cloak, sliding it back as she stepped free of its cover.

Taller than Bassus, the woman held on to his hand as she turned fluidly under her cloak, rolling it down her arm so it was left hanging over his forearm. Her hair was uncoiled, falling from a loosely caught knot at her crown, its ebony shine spangled with small jewelled pins.

At her word the other women unclasped their capes, moving up around Bassus as they did, positioning themselves between him and his wife so she was forced back toward the wall. Filing after their leader, each woman laid her cape across their host's outstretched arm and moved on into the dining hall.

Maia had never seen such richness so openly displayed. Under their heavy cloaks, the girls wore styles of dress Maia had never seen or imagined. Justicia wore a Grecian *peplos*, pure white and edged in gold and purple. Another girl wore a bright pink and orange toga-like garment, which wrapped around her body and over her shoulder, translucent and shimmering with gilded thread and jewels.

The girls were not all as Roman as Lyvia had believed. One woman had glossy dark skin, her small round face held elegantly above her sisters, her hair, long twisted ropes that fell to her waist. It too, was scattered with tiny sparkling jewels.

From the safety of Luc's arm, Maia gaped. If she had not been so utterly overwhelmed, she may have groaned or sighed in awe. Instead she hung back, staring, her mouth slightly open.

Behind the women, a group of soldiers walked less confidently into the room; Praetorian, by dress and bearing. Luc stood straight and gave a curt nod of deference to the centurion as they followed through into the hall. None of Luc's men arrived. Bassus continued smiling broadly as he searched for a servant on whom to unload his mound of capes.

Lyvia had shaken free of her paralysis and boiled up behind her guests, unable to cut off their access but determined to end their night's entertainment. "No you don't. You don't get comfortable at my expense. How dare you bring yourselves into the home of a decent Roman family?"

"Oh, Madam, don't you remember?" There was a purr in Justicia's voice, or maybe a growl. It was not the voice of someone who tolerated fools. "You invited us especially for the *Lupercalia*. We sent runners ahead of us, and you responded with an invitation. The life of a priestess involves so much travel and discomfort an offer like yours could never be refused."

"Priestess? Is that what you call yourself? I know you, you were Julia Galeria and you shamed your husband into divorcing you." Lyvia's eyes had narrowed and her rapier tongue was poised to dissect.

"And I know you; you were Lyvia Hateria and you buried yours. Bassus, how is your health? A wealthy man can never be too careful."

Lyvia appeared not to have heard the slur. "He put you out for adultery. Call yourselves whatever you like, but I see why you cover your faces and stay in shadows and secrecy. You're whores, no better than street walkers and camp followers."

"Ah Lyvia, we are much better paid, as I see are you. Looking around this villa I would guess your hobby is almost as lucrative. Still, we haven't eaten this well for months and for that we must be truly grateful. You've brought up a feast. It will save us hunting fresh meat tonight."

"Don't bother with that fiction. Keep your wolf delusion for peasants and men. I won't be feeding any of you. You're not welcome at my table. You came into my home using secrecy and lies, and now you can all leave."

Justicia paused, tapping long fingers on the table in front of her. "Well. Where

does that leave us?" There was no hint of retreat in her tone, nothing to suggest humiliation or withdrawal. She rolled the words slowly from her tongue, and there might even have been a smile on her red lips, if Maia had had the temerity to look.

"I must admit I am surprised that someone so proud of her propriety would make a scene like this at such an auspicious feast. And to invited guests." She seemed to consider her options, briefly. "I see it this way. We are ordered into the protection of our escort: these fine Praetorian Guards here with us. You could put your hands upon us and have us removed, but that would mean these lovely young men, already tired and out of sorts, would have to defend us against you, and who, some servants and farmers?"

"Surely we are all civilised people. This wonderful food shouldn't go to waste, should it? I suggest we stay and eat, celebrate our goddess' feast, and you sit down and make the best of a bad situation."

It was Lyvia's turn to consider her options. While the women argued, two of the priestesses had positioned themselves, one on each of Bassus' arms, so he had been steered toward the top of the table and encouraged to sit. His smile had become less certain, but he seemed to enjoy the debate.

Lyvia looked hard at the Praetorians, sizing up their attitudes, trying to gauge their loyalties, and deciding at last on a strategic withdrawal. As she stormed past Maia, across the atrium and down into her suite, she spat under her breath, "You get back to your rooms." But she did not turn to see her word obeyed.

Luc looked tired. His arm was cold to the touch, drawing heat away from Maia's shoulder, and he held back from walking to the doorway of the dining hall. "Which way?" he asked.

"In there. Aren't you coming in to eat?" Maia looked around the door jamb as she spoke, longing to get closer to the extraordinary, fearless women who moved around the trestle. She looked back to encourage him.

"I wasn't invited. I'll go eat something and sleep. You go in. Enjoy the company. It looks like you've been left as mistress of the house."

She laughed. "No, I don't think so. I've been dismissed, but there is no way I'm leaving here. I want to get in there and talk to these women. Look at them." She slipped her arm out of his and took his hand in both of hers. "Please? I know you're tired, but don't you want to meet them?"

"I have met them. And I'll be travelling with them for long enough."

Before he could finish his argument a young servant appeared at their side. "Sir," he said, looking at the floor rather than at them. "The Master has asked you and your men in to the feast. I'm to go to the barracks now. Ma'am, the Master asks that you come in and join the table."

Maia grinned. "Thank you. Yes." She turned back to Luc. "There's so much good food in there. Why would you eat dry meat and corn meal when you can feast? And I really doubt Bassus thought to make the offer, so it seems our guest has assumed the role of Mistress.

"That's your invitation, and mine. Come on." She started to walk through the door, but he held his ground. Maia's heart pounded in her chest and a rush of adrenaline urged her at once to run and hide or to laugh out loud. Nothing like this had ever happened. Never had anyone contradicted her stepmother, and now she had a chance to speak to the strange, shameless women who had dared. Holding to his hand, she pulled gently. "Come on. You can tell Cilo what he's missing." He lurched forward, unable to resist her, and followed into the room.

At the door three girls met and separated them, leaving Maia feeling naked and alone. All the courage she'd borrowed fell to weakness in her knees, and her hands were

suddenly empty where they'd clung to his arm. As she was directed to the top of the table near Bassus, she turned to watch the other girls lead Luc to a vacant seat midway down its length. Justicia was seated beside him, presiding elegantly over those around her like it was an imperial court. Each of the girls had taken a seat with one or two stools in between, so that they spread the length of the table with soldiers or empty seats spaced evenly between them.

To Maia's right, the girls who had commandeered Bassus' attention still held it enthralled. Together they fed him and fussed over his needs, ignoring Maia. On her left, an elegant Roman woman ate slowly, drank deeply and spoke exclusively to the young guard beside her. Maia again found herself alone, perched uncomfortably on this unfamiliar stool, without a friend and unable to ask her questions. Priestesses of Luperca. *Lupae*, with a kinder name. Prostitutes. Very, very wealthy prostitutes, with a Praetorian Guard and an escort to the frontiers. She had to know more.

From where Justicia sat, down to her left and across the table, Maia could hear snippets of words and laughter, but the masses of food between them meant she could not see the woman's face and mouth clearly enough to follow the conversation. There might never be another chance to speak or listen to these girls. If this one chance passed her by, she would spend the rest of her life wondering. Fear hammered in her stomach and she crushed her palms against the rough fabric of her shawl.

Standing as if she had courage and confidence enough, she walked around behind her father, down the length of the table to where Luc sat, and leaned to whisper. "Let me sit there. Will you swap seats so I can sit near her? I want to ask her questions."

Luc swallowed. His hands froze around a bowl of air, as if he might be weighing options or appealing a decision. Without looking up at her, he silently chose his course and stood, leaning briefly to the lady's ear as he stepped back, making way for Maia to take his place.

Justicia's look was a jag of ice. Maia had made a bad choice, but the choice was made. She could run away and hide, or she could ask the questions she so desperately wanted to ask. As calmly as she could, she managed some words. "Hello, Ma'am. Excuse me pushing in but I so badly wanted to talk to you."

"Not so prudish as your mother then, I see. Aren't you concerned about what will be said about you if you speak to me? Not concerned over your reputation and your virtue?" There was no kindness in her tone; the sarcasm was meant to bite.

Again, Maia considered flight, but flight to where, to what? There was no more spite here than she dealt with day to day. She decided on honesty. "My virtue? Well that would be hard to smear. I'm the best known virgin in Gaul. It is my only claim to fame."

"Really?" She had succeeded at least in turning the edge of the woman's tone. "How is that, then? I assume you are Bassus' daughter, fit enough to marry just about anyone you chose I would have thought."

"Yes and no. Bassus' stepdaughter. Also, I'm married to his son, Cilo. My wedding was famous hereabouts for its spectacular anticlimax."

This time her words hit a mark. Justicia stared, openly astonished by what she had heard. Food had stopped midway to her mouth. "Cilo's wife? You are married to Oppius Pompeius?"

"You know him?"

"Yes, I know him. How is it he is in Britannia as tribune if he is married to you?"

"That's a question no one seems to want to answer, least of all Cilo. It was something Lyvia planned, I think. She had him married off to me the same day he resigned for another season. Now she has me married, with no dowry of my own at all,

and I'm his problem. If he goes to Rome, he takes only half of Papa's property. Her son inherits equally with him. If Cilo dies out there somewhere before then, I lose my share. She gets the lot. That's only my theory, though. One day I'll ask Cilo."

"I'd like to ask him myself. When I see him, I will." Justicia's face was still frozen in surprise. "Well, well, well? Stepdaughter. Are you Lyvia's daughter, then?"

"No. When will you see him?"

Across the table, Luc had drawn his hands back into a clench beside his food. He stared at his plate, hunched over the implications of their conversation. Justicia threw a hard look, full of questions or accusations at him, and following her eyes, Maia too, looked to him for an answer. Whatever he might have added to the exchange though, was hidden in livid silence. Maia asked again, "When will you see him?"

"I would think in about a month's time when we get to the front." Justicia turned back to Maia and quietly, a little perplexed, began to smile.

"Why on earth are you going to the front? Surely it's too dangerous and uncomfortable. Spring is almost here and the new campaign season will begin. The men will be fighting; it will be cold and wet and bloody. I'm sorry, but I can't think of a single reason so many women would go to the frontier." Maia looked up as the small group of Luc's auxiliaries entered, nodded toward him, and then moved to take seats.

Seeming to consider her answer, Justicia began to chew slowly. She moved her food around on the platter, toying with some figs and spiced fowl. "Have you forgotten we are priestesses? We are called to minister to the spiritual needs of our brave soldiers."

Maia smiled at the joke, but no one else seemed to find the words amusing. "I thought your duties were more physical?"

"Ah, did you? I wonder where the difference lies. We love our boys, and love can make fools of us all, you know, even those who should know better." She had raised her voice slightly, inviting other ears to hear her thoughts. "So, on the front lines, our boys have mud and blood and ice and fear and death. But for love, for love and tenderness and nurture, they have only each other." She let that thought hang in the air as she looked at the image she had created. "Or," she seemed to cheer, "they have us."

"Then why Britannia? There isn't a more distant territory. I'm sorry but you don't look like you are accustomed to hardship."

"I told you. For love." The priestess began to look less comfortable.

"You would go to Britannia for love? But what about money? Soldiers aren't wealthy men. If you move away from Rome, where will your funds come from?" Maia had slipped to the edge of her stool. Her questions became more crowded and urgent, her sense of etiquette less demanding.

"You know, I think you should stop asking so many questions?" Justicia was plainly unaccustomed to being manipulated in conversation, but this child, with her piercing golden eyes, seemed to compel her answers. The girl's honesty and guilelessness left her without her usual defensiveness, and she found she had already said much more than she had intended.

Maia was stung. Not so much because she was embarrassed by her *faux pas*, but because she feared she'd wasted her chance to learn more. "I'm sorry." She slipped back squarely onto her stool and took up a piece of fruit. "But it must be very expensive to travel like this and I can't imagine some rich man in Rome paying for you to travel all over the empire. How can you do it?"

The *Lupa* smiled, dabbed at her mouth and then laughed out loud. "Okay. Just this one question, then." She spoke slowly, her words smooth and richly rounded. "There are rich men who are not in Rome, remember. Your own husband, for one. And I have my

own money. I have estates in Italia and Hispania, and we spend part of every year at home. The estates are well managed and produce a good income.

"Also, my girls are working their way toward independent wealth, many from slavery. So you see, as I told your mother, our career choice is well paid. We can afford to indulge our own small follies. This journey is one of them."

"Then how do you know Cilo? He's been in the army for ten years, all that time in Britannia or *Gallia Aquitania*."

"You've started again." Something subtle had changed in Justicia's bearing. Potentials were becoming clearer, opportunities. Her back straightened and her expression hardened as she decided to entertain this young woman a little longer. She smiled disarmingly. "We spent most of the last two years in *Gallia Aquitania*. We are well acquainted with the many parts of the Twentieth Legion, in and out of Britannia.

"Now, no more questions. You tell me how you come to be Bassus' stepdaughter, but not Lyvia's child. Have I missed an important part of our host's pedigrees? Shame on me; I like to know who everyone is and what they are doing."

Maia conceded. "My mother was a slave, a prisoner of war taken in the years after the Icenian rebellion. I was with her. Bassus took pity on us, I think, at the slave markets in Lutetia. After a short time, he freed us and married my mother. He named me Maia, after the daughter of Plione. That's all there is. That is my story."

"It's a very short story, that one. Still. Cilo would have been a child then, too, I see. So you two have grown up together. You must know him very well?"

"We were children together. I thought I knew him, but maybe I haven't known the man so well. He's been a soldier for ten years. As he has said himself, it's all he ever wanted to be. Perhaps not so much a senator. Or a husband."

"No, perhaps not." She toyed thoughtfully with her food.

Maia caught the sharp look Luc threw across the table, but he refused to meet her eyes, returning to his meal with an attitude of barely suppressed rage or anxiety. She watched the hard clench of his jaw and her pulse quickened, as if some part of her could read threats in his tense silence. Her fingers trembled at the thought of holding his attention and reading the unspoken warnings in his eyes.

"Tell me Maia, how do you deal with his absence?" Justicia's words called her back, and her smile was supportive, inflammatory. "Are you angry? Are you content to wait here in comfort for his return? Have you considered going to him?"

Luc stood suddenly, skidding his stool back with a jarring screech. "Excuse me," he said quietly, moving down the table to where a group of his men sat laughing with two of the *Lupae*. The formality of the table had dissolved, and people were clustering around different conversations, moving away from Lyvia's novel banquet to the more familiar comfort of couches. Bassus continued to be delighted by his two special guests, and servants stepped forward with a constant supply of wine, lubricating the chatter and relaxing the tensions of the night. Maia turned back to find she had been left with Justicia's whole attention.

"I don't know what it is I feel. Acceptance, maybe. Sadness." Abandonment. Desolation. Terror. "Yes, I have thought of going to him. But I don't know how. And I don't know how he would feel about it if I did." Shame. Humiliation.

"Would it be worse to know, than not to know? Really? What possible reason could he have for not wanting to see his wife? Would you really rather wait five years for him?"

"I could offer you passage with us. We are going to Londinium, establishing a temple there. Then, depending on the state of the region, we will travel north to Viroconium. I don't know how long it will take, we don't value speed over comfort, but

I know you will see him sooner than if you wait for him here.”

Maia stared at her, shocked, watching the corners of her mouth turn up in the slightest of smiles. Her dark brown eyes were hooded, heavily kohled and thick with black lashes. There was no way to read their dark depths, and Maia feared the offer had more to do with her own secrets than any desire to aid reconciliation. It was too good to be true. “Why? Why do you want to do this?”

“As I keep telling you, my dear. We love our boys. And love makes fools of us all. And you love our Cilo, don’t you?”

“So do you think I would make a fool of myself? For love?”

“I think that is what you are doing right now. Waiting. Pining for a lover who might never come back.” All traces of the smile had vanished. If she was still talking about Maia, she was no longer looking at her, but into a past or a future only she could see. “When it comes to love, it is foolishness to wait around for a logical conclusion.”

“This is so sudden. How long will you give me to think about it?”

“How long? You mustn’t consider, you must answer from your heart.” The priestess was smiling again, a predatory, sensual look that sent shivers of excitement up Maia’s spine. “I suppose you can consider your choices until we leave here. You can tell no one, though, of your choice. If you come with us, it will be our secret, and you will travel as we do, cloaked.”

A pulse punched up into Maia’s stomach as she realized the implications of the offer she had been made. Her hands were trembling too hard to hold her spoon, so she dropped it in her plate, pulling both hands down onto her lap. The rough wool of her shawl scratched at her sticky palms as she stared, speechless, into her future.

Luc sat at the far end of the table in a tight clique of diners, his back to her. There was no one else she could ask, no one she could tell. Tiberia would be certain they would eat her. Maybe they would.

There were possibilities more dreadful. A virgin travelling with no protector in the company of *Lupae*: women said to be wolves, who whipped their lovers with goat skin flails. It was said they were skilled with their mouths and tongues, and they knew secret arts of giving pleasure to a man, things Maia could not even imagine, thoughts that scorched her cheeks with embarrassment and tightened in her sex like guilty anticipation.

Justicia followed her wide-eyed stare, looking from Maia to Luc’s harsh clench and back again. “Tell me, how well do you know your husband’s friend, there? You were clinging to his arm at the entrance tonight, weren’t you? I’m not sure how it happens that you could have made such a close friend of him.” The *Lupa* wore her heavy lashes like shutters over her thoughts, and the light that shone behind them seemed as specious as ashed-over coals.

Maia shifted uncomfortably, but she met the interrogatory stare. “He was at my wedding. When Cilo was too drunk, he helped me. He was my only friend then, and really he was Cilo’s friend first, but he was as close as I’ve ever had to someone who cared what I thought or felt. He’d probably do the same for anyone, and it’s just kindness, but it’s as close as I get to friendship.”

“Don’t make the mistake of thinking Luc is a kind man, Maia.” Justicia’s words were sharp, and she sat forward as if to drive her warning closer. “He’s volatile. I would say he is a man who can be difficult to handle.” Catching a quick breath she sat back, smiled, and softened her tone. “If you want a friend to chase after, find someone better suited to your own temperament.”

“I don’t chase after him. He just seems to keep turning up.” She smiled, it was true. “I think he’s fated to rescue me.”

“Except he doesn’t believe in fate.” The purr had deepened towards a threat, but Maia was looking at memories, recalling promises of better days to come.

“No, he doesn’t. Did he tell you that, too? And he has no time for gods or anything that goes with them.”

The High Priestess drew herself up. “That,” she snapped, “remains to be seen.” The Praetorian centurion who had been sitting nearby, moved his seat closer and began a whispered conversation and she turned her back on Maia, dismissing her and all her considerations.

Maia’s gaze drifted back toward the end of the table where he sat. She was alone again, and at a table with a host of soldiers and prostitutes. Luc flicked a quick glance over his shoulder toward her, but before she could smile in acknowledgement he turned away again. Since her mother’s death, there had been no one except Bassus and Cilo who cared if she was alive or dead. No one seemed to see her. Except Luc. She was invisible.

Justicia was right, though: it would not be seemly, certainly not in this company, if she was seen to be chasing after Luc’s attention. And there was no one else she could ask.

Really, would it be worse to know what Cilo would say than to wait here and not know? Another campaign season was about to start and it would be next winter before he could possibly travel back to the Seine Valley. He owed her answers. At very least, he owed her answers.

There wasn’t so much to consider.

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CHAPTER FOUR.

By the fifth day of travelling, Maia had grown more accustomed to the routine of the journey. At first, trying to sleep through the day jostled by the tilt and swagger of the *carpentum* left her irritable and disoriented. But the long nights of wakefulness, even though she seldom moved from Neria’s tent, meant that her body was becoming accustomed to the reversal. The dull weight of boredom had settled and was crushing.

She saw nothing of the landscape of *Gallia Belgica* as they passed through it, and knew nothing of where or how the camp was made each night. Caped and silent, she was able to eat by the fire with the other girls, but if any of the guard joined the meal, she was ushered back to the small tent to wait. Her skin and hair itched abominably, with only a bowl of warm water and a cloth to wash with each evening. It had almost begun to seem that waiting in the comfort of the villa would have been a better option.

Luc’s voice reached her from the nearby campfire, and she moved to the flap of her tent. Pulling her cowl down to be sure her face was well covered, she peered through a small gap, longing for the company of someone more familiar. Neria was friendly enough, attentive to her needs, but staying hidden meant rarely having the opportunity to talk to anyone about what she was doing.

Several unfamiliar faces sat around the warmth of the fire, soldiers, suggesting the camp had been made near to a fort. And with the security of the second garrison, the whole camp had visibly relaxed and Maia ached to be a part of the celebratory mood. The cold air carried the familiar smells of a riverbank and whispered promises on the breath of the distant ocean.

In profile against the firelight, Luc seemed younger than she remembered.

Certainly he was younger than the men who sat with him, but he carried age in the same way Cilo did. Not so much the weight of years, but of experience, of living days which had ended youth with grim finality and from which manhood had emerged, cold and drenched in blood and sweat.

Engrossed in her voyeurism, she stepped back sharply as a caped figure suddenly blocked her view. Neria smiled from the depths of her cowl and whispered, "Cover up, Sweetie, come on. Come with me."

Clinging to the edges of the firelight, she moved silently, following the hem of the robe in front. Stepping around guy ropes, catching up the hem of her cape to keep from tripping, Maia followed as quickly as she dared to the light of a larger tent. Once inside, Neria quickly fastened the door flap behind them, and then drew a heavy brocade curtain across the opening, sealing them in a warm cocoon of brazier light.

The space was wide and open, twice larger again than the area Maia was accustomed to and richly decorated. Fine fabrics, a thick-piled carpet underfoot, brass and glass accoutrements glinting in the gentle light, and everywhere the elegance and sophistication of wealth. Fragrant steam seethed from a large copper tub in the centre of the room, and rising from a wide, soft pallet, Justicia held out her hands in welcome.

"Come in, my darling. Let me have a look at you. Has the journey been too awful?" As she spoke she moved to unclasp Maia's cloak, slipping it from her shoulders and handing it summarily to Neria.

Maia had no real sense, sitting beside her at the feast, of just how tall the priestess was and she found herself reaching up into a warm embrace. "I'm okay. I am feeling a bit cramped up and bored, but surely I'll be able to come out of hiding soon. We've come much too far for me to be sent back now, so there can't be any point to hiding anymore."

"Yes, soon. Once we cross the Straits. Until then a runner could still be sent back to the villa. For now, if they suspect that you might be with us, they have done nothing to demand your return. They don't yet know you have left or they don't much care." As before, she pulled no punches with her frank assessment of the situation. "Meanwhile, all going well we will be at the coast tomorrow. So, we have tonight to redeem you from your old life, and to bring you, what will we say, to full bloom in your new life." If there was any sarcasm in the words, her smile was warm.

"You have plans for me, then? Is there something I should know before I go any further?"

"My dear child, you've come much too far to be wondering at my plans now. But it's all right. You don't have anything to fear from me, or my girls. Or generally from the men we entertain. But there are things which we hold very important and one of them is hygiene."

Ants burst loose across Maia's skin and her face burned in the coming fires of shame. Of all her mortifications, this one had been unexpected, so blunt, so humiliating. Even as justifications raced through her mind - the journey, the circumstances - she found herself unable to answer the charge, only to drop her face and rub dejectedly at her hands.

"Oh my dear, I'm sorry. I didn't mean any insult." Justicia pulled her again into an embrace, soothing her against her fragrant bosom. "I meant generally, not that you were unclean. Look. This is what I'm talking about." She opened a small trunk, showing coloured bottles full of perfumes, incense oils and medication, pots of powder and cosmetics, and a dozen small opaque blocks. Handing one of the waxy blocks to Maia, she said simply, "Smell it."

Sandalwood sweeter than any incense Maia had ever burned filled her nostrils.

Tiny flecks of dried lavender were suspended in it too, so the whole piece had a soft, purple hue.

"From the Germanic traders. We make our own now, so we are not so dependent on merchants crossing the front lines."

"But what is it?" Maia blinked away the threat of tears.

"It's for bathing, child. Far less greasy than tallow blocks. Come over here. This is why you're in here tonight. I want to introduce you to the delights of bathing in a tub when a bathhouse is out of reach. And clean hair. Have they always oiled your hair?"

"Yes." The answer was whispered.

"Well, not any more. Now, what did you bring with you? Any clothes? Sandals? Jewels?"

"I brought what I'm standing up in. I didn't want anything from the Stepmother."

"That was foolish of you. If it was yours, why would you leave anything behind for that cow? It doesn't matter. We have clothes enough for you; you're only small. Some of the girls wear clothes once and then pass them off. It's a waste.

"Now. Take off that *tunica* and we'll toss it. You step into the tub and relax."

Pushing heavy shreds of hair back behind her ear, Maia did as she was told. Lifting the loose linen *tunica* over her head then slipping off her sandals, she stood naked, shivering, and self-conscious. Unsure of how to attempt the tub, she fumbled with her small leather pouch, releasing it from her belt, and slipped her gold bangle from her wrist.

"What are these treasures, then?" the priestess purred.

"Just that. Small treasures. Charms that are important to me."

"And the string. You leave that there?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It's important to me."

"I see. Maybe we can talk about it another time if you're sure it has to stay."

"I am."

Neria smiled, her open golden face so full of reassurance as she took the precious things that Maia twitched a small smile in return. Still holding to the other girl's hand, she stepped up onto a low stool, and down into knee-deep hot water.

Swirling the last dregs of beer, Luc watched the froth settle, then swallowed, belched, and put the mug aside. He had been running the caravan hard, anxious about crossing so much open country so close to the borders of Germania. The front was bloody and active and the line of Roman defences stretched, in places, dangerously thin. The threat of bandits and raiding parties ached between his shoulders.

Now the watches were set, and for the first time in days his time was his own. The thought brought with it no relief. The issues he'd been putting off still had to be faced and he had no heart to rush toward a resolution.

Tomorrow would come soon enough and with it the coast. At Gesoriacum he would have to face his hatred of ocean travel. There, barges stood ready to carry them from Portus Itius to Rutupiae. He had run the company north over land rather than west and up the coast to avoid unnecessary use of boats of any kind, and now that it was unavoidable, he refused to think about it, only that he would soon be home.

The other problem was not so cut and dried. It needed to be faced squarely, again, and there would be no better time than tonight.

With nothing left to hold, Luc watched his hands shake. Tremors he could not throw off rode his nerves like the permanent set of frost. Tension ached in his neck and shoulders, and he clenched his fists, turning them over in the weak firelight. Fatigue as heavy as lead weighed behind his eyes and he longed for sleep.

Somewhere there was a soft, clean place where he could close his eyes and shut out blood and screaming. Somewhere away from the life he knew, there was peace and safety and he could sleep without the stench and stain of bloodshed. He could rest without nightmares and horror scraping silent screams from his chest. There would be no more murder, and no more winning and losing and dying.

Until he found that place, he preferred to move than to sleep.

He turned from the fire, looking into the shadows past its light to where the priestesses' tents stood in a dark cluster. He had no more reason to procrastinate. Holding out his hand in the soft light once more, he cursed quietly under his breath, and stood to face the issue squarely one last time.

Maia hung her head back over the basin as Justicia poured wine vinegar over her hair to wash away the yolk of eggs.

"Tish, it's me. Open up." Luc slapped the tent flap, vaguely annoyed to find it laced. Blowing fogged breath into his cupped hands, he stamped his cold feet irritably.

The priestess held a hand over Maia's mouth before she could respond and whispered urgently to Neria, "Go quickly. Tell him I need more hot water. Ask him to draw more and have it heated." To Maia, she said, "That'll keep him a while."

Neria moved quickly to the curtain, moving it only enough to put her face through, and opening a lace on the tent flap. Before she could deliver her message, Luc called over her, "I need to talk to you. Come on, Tish, let me in."

Neria spoke quickly, pulling the curtain back into place as soon as she'd finished her message and snatching up Maia's woollen cloak before she came back to the side of the tub.

"It must be something important." Maia looked panicked, a little bewildered by the sudden rush to have her out of the tub and away.

"It's nothing to worry yourself about." Justicia wrapped her in her cloak. "I know what he wants to discuss and it's nothing I haven't heard before, nothing I need to hear again." She pulled Maia close and kissed her lightly by the ear. "You go now and find something to wear. Neria will do your hair. By tomorrow night you will be in Britannia where you belong. So, go now. Quickly."

With the girls gone, Justicia poured the mess of egg yolk and vinegar wash out into the sandy soil by the entrance. The tub would have to stay as it was for the moment. She stepped out of her *tunica*, leaving only the sheer silk of her *palla* passed under one arm and held at the opposite shoulder by a jewelled clasp. She scrunched her hair and ran her hands over the soft rounded mound of her stomach. The days were gone when her breasts sat as high as she would have liked, but tonight she would have to use all she had, as it was.

Tears threatened, and anger rose in response. The gods, she spat a curse, and the fates were too cruel. She had already lost everything she loved once, and by the gods she'd had her revenge on those who'd taken it. But she'd been younger then. Stronger.

No gods, however petty, would ask it of her again. The pain was just too big to bear. Would the goddess she served not grant her the one thing she loved more than life? Cold air chafed at her exposed skin, and the chill bit painfully at her bare nipples.

Seizing a fur from her pallet, she pulled it tight around herself and began to pace.

Maia slept through the next day's journey like she had never slept before. The silky fabrics of her bedding caressed her newly clean skin like a lover's breath. Her hair fell across her cheek in swathes of silk, tart and fragrant as wine vinegar. When she woke it was to the sound and smells of a port city bustling into the evening, and Luc's impatient banging on each *carpentum*, rousing his tenants to make camp.

Maia sat up, excited, pulling her hair up in a loose knot just as Neria had shown her and fastening it there with clips. She didn't bother to dress, only to pull her warm cloak over the loose *tunica* she had slept in. The cart jostled awkwardly as the team was unfettered, and she waited impatiently for the chance to move from her caravan to the tent. Neria had given her one beautiful transparent lavender wrap, jewelled with beads, and she was anxious to look at the discards the other girls had to offer.

Peering as always through the slit between her curtains, she watched Luc storm around in the gathering darkness, thunder etched across his brow and murder in every step. His words were garbled by distance and she woke Neria and Fausta. "Something's going on. I can't hear what he's saying yet, but he's really angry."

Neria opened her wide blue eyes, smiling as she came awake. Even her voice had a childlike sweetness that matched both her face and her heart. "He's always like that, even when he's in a good mood. And I think maybe he has a lot on his mind. We'll find out soon enough. Maybe we'd better get ready just in case." She crawled to the curtain as she spoke, uncaped, peering out into the evening drizzle. "Cover up. He's coming this way."

Maia shrank back into the shadows, holding her breath. Her fingers gripped the soft cloth of her robe and a smile touched her lips. Fear of discovery warred in her heart with the sudden desire to move to the curtain and see surprise lighten the shadows in his eyes.

"Ladies." He slapped the upright beam of the canopy, his words were clipped. "We aren't making camp here, the tents are staying stowed. We will be loading the barges before dawn to catch the tide. You've got about eight hours until then. Also, we are in the docks. Do not move anywhere outside this compound without an escort." And he was gone.

Maia breathed again.

Fausta mumbled, "Bad tempered bastard. I'm going back to sleep."

"Me too." Neria pulled furs and soft blankets up around her face.

Maia watched them snuggle back down, disappointed, and struggled back to the small opening. Luc moved to the other wagons, his posture stiff and his hands clenched at his sides. He seemed to drag a cloud of pain around his shoulders, and Maia longed to run to him. He had offered her the only kindness she'd ever known, and watching his movement now caused a wash of cold discomfort deep inside her.

Once they had crossed the Straits, Justicia had said. Until then Maia tried to calm herself enough to get another couple of hours sleep. It was the only way she'd stand the long cramped sleeplessness of the night.

When the smells of cooking woke her again, she gathered her cape around her and looked out into the firelight, checking that she would be unseen before climbing carefully down from the covered wagon. The High Priestess was at the stewpot, covered, but recognizable by her height. Only Fausta was nearly as tall and she was still snoring.

From deep inside her cowl, Maia spoke a quiet greeting, helping herself to a bowl

of soup.

"Hello there, my little one. Did you sleep well?" The huskiness in her voice suggested she herself had not.

"Yes. I feel so clean, it's wonderful. Are you all right?" Although her face was covered, there was stiffness in the older woman's movements that spoke to Maia of pain, or terrible grief.

"I'm all right. I don't want to sit about out here in the rain, though. Come in to my *carra*. We haven't had a chance to talk."

From between deep cushions and furs, Maia reached for more bread and sopped into her soup. "I've been waiting for a chance to talk to you alone. I still want to know why you decided to do this, to offer to hide me here, to take me to my brother." She pushed her cowl back, and continued to eat.

"I thought you might. The answer is simple enough, but I'll tell you a bit about me first, then you will understand far better." Justicia turned gracefully despite the cramped space, and arranged her cushions before dropping her cape to her feet and taking a seat. Without her cowl, the puffiness that comes with hours of crying pouched under her eyes, and her mouth was set in a tight, grim line.

"Your stepmother knows of me; she knows all the cruellest gossip. Noble Roman women are by far the biggest snobs and gossips and the cruellest and worst hypocrites in all the empire. As she said, my husband divorced me many years ago and it caused quite a scandal, not least because his money was actually mine and I kept it.

"You see, I was foolish enough to fall very deeply in love with a slave much younger than myself. That isn't too terrible, if it's discreet and your husband is content to spend the money and shut his mouth. But then I added to his chagrin by producing a daughter. Not his, you see. And noticeably so. Her hair was fairer, dark gold like yours, and her eyes were pale, more green than yours, but not as dark as mine or my husband's. Again, not so terrible if it's all discreet. But he wasn't. He had my beloved strangled, divorced me, and then my daughter died. Suddenly. Too suddenly." Fresh tears welled up in her eyes and she wiped them away carefully, worn out by wiping so many tears.

"So, there you are. That is my terrible past. I was shamed out of society, but too wealthy to slip unnoticed from their world. Also, I developed an extravagant hatred for the great ladies of Rome, and as you might imagine that made it difficult to stay there.

"Now, I simply buy myself daughters, as many as I can. I despise slavery in all forms and snobbery in all classes. And as for great men?" At this thought she smiled. "There are none. They are useful. They have money and power, power to make changes from which my girls and I will one day benefit, but in the end they are all little boys. Only some are more beautiful than others."

"I'm not sure that explains what this has to do with me. Or Cilo. And I wonder if prostitution isn't slavery, too, just better dressed." Maia spoke quietly, but her direct gaze drove its powerful innocence into eyes that refused to turn away.

"My girls travel with me only if they choose to. For most it is only a means to an end. On the estates the girls are educated, classically and in life. That is, my understanding of life. Not even Rome will last forever. Not even Rome. Comfort and prosperity and happiness should not depend on status, especially status conferred by hypocrites.

"And you? You, my lovely little one, are far too smart and far too courageous to shrivel in Lyvia's dungeons. I cannot imagine how you and Cilo could manage a marriage, but if that is what you want to do, you should do it. Then, when he does return to Rome as a senator, you will bring new eyes to an old world. It can only do good."

Maia's shock registered plainly on her face. "I can promise you I am neither smart nor courageous. I can barely write my name, I read very badly, and I live in a state of constant terror."

"Aha. Is that true? All right then, have it as you will." Justicia nodded. "Then know at least that if my daughter was alive she would be seventeen, nearly your age, and she would have had your colouring and your heritage. Her father was a Celtic warrior, also from Britannia. If I can give you the freedom of your own future, your own homeland, your own life, then that is more than I did for my own child."

As Maia stared intently at this woman, struggling to read the deeper truths that hid in the shadows of her eyes and the lines on her brow, her expression changed completely. "One day," she added, smiling a complex smile, "when you have spoken to Cilo and know your future better, maybe you will come back to me. You might want a brother more than a husband. And you might miss having a mother as much as I miss having my own daughter."

There was no answer to that. Maia tried to tuck floating strands of hair back behind her ears, but they fell again as soon as she moved.

Outside, the rain settled into a steady drum and the camp stayed silent, poised, waiting for the dawn. Justicia slept and Maia crept back to rest among her own cushions, wondering at the contradictions glaring at her. To see the High Priestess now, not cool and acidic but living as champion of all those less fortunate, made her frown and shake her head in confusion.

She had lost her love. And she had lost a child. Maia knew well enough the profound scars of loss. Still, it all seemed to sit a little askew. At least she understood better now why Justicia had taken such a shine to her. And it was warming to consider that, just maybe, Maia had someone who could love her like a mother.

Britannia might be more of a home than she remembered.

As the night drew to an end, the camp began to stir. Oxen grunted and complained about the effort as they towed the *carpenta*, one by one, onto the barges where their wheels were locked and made ready for the crossing.

Her travelling mates slept, and Maia wondered at the life she had been handed, her future in a homeland she could not recall.

She took her pouch from its tie at her waist and handled the little silver coin. It was Roman, it told her nothing about the place she came from or about her mother. She smiled too, at the walnut. It was her luck. Once they were on board the barges, when she could no longer be sent back, she would show it to Luc and show him how far it had brought her, whether the gods liked it or not.

The sun rose as the tide peaked, running the barges out and steadily to the north on the flood, and Luc sat at the side of the forecastle, gripping the bench seat and breathing over nausea.

He had no intention of watching the land slip away behind them, but watching his feet was already taking its toll on his gut. Taking another deep breath, he changed tactic, laying his head back and staring instead at the sky above. Even when he closed his eyes, the rhythm of the water moved inside his head and the creak and twang of the rigging drew his ears into the conspiracy. How many more hours did he have of this?

He wanted to sleep. There had been no rest for so many nights, and the strains of the journey were driven deep into the muscles of his arms and back and jaw. At least the rain had stopped and the water was calm enough. What he wanted most was to stagger

to the comfort of one of the *carpenta*, wrap himself in soft cloth, and bury his sickness in deep pillows.

It was not too far to the nearest canopied wagon. Three of them were anchored side by side down the middle of the wide cargo barge, under the centre rigging. The other three were on a second barge, somewhere behind them, and he had no desire to see if they were faring well. Justicia would not be pleased if he used one of her vehicles, but he'd made certain her wagon was on the second barge. Some of the caped girls were moving about, intrigued and excited by the sea voyage, so at least one of the vehicles was empty. Anything had to be better than the way he felt now.

Standing with difficulty, he moved down the wall beside the trough where the oarsmen laboured, toward the first *carpentum*. Holding its sideboards, sidestepping down its length, he made it to the opening and slapped weakly on the upright by way of a knock.

"Hello!" Leaning on the board, he stepped back, hanging his head forward as nausea rose, filling his mouth with hot spit. He breathed through the worst of the attack and then put a shaky foot to the step, heaved himself up, and fell forward into the soft inner sanctum.

Grabbing a large cushion, he pulled it against his stomach, rolled into a ball of misery, and groaned at the sounds that had followed him into his sanctuary. He couldn't open his eyes, so he lay still, breathing as deeply as he could and trying to still the constant motion inside his head.

"You want this basin?" The voice from beside him shocked through his funk, so his head came up too sharply and his eyes flew wide. He was trying to apologize for leaping into the van, but he only managed a croak, and a nod, before bile and water cascaded into the bowl.

"Sorry. I had to lie down." He wiped his mouth and put his head down on the cushion again. "I thought there was no one in here."

"That's okay. I'll wash this out. Want some water? Yes, I'll get some." Maia pulled her cloak up tight around her as she crouched, stepping over his corpse, moving to the entrance so she could sluice the tin bowl and fetch up the water skin. Kneeling in the shadows, she held the nozzle near his lips so he could drink a little, then wet a cloth and wiped it over his forehead.

Even in the deep shadows his face was beautiful. Maia drew the cloth over the contours of his jaw and let her fingertips graze the rough golden stubble. "Not so good on the water, huh?"

A grunt was all reply she got and he clasped the bowl tighter up beside his chin.

She wiped the damp cloth over his forehead again, deciding she should keep quiet and let him rest. "Why weren't the oxen loaded with the horses?" She folded her cloth and placed it carefully over his closed eyelids.

"Changed them. New ones on the other side," he mumbled.

"Do you want to sleep?"

"Yes."

"You want me to go outside?"

"I don't care."

"The others will be back soon; they've only gone out to have a look around."

Taking the cloth again, she dribbled more water on it and wiped over his hot forehead. "Maybe I should go out and tell them you're in here."

"Okay."

"Do you want me to go out? I just didn't want to leave you here so ill. Do you want more water?"

“No.”

She moved to wipe the cloth across his face again, and he caught her wrist, tight, dragging her forward into his line of sight. Maia let out a small shriek, fright shocking through her like the clang of a gong.

“Where did you get this?” Cilo’s gold bracelet hung against his hand, shining dully in the gloom. She sat silent, unable to answer, shock and fear clamping in her throat.

“Oh no. No.” He raised his head slowly, reluctant to open his eyes even in the dim light. “Show me your face.” He hadn’t released the grip on her wrist and it twisted painfully as he moved. “Maia?”

She was still afraid to answer, but the pressure on her wrist was increasing, pulling her forward and he was not about to let it go. “Yes.” A child’s voice.

“Oh no. I should have known. I should have known.” He let go of her wrist and she pulled it back, rubbing the place where his fingers had dug into her flesh. He didn’t see the bruise, though. He’d laid back, hands over his face, mumbling and swearing into his palms.

“It’s all right. Justicia knows I’m here. She helped me.” When she found her voice it rushed at him with a thousand assurances, none of which he seemed to accept.

“I bet she did. Damn it all, Maia, now what am I supposed to do?”

“Nothing. You don’t have to do anything.” She leaned forward, kneeling to press his shoulders down, trying to make him relax. His chest was hard, his skin hot under the light linen of his tunic. Fine threads of her hair fell to tickle against her cheek and down her throat, and they lifted goosebumps in the warm wash of his breath. Leaning over let her breasts fall forward and the loose flannel of her nightdress slipped like a caress over her nipples.

She sat back quickly, pulling the robe tighter across her chest self-consciously. “I’m going to see Cilo. I have to find out what sort of deal he made with the Stepmother. I have to know, Luc. I have a right to know what they did.”

He looked painfully at her in the shadows, then reached up gently to push the cowl back away from her face and his fingers left a burning trace over her cheek. “Have you been hiding in these vans all this time?”

Her heartbeat stuttered, catching the air in her chest and making her breath uncertain. “Yes, but it hasn’t been so bad. Boring, but I’ve been comfortable enough. And the girls are all nice to me.” She smiled, tried to reassure him and herself that way. “I have every right to go to him. They owe me that much. He owes me.”

Luc didn’t comment on that, just covered his eyes again with the back of a hand and groaned. In the darkness her purity seemed to shine, and the wide innocence of her eyes held his heart like a nest of down. If there was a place where the world was safe and right, he could see its shadows in the depths of those eyes.

She knelt beside him, looking down, like an angel, or a goddess. Beside him, where a fingertip could reach to touch her skin or his hand could slide through the silk of her hair. But she belonged to Cilo. Above him, pure and clean and unattainable. She belonged to a world he could never hope to enter. If there was peace and healing in her arms, it was a salvation he could never know.

“You should sleep,” she said. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Don’t I?” It was mumbled, his stomach had risen into his throat again.

“Let me look after you. Just rest. We can talk about it again when you are feeling better.” She wiped over his face with the damp cloth again, resting the back of cool fingers on his brow to check the burn in his skin. “Wait ‘til you hear Justicia. She can explain it better than I can.”

He groaned again, rolled onto his side away from her and curled up around his

cushion like he'd been kicked in the stomach.

Snatching a pillow for herself, Maia lay down, too, with her head curled forward so it rested against his back. If it had been Cilo, here, she could have wrapped her arms around him and held him. She could have spoken about her fear and her excitement. But this wasn't her brother, it was his best friend. She had no more right to him than a few borrowed moments of his time. At best she had his friendship. Her journey, her fears and her hopes were all her own to carry. At least she felt safer close against his back, even if he was clenched like a furious fist.

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CHAPTER FIVE.

Maia waited impatiently as the barges negotiated the shallow lagoon, crossing slowly to dock against the falling tide. She roused Luc from his sickbed with Neria's help and sent him in the direction of the pilot, but his only comments were terse, grunted or snapped from under the grim overhang of his mood.

Although she still wore her cape, Maia chafed at the restrictions of her travelling conditions. She refused to remain in her *carpentum*, walking out onto the deck and watching every movement, delighting in the nuance of every scene, every smell. She had watched the distant chalk cliffs and wide sand flats form through the afternoon mists as the fierce ebb tide rushed them south against their crossing.

She kept back out from underfoot as the men unloaded the cargoes, removed the packing from around the wagons and prepared to unship them. Late in the afternoon, as the first mule team came on board to haul the vehicles off, however, Neria insisted she come in under cover.

As evening settled, Maia found herself ensconced at a roadside inn in Rutupiae with the other women, while their escort disappeared behind the walls of the fort. In the privacy of their rooms, the girls ate well for the first time since leaving Bassus' villa, and then, nearer midnight, the retinue set out for the local bathhouse.

From deep within veils of steam, Justicia's voice carried, quiet but steady. "I understand you spent some time with Lucius on the crossing. How did it come about that our commander was sleeping in your berth?"

Maia knew Justicia would not approve of the situation, the girls were not supposed to allow anyone into the wagons, and the priestess' mood was as dark as death. "He was sick. Really, really sick. He just sort of stumbled in there, and I told him he should rest there 'til we made the crossing and that's what he did. I don't think he could have done anything else, to be honest." Cold doubts gnawed deep in her gut as she answered. Something in the way the priestess had manoeuvred their positions, something predatory in the purr of her voice, made Maia anxious.

Even in the warm water Justicia was stiff, pained, and her eyes were raw with tears or lack of sleep. "I see. And he chose your berth, without an invitation?" There was more to her questions than curiosity, and the answers seemed to bear a burden greater than they should.

Maia nodded, and Justicia continued, "Perhaps as we travel further together, you will come recognize just how much I have given you." Steam roiled and twisted between them, one moment hiding, the next revealing all that could be seen. "Surely then you will be able to make safer choices."

The old demons of humiliation and shame crawled across Maia's palms and she

rubbed them together under the water. She didn't understand the dangers she sensed or the safer choices she should make. Her skin was itching, too. She had been dismissed, that she understood. Standing up, she took the linen towel and used its roughness to scrape away her incompetence as she crept away.

During the next two days she stayed wrapped in her more familiar cocoon of insignificance. Fear and uncertainty had tainted all the joy of her newfound freedom. She stayed covered in her wagon, sleeping through the days, and ventured out only long enough to eat at night. Even Neria's tent was off limits some nights as the girls began to better acquaint themselves with their escort. In her loneliness and isolation she waited for glimpses of Luc, but they were rare, and she never found a chance to speak to him.

Ahead of them in Londinium a *taberna* had been bought and was being renovated, and from there the girls would run their salon as an oracular temple until Justicia decided on the best real estate in the area for her temple proper. It was planned they'd be at their building by nightfall, and the knowledge was both a relief and a niggling concern that kept Maia from sleep. She didn't want to live there for months as a disappointment, carrying all the shames from her old life and replanting them here where she had hoped to start again. She wanted to move on, to go to Cilo and then, as Justicia said, she would better know her own future.

What she needed more than anything else was someone to talk to. She needed to work through her options. She needed to make a plan for her future or her fates would carry her, once again, into a backwater and there she would stay until she died. Maybe there was no plan that could succeed against fate.

Careful not to disturb the girls sleeping beside her, Maia sat up, pulling her hair up into its loose bonds. She tugged her soft flannel *tunica* down and wrapped the lavender robe around herself, folded it back and pulled it up over her head. Quickly she laced her sandals, and with great difficulty backed out of the canopy, stepping down onto the step and then jumping free of the wagon as it rocked over the rutted stonework of the road.

Hers was the third *carpentum* in the convoy. Foot soldiers marched along each side, and a cavalryman rode at the front and rear. She walked backwards, away from the road, slipping in the loose scree of the roadside ditch and trying to smile reassurance at the astonished soldiers as they passed. As soon as the last car of the caravan came into view, she knew which way she was going. Fixing her eyes on the rough cobbled path under her feet, she started running back to where Luc brought up the rear.

As the last van waddled by, she moved toward the horseman, meeting the annoyance in his eye, holding out a hand for a lift. "Can I double with you, please?"

Luc shook his head, frowning with exasperation. "I don't believe this. Now what?" He had passed her and she hiked up her skirts as she started to jog along beside him, looking up expectantly. "Luc, please. Pull me up. I need to talk to you."

Reaching to twine his arm through hers, he held out a foot for her to step up on, and he lifted her sideways onto the wide curved pommel of his saddle. "You should be covered, you know that. You'll freeze out here." When he spoke there was no anger in his voice, only resignation.

"But I'm not a priestess, am I. I'm just a traveller now and the robe was too heavy to run in." She bundled the reams of light purple fabric up into her lap, adjusting it over her head and shoulders. "I needed to talk to you, and there isn't any other time to do it."

"What about tonight; we're coming up to Londinium in an hour or two." Dense forest had already given way to open fields, cleared back away from the road, and in the distance a cluster of farm buildings huddled under a low grey sky.

"I don't think Justicia likes me talking to you. She wasn't happy about you sleeping in the van on the ocean crossing." She picked at a bead on her robe as her

cheeks began to burn with embarrassment.

"And she will be thrilled about this arrangement now, won't she?" He was grinning, but the humour never quite reached his eyes.

"I didn't know if you would stay in Londinium or if you would move to barracks somewhere and then keep travelling." She smiled apologetically without looking at him. "So I thought I'd try now, but I wasn't going to tell her about it."

"You won't have to. She'll know by the time we get into town." He shifted back in the saddle to give her more room, or to put some space between him and the soft warmth of her side. Her hair, inches from his face, shone like honeyed corn silk, she smelled of sandalwood and wine, and the warm curve of her bottom moved on his lap with each step of the horse. "If you're planning a long talk, maybe you should climb up behind." Behind him, where he could keep his gaze from the skin of her cheek where it curved by her ear and down her long, pale throat. "You'll be more comfortable and I won't get the looks I'm getting from my men."

Maia blushed again. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to embarrass you. I just do things without thinking them through properly."

"Yes. I noticed that." He smiled again, and this time it lit his eyes with genuine amusement. He swung his leg back and slipped down, holding the mount still while Maia slid back behind the saddle. She rested one hand on his shoulder for balance and drew her narrow skirts up over faultless thighs so she could sit straight. He closed his eyes over a slow breath and vaulted up sideways, swinging his leg forward over the horse's ears. "So, what is it we have to discuss?"

Maia tried again to arrange the shawl over her hair but it slipped away, and she gathered it instead and tied its swathes up around her waist. Finding the right place to start was not easy; she had not decided exactly what it was she wanted to say before she left the wagon. "I don't know what to do." She smeared a drip away from the tip of her cold nose. "I would have asked Justicia, but I've done something that has made her angry and I don't feel like I can go and talk to her about it."

"You don't have to worry too much about that. She won't stay angry with you for long once you're settled in Londinium."

"All right." Maia drew the word out suspiciously, wondering how he could possibly say how Justicia would react. "You seem to know her, so you can tell me if I should stay here with her and the girls and wait another month. Or should I find a way to keep moving to where ever the Twentieth Legion is now?"

Luc spun so suddenly he jerked the horse's mouth and sent it dancing sideways across the cobbles. "Are you serious?" A deep frown cut his forehead and he glared at her.

Maia swallowed hard, rubbing her sticky palms down her thighs. Her heartbeat raced up into her throat so she struggled to breathe or speak. "I, yes. I mean, I don't know what to do." She put a trembling hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you angry, I just need someone to talk to about what I can do and I don't have anyone else I can ask."

He looked away, staring down into an unfathomable distance, gently shaking his head. When he spoke again, it was not in anger. The quiet in his voice was incomprehension, maybe awe. "I'm not angry, I'm stunned." He shook his head again, trying to find a way through the chaos of his thoughts. "I can't even believe you won't do it, can I? You just up and do what you need to do, that's it. You just do it."

Maia breathed a small sigh of relief. "I haven't done anything yet, though, have I? I'm only wondering what I should do."

"Nothing yet? Just stowed away with women you never met, to travel across a

country you've never seen, into dangers you can't even guess at, to ask a man you don't understand questions you can't put into words." He laughed. "Nothing." He laughed again, wiping a hand across his eyes. "I'll bet you don't have anything with you except what you're standing up in, right?"

"No." Maia almost smiled. "I also have my lucky walnut, and my mother's silver coin, and my knot bracelet and..." She didn't want to mention the bride's knot, still at her waist, waiting for her husband to untie. "So hardly nothing."

"That's right, hardly nothing." But they were speaking different truths.

He rode on in silence for a while, and Maia bit her lip, forcing herself to let him think in peace. The cold was riding up her spine, blowing shivers into her jaw from behind and the heat in front of her was magnetic. She rubbed the skin of her arms, wishing she could wrap them around his warmth, could press her face and her body against his back and let him warm away the cold.

When he finally spoke he'd made a decision. "You don't have to worry about Tish being angry, that will settle. You should stay with her where you'll be safe, and I'll talk to Cilo. I'll send a relay runner to him as soon as we get to the barracks up here. If he knows you've come all this way, he'll find a way to get back here to you."

Words rushed into her mouth, but he kept talking and she had to bite them off unspoken. "I'm giving these boys a few days in town, there's nothing to say when we were due back. I'm not even certain which fort we have to get to. They were moving north, see, and I won't know where they'll end up until we get there."

Distances opened in the length of his pause, and Maia was uncertain whether she should speak. "And," she prompted.

"And, that's what I think you should do. Take the safe way, just this once. You asked me what you should do, that's my answer. Stay safe. Stay away from the bloodshed. Let him come to you. And I'll bring you his answer before we leave town. Everything will have settled down by then."

"What can be settled? How long will it take for him to get back to here? He won't be able to just leave, will he?" There were other questions rushing to be heard, too many for words.

"The problem that's making Justicia angry will be settled. That's the only thing I know for certain, now. Cilo is Tribune, he can go pretty much where ever he wants to, as long as Agricola gives him leave to go. So when he comes is as much up to him as the actual battle plan allows. At the moment, they shouldn't be doing any more than moving from one permanent base to the next, but I've been away for more than a month. It's a long time over here. A lot can happen."

Maia paused amid questions; too many even for her, and none with clear answers. She studied the middle of her palm, rubbing it with the ball of her thumb, rolling sweat and leather grease away. "So, I should stay?" She was pouting, unaware, as she rubbed at her hand.

"That's my gut feeling. You don't know how hard it is out there. I don't even know how you would plan to travel. With us, with these men, you're safe enough just being Cilo's sister. No one is going to give you any grief, you can trust that. But if you try to travel with merchants or with any store caravans, you are on your own and there is no woman safe out here alone.

"Tish always has her arse covered when she moves. She won't go north unless the roads are secured and she has a cohort hanging out of her rafters. She watches the hotspots as closely as any general. She'll know when it's safe to move. If you have to go anywhere, that is."

"Luc." Maia whispered, resting her forehead onto the hard leather between his

shoulders.

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

“Oh aye.”

“No, I mean it. Thank you for listening. Thanks for answering me like I matter. Like the answer matters.”

“That’s all right.”

“I never had a friend who cared enough to hear me, except Cilo.” His name hung between them in the warming silence, drawing threads from their own memories. For Maia he drew a mess of complex contradictions. Everything she knew of him required her trust, and yet his decisions had robbed her of all she had known. Her life had imploded in their wake. He had dismissed her opinion as surely as if she was irrelevant, and it left the sour taste of betrayal. If he valued her, he would have talked to her about the choices he had, he would have made her real.

Picking at the glittering beads along the hem of her shawl, she finally asked. “You trust him, don’t you?”

“Trust him? I’ve never had cause to doubt him. He’s black and white; I’ve always known where he stands. But I don’t always agree with him. I don’t know how I’d feel if I was in your position; I don’t know how you stay so calm, so gracious.”

Grace. Maia looked at the marked and crumpled fabric caught in an untidy tangle around her hips. She tried unsuccessfully to pull it up again around her shoulders. The horse’s coat was damp beneath her and grime and horsehair had crusted into a dark line to her knee. Most of her hair had slipped its bonds and fell in loose curls down her cheeks and onto her shoulders. Grace. Who was he kidding? “Does he make his own fate, do you think?”

Luc laughed out loud. “He gambles with the gods every day.” Still smiling, he said, “He chances everything every single day and then just rolls the dice.”

“But he still plays the games the gods decree, then. He still follows the fates they set him.” She traced the knots of fate that ran over her bracelet. “He told me once that our loves and our deaths are written the day we are born. He said they can’t be changed.”

“Aye, and believing that is what makes him so utterly fearless. And stubborn.”

Maia frowned. Or maybe being fated to war meant never having to face the fear of choosing another path. “Maybe he runs headlong into battle so he won’t have to look into the shadows at his back.”

Luc watched afternoon shadows crowding against the road, and distant trees whose roots ran deep into the ground, feeding still on old blood, old murder. There was no part of the empire that hadn’t been drenched in a scarlet wash. War and shadows, they seemed like the same thing to him. “That’s a question you’ll have to ask him.”

“I don’t think he’ll come to Londinium. I think he’ll stay and fight, just as if he has no choice, because I don’t think he has any good answers for me.” She looked into the deepening shadows in the world around her. Over her shoulder, forests crowded back into the lee of the hills, and grassland drained away into dull distance. Behind them the road stretched away, taking her past with it. Only the shadows ahead held any future for her. There was nothing left to run away from.

Luc pulled silence closer around him and watched the horizon for the first glimpse of the Tamesis River. Far into the distance light columns of smoke marked the city and its fort. Grass was breaking up into marshy flats but the road moved on as solid as the empire, raised above any bogs and gullies. High and hard and straight.

When he finally spoke again, his thoughts had moved over many more miles than

they had travelled. "Do you remember any of this? The countryside? The language? Any of the people?"

"No," Maia said. "I was so small. Sometimes I think I remember things, but more likely they are my mother's memories, told to me as stories and I've drawn myself into them. Sometimes I remember her speaking another language, and I know what she was saying but I can't recall the words."

"What are the things you think you remember?"

"A slave cage rolling through snow. My mother begging for food and water so I could eat. Muddy slave stalls in Lutetia. Nothing about this country. Or my mother's people. Or my father."

"Nothing you'd want to hold onto, it seems." His tone was apologetic, as if he would ask more but felt he was walking over painful places.

"Some of it's okay. I remember more of my mother once we were living with Bassus. She used to tell me, over and over, that courage lay in finding joy no matter where the fates took you. All these years I've tried to do that, to be content. But then I realized she never stood still; she was never carried along by life. She found what she needed; she looked for happiness, for both of us."

"Like marrying Bassus, you mean?"

Maia laughed. "She told me once he was only a Roman, but he was a kind man and we could do worse." She nodded to herself in silent assent to her mother's wisdom. "And he is, too. He granted her freedom before he married her. We could have left him then and there, but he was our best hope for a good life. I think she was very fond of him."

"Only a Roman. Only a foreign slave would say that. My father is Roman, now. He served his twenty-five years conscription. Now he is a Roman citizen and not a mercenary anymore. He has his house, a pension and a diploma giving him the right to marry the woman he married thirty-five years ago. But not his sons. We are all in the army. All auxiliaries. Conscribed for twenty-five long years." His laugh was a bark, coughing out something other than humour. "I've got fifteen years of this still to go just to be a Roman."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be insulting. She was just proud of who she had been. The Roman world was nothing more to her than an invader at first and an inconvenience in the end."

"I'm not insulted, not at all. I agree with her." His words were small, worn down by regret.

"Why do it, then? If you don't want citizenship, why stay?" Maia knew the army. It had always been Cilo's favourite subject. Auxiliaries, free foreign units, could resign. Unless they were slaves they weren't compelled to service as Roman citizens were.

Luc was silent for long moments. His broad shoulders seemed to drop, his straight back slipping down inside the protective leather. "Good question," he said. If there were good answers, they hid in his silence. Maia shrugged and a small pout pursed her lips. All he needed was discharge certificate from his commanding officer and he could walk away at any time.

He pulled the horse toward the side of the road, looking up along the slow line toward the approaching horizon. "We'll be stopping up here in just a few moments," he said. "There's a bridge to cross before we enter the town walls." He turned as well as he could in the saddle, trying to see her more clearly in the fast fading light. "Maia, I want you to promise me you will stay with Justicia. Promise me you won't take off as soon as we get to Londinium." His frown was deep, painful concerns shone from his eyes, and he stared at her until she was compelled to answer.

“All right. I don’t think there’s anything else I can do.”

“That’s not a promise. I want you to promise me you will stay put. I will come and see you before I leave. I need to know you will still be there. Promise me.”

There was no escaping the insistence of his glare and she had no plans to move on anyway. He had made it clear there was no safe solution. “I promise. I will wait there until you come and see me. On my honour.”

Pulling the horse around as the wagons began to slow, Luc turned to slip his arm through hers, to support her as she slid down over its flank. “If I send a runner relay ahead tomorrow morning, it’s forty-some leagues to Viroconium.” He reassured himself, speaking the calculations aloud. “Seven leagues each, six runners, fourteen, make it fifteen hours each way, I can have a reply from Cilo within the next two days. You are going to wait, aren’t you?”

She straightened the *tunica* down her legs, and tried to pull her crumpled *palla* into place comfortably. “Yes! I promised you already.” She looked up along the wagons, moving away from him toward the third in line. Ahead, the caravan waited while another line of vehicles passed toward them over a long narrow bridge. Far below the river coursed, deep and dark on this side and wide paler shallows on the opposite. As the last of the evening light faded from the sky, Maia climbed back into her *carpentum*. In the gloom, she dusted the sticky horsehair away from her thighs and tried to pull her hair up neatly as Neria had taught her. It seemed colder in among her piles of warm bedding than it had been behind Luc. In the shadows Neria stirred, raising her head and looking around blearily.

“Grace? Yeah, right.” Maia whispered. Neria could do no more than stare uncomprehending.

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CHAPTER SIX.

Curious spectators drew their woollen shawls tighter, peering through greasy lamp light at the opulent caravan as it passed down through the main city gate, past the high stone buildings of the port and on into the township. To Maia everything looked dark and poor in the wan light and night-time shadows.

Within the stone walls of the town, the houses and *tabernas* were all low wood and mud brick structures that seemed to huddle in their neat lines, crowding to gossip or hunched under the burden of their eaves. The roads were wide enough to pass easily, and the taverns and market stalls were well lit, but there was nothing of the dazzling clean lines of Rome in this far-flung city.

The people they passed dressed as Romans everywhere, nothing seemed exotic or mysterious. It seemed, in fact, that the arrival of Justicia’s convoy was of much more interest to the locals than they could possibly have been to her. A young man, barely more than a boy, ran ahead, waiting when necessary for the carts to negotiate the corners, leading them to the inn Justicia had purchased for her salon.

They had travelled a short distance along, parallel to the riverbank, to where the markets and their clusters of dwellings thinned, when the journey came at last to an end. Their home was either stone or brick, Maia couldn’t tell in the dark. It was plastered and whitewashed to a brilliance not seen in the other buildings. A wide covered portico had been built onto the entrance, welcoming, so that even from the street Maia felt she could belong here. It was the only place she had seen that looked familiar enough to be her home.

The girls moved silently, tense with the anticipation of relief, in through the doorway to a wide entrance hall. The spacious dining room beyond was crowded with soft couches and buffets overlaid with fine foods and wine. Thick carpets covered roughness in the stone floor and incomplete murals danced from the surrounding walls.

Maia turned around slowly, her mouth slightly agape as she took in the richness of the room. Girls were shedding their robes in the firelight, drifting off down hallways that led from the central room, calling and laughing, and she found herself standing alone. Unfastening her cape, she turned quickly from under it, letting it fall to the floor as she jogged back out to the atrium.

Justicia stood caped and regal, beside an older woman dressed in the simple *tunica* and wrap of a domestic. Luc was with them and Maia rushed to his side, taking his hand. "Come in with me, look at this place."

Before he could answer, Justicia placed her hand on Maia's, pressing down firmly enough to break her tentative grip, and said, "We won't be accepting guests for a little while. Better you go in and find out all there is to see first."

"I'm sorry." Maia froze, wiping her hands down her thigh, looking from Luc to the priestess and back. "I'm sorry. I..." She wasn't sure what to apologize for, only that she must.

"That's all right, little one. Go in now." The ice in Justicia's eyes made a lie of her smile and Maia turned away. Rising heat scorched her cheeks as she walked back toward the *cenarium*.

"Two days, Maia," Luc called, as if to be sure he had the last word, but Justicia had rarely been outdone.

"Just a minute." Her tone rang against the walls like a slap and Maia stopped dead. "Can I assume you are staying in Londinium for a few days, commander?"

"Aye, I am." Luc seemed unperturbed by her sharp articulation, meeting her eyes coldly. "I'm sending runners to Viroconium, to Cilo. Is there something you would like me to add to the message on your behalf?" Maia saw a hardness in the lines around his mouth she had not noticed before as he stepped closer to the High Priestess.

Justicia was almost as tall as Luc and her body swayed toward his, as if she would rest her chin on his shoulder, or turn to slip under his arm.

"No. Nothing, thank you." She seemed to withdraw, to cede, as she added. "We shall expect you, then. In two days. One last feast before you all leave?"

"Perhaps." He gave a curt nod to Justicia, then turned to nod farewell less formally to Maia before he walked out the door, heading for the fort in the northwest corner of the walled city.

Maia felt suddenly alone, despite the sounds of celebration rising from the dining hall. There was no warmth or welcome in Justicia's face. Her gaze was turned inward, and she seemed stiff, as if she had clenched all her resolve against unbearable pain.

"Well." Justicia clapped her hands lightly as though she had actually reached a satisfactory conclusion. "Everything here looks perfect, Olwyn. Come and eat with us, I want to know what arrangements you have made for security and maintenance." As she spoke, she walked across to Maia, gently taking her arm and steering the trio sedately into the food hall.

The food had been laid out to give the new owner a good idea of the local and imported produce available. Meats, poultry and cheeses made up a good portion of the buffet, with bowls overflowing with fruits, fresh and dried, and sauce boats of all kinds surrounding the trays. Rolls of bread and light pastries were piled high in the middle.

Maia ate rich Roman food, nothing like the bland stews and porridges of their journey, and she sucked sauces from her fingers and sopped bread around her plate. As

she finished, she looked around at her companions. Some of the faces she didn't know despite her many days of travelling in their company. Everyone had so diligently remained covered that Maia had rarely seen faces.

Now they were not only bare faced but their clothes were on display, and Maia's eyes sparkled with pure delight. They were immaculate, elegant, draped in diaphanous fabrics, translucent, and dyed in colours she had never imagined possible.

She looked along her own length as she reclined and gasped when she realized the state she was in. Her pale *tunica* was scuffed and marked with dirty saddle grease, and horsehair had assimilated itself into the cloth. Her purple silk *palla* was crumpled irretrievably and some of the sparkling beads dangled on loose threads. Shame scoured her cheeks to scarlet.

She looked up at the impeccable creatures that reclined so gracefully on the couches around her. All the years of enduring Lyvia's attacks had never managed to draw a single day when Maia had felt elegant, not one. Hot tears were rising as a terrible realization formed and carved itself into hard truth behind them.

Even if she dressed like this, if she bathed in fragrant water and strung jewels from her hair, in the end the Stepmother was right. She was a barbarian. A wild child of the colonies. She didn't have a single elegant bone in her body. "Grace?" She choked, desperate to be somewhere she could hide.

"Are you okay?" Neria knelt beside her, her cool hand lightly on Maia's. "Hey." Her smile was bright and enthusiastic. "Come and look around. You have to choose a room."

Maia looked up as Neria stood holding out her hand. She felt frozen, stiff with the sudden shattering of dreams. "I don't belong here," she whispered.

Neria knelt again, quickly, and held her palm against Maia's hot cheek. "None of us belong here. We're all moving on to somewhere else. All from somewhere else. But it isn't so bad here, there are worse lives, and in the end you don't have to be like anyone else."

"I'm not. That's just it. I'm not like anyone else here; I don't belong here, do I?" She sniffed and looked around self-consciously.

From the next couch, Justicia watched them from behind a fall of raven hair, and Neria stood again with her hand out. "Come on. Come with me."

Maia swung her dirty legs off the couch and took the hand. Towing behind, she followed down one of the hallways, moving between closed doors and large open rooms. Near the end they turned to a rough wooden door and Neria pushed it open as they went into the room. "Here, this is good." She closed the door behind her and looked around.

"In just a moment I'll get you some clean clothes and you can change. Don't mind if that's ruined, it's nothing, nothing but cloth. Don't let it upset you, not now we're here.

"This building was once an inn, so it has its own well and chain pump, and boiling pots to warm the water. It's also got a walled garden I hear, so we can sit in the sun some days. Behind the house there are gardens for vegetables and herbs and coops for the pigeons and poultry.

"We will live very nicely here, Maia, very comfortably and with good food. Tish will already have paid for security, domestics will take care of all the cooking and cleaning, we'll work when we want and sleep when we want. There are much worse lives to live. Much worse. It won't be hard to be happy here, really."

She took both of Maia's hands in hers, imploring her to find hope in her words. "If there is still something that is making you sad, something else you need, ask Tish. If it is

humanly possible, she will find a way to give you, any of us, anything we could ever hope for.”

Maia took her hands back, wiped at her eyes and sighed. “I already had all this. All of it. It’s everything I left behind. And I didn’t belong there, either.”

The huge blue eyes that searched hers showed confusion so absolute that Maia felt she was speaking in a foreign tongue. She wanted to speak about being important, about being real. She wanted to explain the crushing boredom of being waited on when nothing and no one needed your attention. She wanted to explain the icy numbness that filled her with hopelessness. And about belonging and being loved. But the truths she knew threaded away in high pitched keening, carried on wooden pipes, ageless songs woven in forgotten words.

She smiled instead, hugging Neria’s kindness against herself. As long as she could remember, Tiberia was the only person who ever hugged her, ever held her. Ever. When she forced her arms to open, she said, “I need to wash.”

Neria’s face lit with the radiance peculiar to her smile. This was something she could understand. “Come on, then. I’ll find you some clothes. What sort of things do you want?”

“I’ll know when I see what there is to choose from.” Although she managed a smile, something profound had shifted inside her. The cold stone realities of her life, the truths she had put aside in her efforts to be who she should be, rose in the pit of her stomach. She felt vaguely ill as she followed Neria back along the corridor to another room where a shallow pool steamed fragrance into the air. As she stripped away her pretty lavender delusions and stepped out of her grubby *tunica*, she said, “I know. I want soft wool. Warm and thick. I want practical, not pretty. I want tough, not delicate.” Neria looked uncertain, a little horrified, and Maia smiled again. “If none of the girls have anything like that, the domestics will. They will have the sort of clothes a normal person who lives here would wear, won’t they?”

“Hmm. I’ll see what I can find. Won’t be too long.”

Maia slipped down into the water, letting her hair fan out around her face and letting the steaming water cover and fill her eyes. She held her breath, feeling every tear she had never shed wash against her skin, feeling her body aching for air, feeling the desperate reality of needing to breathe. She chose to sit up and push the water away.

Two days suddenly felt like an eternity. Two days, she’d promised. Luc would keep his promises, she had to keep hers. In two days she would know what Cilo had to say. In the meantime she could think things through properly. Not impulsively. It would only be two days.

[\[top\]](#)

CHAPTER SEVEN.

All the years of inactivity burned in her limbs, restless and inarticulate. Maia paced the gardens behind the salon. Striding, stamping her impatience into the crushed stone of the paths as she followed their set directions, down the centre and out along the back wall of pikes. Over their sharpened tops she could watch the cold grey sky and could search the clouds for columns of smoke rising from the barracks across the open rubble field. But she could see nothing, hear nothing, of the world outside the house.

Two days had passed into three and still Luc had not returned with the word he’d promised. Agitation writhed in the pit of her stomach, twisting and churning around

something that began to feel like rage. Something heavy, cold and hard had grown deep inside her chest so even the breath she drew fought its way in, thickened, and choked out again behind clamped jaws.

At night the house was solemnly and discreetly busy. The men who called to make their votive offerings were devoutly respectful, mostly soldiers and always welcomed. The bathing rooms had a constant supply of steaming water and the *Lupae* enacted ritual baths, washing hair, massaging and shaving the supplicants.

In other rooms, canopied pallets were spread with thick wolf pelts and furs, leather restraints hung from the crossbars and the priestesses dressed in leather loincloths and furred girdles. From these rooms came mournful howls, nocturnal lupine cries that echoed in the corridors and raised the hairs on Maia's nape as she slept, or tried to, in their lair.

By day, the girls, including Justicia, continued their contrary sleep patterns, with shutters closed, footsteps muffled by heavy rugs, and the chatter of domestic workers whispered. Through the first day Neria had remained awake, giggling a lot, trying hard to dissuade Maia from her choice of clothing. The cast-offs she had gathered were some of the most beautiful things Maia had ever seen: fabrics from outside the borders of the empire; cloths that shone like silver, that dazzled with gemstone beads; robes stiff with threads of precious metal and loose smocks made from split leather softer than fine wool.

None of these things, though, fitted with the growing unease that plagued her. In the end she pushed them away and stayed with her choice of soft thick wool. A very fine linen undershirt against her skin was her only extravagance, and sandals that laced all the way to her knees.

As she strode her laps of the garden on the third morning, she wrestled the gathering urgency in her blood. It was all she could do to circle the yard when her heart longed to open the front door, walk out down the street and never look back. She had no clear idea of where she had to go, no money to travel with and no means of transport. Luc had said there was no safe way for a woman to travel in this extreme edge of empire, that there were hotspots and dangers for the unaware. This time she had at least tried to think her way through it all, and the frustration that resulted made her want to smash things, stamp and kick and scream. All she could do was pace.

When Neria called from the kitchen door, the sound jarred through her like guilt, every nerve spasming and prickling over her skin.

Motioning wildly for Maia to hurry, she looked around conspiratorially. "Shh. Come on. We have to go out. Here," she whispered as she handed Maia her heavy black cape.

"Where?"

"Shh!" Neria's eyes were wide with excitement or naked terror as she took Maia's hand and jogging, towed her toward the front door. Slipping through behind Maia and closing it again with inordinate care, she turned to quickly embrace a soldier who stood on the patio, then seized Maia's hand again as they all moved out and down the street.

Maia straightened her cowl, pulling it down out of habit, watching her feet for fear of tripping over the hem. As soon as they were clear of the inn, Maia asked again, "Where are we going? What's going on?"

"Don't stop." Neria was breathless. "If Olwyn sees us we're dead. Hurry. Just down to the end here." Thirty yards away down the street, a squat building with wide thatched eaves hunched its shoulders against the drizzle, its front windows shuttered like eyes closed in resignation. As the trio passed its low mud brick wall, they stepped down beside it, putting its silent resolution between them and Justicia's salon. Neria

drew a harsh gasp, as if she had been holding her breath as they walked.

She laughed, nervous and excited. "Are you okay?" She giggled again and hung onto the hand of their escort.

"I'm all right. What's going on?" Maia looked around at the open spaces of Londinium. The next building along was a house, smaller than the building they hid behind, more homely. Across the road, but several hundred yards further along, a row of houses began, running off toward where their street met the main road into the centre of the city. Freedom seemed to grasp her chest and squeeze. All her promises were hanging on a delicate thread of confusion. If she just moved her trembling knees one step, and another, she would be running again, running into the shadows ahead.

When she pushed her cowl back enough to look at her companions, Maia recognized the young man in uniform. He was one of Luc's auxiliaries, dressed in the same grey tunic and long brown kilt, but he wore heavy mail where Luc wore leather armour.

"Bryn brought a message for you last night," Neria gushed. "We're taking you to meet Lucius and he doesn't want Tish to know. Is it all right? Are you going to come?"

As if there was any question. "Yes. Where is he?"

The soldier answered, "He's in the city, waiting. That means we have to go down here to the corner and then left. There's a tavern there. It's quiet this time of day but we are walking out in the open and that will attract attention. Just cover up well, walk together and don't speak to anyone. I'll be right behind you. Are you ready?"

Maia and Neria pulled their cowls right down, bowing their heads and walking arm in arm. Several steps behind them, their escort's tread was rigid, formal, like he was carrying out an urgent duty. The girls lifted their hems, needing almost to run just to stay ahead of the measured step of a man who marched for his living.

By the time they reached the corner and turned into the high street, they were moving through a throng of curious shoppers, soldiers and merchants. Without slowing their pace, they wove as carefully as they could between the carts and barrels that clogged and directed the milling crowds. No one seemed in any hurry, nor were they anxious to clear a path for those who were, and Maia found her breath coming in sharp gasps, her heartbeat racing and sweat breaking across her lip. When she thought she would have to ask for a moment to catch her breath, their escort said sharply, "Just here," and they stopped in the open front of a tavern yard.

In the calmer backwater of the yard, away from the streams of city dwellers, they paused only long enough for their escort to look for any sign of followers before he ushered them quietly in through the front door.

Inside, the damp morning light was brooding, cramped by shadows that hung into corners away from the fire. None of the occupants so much as looked up as the trio made their way silently to a heavy trestle table near the back.

Luc stood as they approached, his eyes fixed on Maia as if she carried hope with her. He smiled welcome, but fears gathered behind his eyes and an uncertain frown creased his brow.

He wore no armour, only the rough linen of his tunic and a long kilt, belted by thick leather. And he'd changed his military sandals for sturdy fur lined boots that laced to his knees.

She studied his face, tracing every line, every shadow in the stubble of his chin, searching for revelation. Before she could decipher his secrets, he dropped his face and let the shadows of the room hide them. He reached to the neckline of his tunic and drew out a parchment, rolled and tied with a leather thong. As if its contents appalled him, he shoved it at Maia as she moved to sit. "This came last night. There's money, too."

Maia tried to search his eyes once more before she dropped to her seat, slipped the tie from the roll and read.

Lucius,

Use this money to purchase a suitable house for Maia. She will need domestic servants and security staff. She must be relocated away from Justicia as soon as possible. I will send word to our father from here. Give her my love and tell her I will come to her as soon as this war permits.

Trusting her to your care, Cilo.

Tremors rolled from her heart out through every muscle in her body. Her cowl was suffocating her and she raked it back. Darkness crowded her vision so the message and everything in the room around her seemed to rush away. Sweat pooled under her eyes, fires raged in her chest, choking her, leaving her skin to freeze as it flushed and drained away to white.

She shook her head and opened her mouth to speak, but there was nothing to say, no words, only nausea. Abandoned. Again.

Luc had not looked up. He searched the floor between his feet. Neria tentatively drew her cowl back just enough to see the scroll and lifted it carefully from Maia's numb fingers. She read it through, shrugged and read it again. Smiling, she put a gentle hand on Maia's shoulder. "This is okay, Sweetie. There are some nice houses, I'm sure. I'll be able to come see you." She looked at Luc, trying to gauge the severity of the problem.

Maia stared at the place the scroll had been, hearing her friend only as a far off murmur. She swallowed, trying to unfreeze her voice, to make her tongue respond. The hand that rose to wipe her mouth was shaking violently and Neria caught it, holding it in both of hers. "Maia, look at me. You're okay. Everything will be all right."

She looked into the cowled shadows around Neria's face and choked on a laugh or a sob. All right? Nothing was all right. Nothing was going to be all right. Tearing her attention back toward Luc, she managed a hoarse rasp, "There's money?"

"Aye."

"Good." She couldn't stop the shaking, but the frustration that had driven her to this place was rising toward control, clearing away the shrouds of shock. From the dark recesses of disbelief the cold clarity of anger emerged, tentative but for once, unashamed.

"Maia," Luc started. "Stay there. I want you to wait just one minute." He was standing, motioning for his companion to follow, but Maia heard only the words.

"Wait! Wait for what? 'Til when?" Her fists had clenched and she tried to stand.

"No, you don't understand. Just sit here for one moment." Luc moved around behind her and put hands on her shoulders to calm her. "One moment."

As Luc and the young soldier strode from the murk into midmorning, Neria tried to make her focus. With a hand on her cheek she pulled Maia's face around, holding her there. "Luc will take care of this for you. You don't understand their secrets, that's all. Tish says she hates hypocrisy, but the truth is she plays all the same games. She just plays by her own rules.

"Cilo doesn't want you near her because he can't know how much she will decide to tell you." She tapped the scroll. "This is all about power, Maia. They all have their own secrets, and they keep them until they need to use them."

Maia frowned as she fought to shove down the fierce new emotion that burned inside. She wanted to push this girl away, make her take her hands down and stop

talking at her, but there was something compelling in what she was trying to say. "Cilo has secrets? What secrets? What doesn't he want me to know?"

From the door Neria's soldier beckoned and she started to stand. "We'll catch it for this." She smiled despite the grim words.

Maia looked to the men at the door, suddenly needing to ask questions, urgent questions and she grabbed at Neria's hand. "From Justicia? Wait. Why did she do all this? One minute I'm her daughter, the next she just cut me off. I don't understand."

"We're all her girls, Sweetie. She took an extra shine to you. But in the end, you're young and full of life and you have everything she wants. Everything she's ever wanted." As she moved away, Neria pushed down on her shoulder to stop her from rising. "Stay safe. Be happy, Maia."

The scroll lay half-open on the table before her, inviting, as if by reading it again a whole new truth might be revealed. But even as she reached for it, Luc walked back to where she sat and straddled the bench beside her. There were fierce new truths written in his eyes, lights that burned intensely. He'd found a conviction, or made a decision that changed the grim lines of his face.

"I just bought you a horse."

She stared, silent.

He met her eyes. Met them and held them, and for the first time since she'd known him he didn't look away. The silence grew, with neither of them moving to question or explain.

Maia was hot, shivering with the cold sweat that lingered on her skin. Her knees, when she tried to turn to face him, trembled, weak with the after-effects of shock.

Eventually he said, "I'll get you a drink."

Maia released the catch at her throat and let heavy cloak fall from her shoulders. The fire had warmed the whole room, and under the cloak she wore layers of wool. Next she unwound her *palla*, freeing her arms at last to the open air so her clammy skin could dry. Luc set a wooden tankard of thick malty beer in front of her and drank down a long slow draught from his own.

"Did you hear me?" He sat facing her across the table.

"Yes." She lifted her drink, sipped to taste it, then washed down a wide mouthful. "You bought me a horse?" Her hands were still shaking and she brought both up to hold the beer steady.

"We'll have to be away. Neria will wait as long as she can, but once they realize you've gone, Justicia will send after you. There's no doubting that, Maia. She won't let you go as easily as Lyvia did."

The worst of the shaking moved back up Maia's neck, so when she tried to drink she banged her lip and slopped ale down her *tunica*. She bit the hurt place on her mouth, a frown quivering over her brow.

She had money; Luc had bought her a horse. Too suddenly freedom was opening in front of her. Too fast to be able to grasp it. "I don't know where to go. I don't know what to do." The anger that had sustained her evaporated. Cold dread lay in the pit of her stomach and tears burned her eyes.

Luc shrugged. "I do."

Once again Maia looked intently at the face in front of her. Silent pleas filled her eyes; she couldn't risk more misunderstanding, more silence, more secrets. Her breath was near to sobbing, her voice a whisper. "Tell me what you're going to do. How I fit in your plan."

"I will take you where ever you want to go. Right now. There are two horses outside, waiting, right now."

“And?”

“That’s it.” His knuckles on the handle of his tankard were white, but the hand didn’t shake. He held her eyes steadily.

“Is it safe?”

“No.”

Maia wanted to think, to be sure, but there was no solid ground on which to take a stand. Every way she looked she saw destitution. Uncertainty. The only solid thing in her life sat in front of her, now, asking her to chance the fates. “Where do we go?”

“Now? We have to go west. First we have to leave the city in the one direction we’re most likely to take. Once we are a day away from here, you can call all the shots. You decide.”

“North?”

“If that’s where you want to go.”

“Why can’t we just go to Viroconium. You said its only fifteen hours.”

“No. I said six relay riders would do it in fifteen hours. Two of us, two horses, eight days. But if we go west first, ten days.” There was no pause, the calm of the battle veteran overrode all other concerns.

“Why?” This time Maia saw him flinch.

His frown deepened and he looked down at his hands. “Because you deserve better.” When he looked up again the light in his eyes had softened. “Because I don’t want to leave you here.”

It was enough. For now. The ambiguities in his words were enough to give her hope. The warm light in his eyes lifted her ragged heartbeat to new levels, but he was offering her the help she needed to get to her husband. Soon enough she would learn what it meant to have a friend she could trust. “All right. I trust you.” She ventured a shy smile. “We can’t even petition the gods, can we?”

“No.” His frown eased, but he didn’t smile. “There’d be no point.” He swallowed the rest of his beer. “Drink up. We’ve only six hours of daylight and seven leagues to cover today. Can you do that?”

“I don’t know; I haven’t ridden for ten years. My thighs were stiff from just a couple of hours behind you.”

“You’ll toughen up.” He smiled as he stood, gathering up her cape and *palla*.

She followed on weak knees. “I’ll have to,” she said, collecting the scroll and its tie. Following him into the light, Maia walked into his familiar mix of sweat, horse and leather grease. It smelled right, better than sandalwood and lavender. Even feeling small in his shadow, she was at least real. For once in her life, her choices mattered.

A narrow alleyway ran down beside the tavern, muddy and strewn with rubble and old earthenware. The horses stood at a tie ring, relaxed, apparently accustomed to the weight of the packs they carried. Luc walked to the head of a sturdy chestnut mare, untied her and pulled her back to where Maia stood. She hitched her *tunica* up unselfconsciously as she stepped onto his hand and up into the saddle. Sitting down under the high pommel was a good deal more comfortable than balancing on top of it.

“We go down through here, just keep following these alleyways for several blocks.” He pointed as he spoke. “When we come back out onto the street we’ll be on the main road out of the city running northwest. I’m going to follow you, and we’re going straight through the gate like it’s not even there. Chances are no one’s going to stop us.” While he spoke, he adjusted his own cape. “If they do, I want you to just keep walking out. Don’t speed up, don’t stop, okay? Just let me deal with it. I’ll catch up with you if I have to. Got it?”

Maia frowned, felt a rising sense of apprehension. “Why is it a problem? I don’t

understand.”

“I hope it won’t be a problem, but no lady rides out of the city on a cavalry horse with one man. If we could have planned it I’d have gotten you a carriage of some sort, but this is going to have to do. We’ll bluff it. If they ask, I’m just taking a local lass home. It’s the best I can come up with at short notice.”

The alley was too narrow to ride abreast and Maia had no choice but to ride ahead. The horse stepped surely around the piles in her path as they wound down between brick and stone walls and rough wooden fences. When it opened again into a wide street, it was as the high street had been, bright with the slow moving population of merchants and pedestrians.

Moving carefully across the flow, Maia jogged to fall in behind a *carpentum* being carried down the street by six young slaves. The fabrics of its canopy were dull and uninspiring after seeing Justicia’s, and the pace was slow, but at least they served to cut an easy path through the townsfolk. The pair moved silently after them, forming a convoy of types by proxy. Even as the buildings fell behind and the throngs disappeared, the *carpentum* continued on its slow way westward down the Watling Street toward the sentry gate.

A sharp jag of fear caught in Maia’s throat and she looked back again, her eyes wide. Raising his eyebrows silently, Luc motioned her toward the open gate and she pulled her horse to the middle of the road, kept her head steady, and walked to the gate and through.

As marshy grassland opened around her, an overwhelming rush of terror and exhilaration washed through her and her blood became light. Breathless laughter stuttered in her throat and every inch of her skin thrummed against the confines of her wrap. At that moment, she wanted to throw back her head and laugh and run the mare at full stretch until she could run no more.

“Just keep walking.” His voice beside her steadied her and he was smiling when she turned to face him. “So far, so good.”

Her amber eyes were dark, their pupils wide with adrenaline, and her nostrils flared gently over every breath. Her hand trembled where it rested on her thigh, and as he watched, her tongue touched the fever-dry line of her lips. Yearning rose up and burst suddenly in his chest, driving the breath from his lungs with the force of an impact. He couldn’t look away. The flush of excitement coloured her cheeks and she was unquestionably the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

“I remember,” her voice was a tone lower than normal, husky over her dry throat, and she swallowed, “when we were children, we raced across the open fields. Cilo would gallop straight into the forest, even where we couldn’t see a trail and the darkness of the trees closed around us like night. I’d follow him, flat out.”

She licked her lips again and swallowed, her eyes glittering with the euphoria of memories too long pushed away. “It was like life and death. It was tempting the fates, testing ourselves against the odds. The higher the risk, the better.” She shook her head, her eyes focused on a past he could not share, and she whispered sadly, “He made me brave.”

Luc watched the fear and sadness that haunted her settle back into place in her features and felt his chest tighten as the heat within him cooled. “It sounds to me like you were as brave as he was. He just helped you see it.”

She looked out from the mists of the past into the bright sunlight of the present.

Even her voice had rediscovered its usual timbre as she said, "I'm not brave, not at all. Justicia said the same thing, but she was mistaken. What she thinks is courage is just desperation." Turning the even innocence of her gaze squarely on him, she frowned. "When you have nothing to lose, chancing everything is easy."

He studied the scars that traced his history across reluctant hands and smiled. "Maybe it gets easier with practice."

Looking behind at the high stone walls of the city, he said, "This gets easier with practice too, but you're going to feel it for a long way yet. Are you ready?" Without waiting for an answer, he kicked his horse up to a steady jog and Maia followed suit. "A fit horse will cover four miles every hour for six or seven hours at this pace. It's the rider who calls it quits in the end."

Feeling awkward and jolted by the gait, Maia didn't doubt it for a minute.

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CHAPTER EIGHT.

Standing felt wrong. The muscles down her inner thighs felt like they carried the ribs of the horse with them still. The bones of her pelvis had eaten through her skin, at least it felt like it, and she needed to arch her back just to make it feel straight. In the dim light of the stable, she limped painfully to the rail where her saddle hung and leaned, then tried squatting, groaned, and finally knelt down in the straw to search through the pack she had inherited.

Bryn had carried the same standard pack that Luc did. A blanket roll around digging tools, a cooking pot and tin pail, a small water skin, and a satchel holding corn meal, dried fruit and small bags of spice. Maia pulled a bundle from under the food and unrolled it to find a light woollen tunic and a pair of split leather leggings. She was studying them when Luc came to stand beside her.

She looked up at him when he chuckled. "I bet he forgot those were in there. That's part of his uniform."

"Why do you have a different uniform to other soldiers? I thought the idea of warfare was to have everyone dress the same so you can see who not to kill."

He turned away. "The idea of warfare is to kill everyone. Men, women and children, and there's never an end of people to kill." He took a step as if he might walk off, then stopped himself with an obvious effort. Holding a hand out to help her stand, he said, "Come on. Let's go eat."

Quickly bundling the clothes back into the satchel, Maia stretched out her hand and accepted the offer of help. Her thigh muscles screamed as she struggled to rise, forcing grunts and muttered blasphemies under her breath, and Luc laughed despite his scowl.

Limping heavily, she leaned on the hand she held as they moved out of the stable. Standing at her tallest she only reached to his shoulder, hobbling she looked like a sad-eyed child and he started to laugh again.

"It's not funny," she said, but she smiled.

"Don't feel sorry for yourself yet," he joked as he released her hand at the door. "Wait 'til you wake up tomorrow."

The inn was no more than a house. Its front room was wide and open, with a fire and two trestle tables at one end and a bench and shelves for a bar at the other. Like the houses left behind in Londinium, it was squat, whitewashed mud brick under a heavy

thatched roof. Without prompting, the tavern keeper approached their table with a tray of food, steaming bowls of mutton stew and a cob loaf.

Standing at the end of the table, he grinned at Maia and rubbed greasy hands down his overstuffed tunic as if he imagined a meal for himself but he had no interest in the food. "Wine? Or beer?"

Maia squirmed away from his leer, sliding further down the bench, and Luc slapped a couple of coins down hard on the table. "Wine."

As he waddled away Maia shook revulsion off her skin and handed one bowl across to Luc, taking the other for herself. "Now what?"

He shrugged, tearing the loaf and handing a quarter to her. "That's my day's ride west done; now it's your call." He looked past her toward the bar.

The innkeeper had a ewer of wine and two goblets and was about to carry them over when Luc walked across to where he stood. He was easily ten inches taller than the older man, wider across the shoulders and probably twenty years younger. As he took the tray, nodded and turned his back, Maia smiled. Like Cilo he had no need for threats and bluster, just being was enough. She watched him closely as he walked back; he *was* fated to rescue her. She smiled again to herself, wrapping herself around the warmth growing out of that realization.

"What are my options?" she asked as he resumed his seat, pouring the wine as he did.

"This is Pontes. At least the township just down there is, where the road crosses the Tamesis again." He drank deeply, sopped his bread into the stew and ate. "If we keep going west, we stay on sealed road, the going is easier and generally safer." He opened his hands, showing nothing in the balance. "Eventually the road turns north to Glevum, and then we follow the river Sabrina all the way up to Viroconium."

"How long? How many days?"

"To Viroconium? If you're fit to ride a full day tomorrow and the next, nine days without any stops. If not, ten, maybe twelve."

Her body spasmed at the thought and she forced down a whimper of self-pity. "Or?"

He saw the look that flicked across her face, and smiled. "It's still eight days hard ride if we go north from here." The shadows across his brow changed, and he looked down at his food, moving the sop around carefully. "And tonight is the last night of winter."

Maia smiled and shook her head quizzically. "So? It's Spring tomorrow, Calends of March. And?"

"And the new battle season starts tomorrow."

She stopped chewing. Both hands fell to the table like her strings had been cut. "No matter which way we go, we can't get there in time, can we?"

"No." He kept watching his food, fastidious in his attention.

She huffed an annoyed sigh, searching the shadowed corners of the room for inspiration or direction. "Do you know where the campaign is going this season? Do you know anything about the battle plan?"

"No. Well, I can guess, but I could be wrong."

"Then guess." Her heartbeat was rising; the unfamiliar burn of anger was stirring in her stomach.

When he looked up, those golden eyes were fixed on his. Iced. Her fists had clenched and whitened.

"They're moving north toward a new base at Deva. The territory of the Brigantes, east and north of there, is held, but not really stable. They'll be consolidating: making

the legion's presence felt, killing off dissidents, making sure they have the whole area under reliable control. Then they'll keep moving north."

She stared at him, searching the hard lines of his face for another answer. He had to have known before they left that they had no hope of reaching Viroconium before the fighting began again. And that they would be moving up behind a new front line. He should have warned her. She dropped her hands to her lap, sat back from the table and changed tack. "What did you think I would want to do? You said you had no plan other than to take me where ever I wanted to go, so where did you think that would be?"

He wiped his hands together and rested his elbows purposefully on the table. "It doesn't matter. It didn't matter to me then and it doesn't now. It looked to me like you were going to take the money and run. I wasn't all that worried where you headed, as long as you didn't try to do it alone."

"But you knew I couldn't get to Cilo before the season started and you didn't bother to tell me."

"You didn't ask."

"You're being pedantic."

"And you're being naïve. You should have known. Just step back and take another look at the choices you had. If you'd stayed with Tish until she leaves for the front, you were still going to be moving into a war zone. If you found a house and waited in Londinium, alone, because the ladies will move out in a month or so, how long would you have waited for him to show up? Which of those choices do you prefer? If I'd left you there, how long would you have waited before you decided to go by yourself?"

Maia let the annoyance slip away like so much hot air. She looked at her own hands, taking her goblet of wine and sipping. "Okay. You're right. I should have realized this myself." She scanned the facts as he presented them, knowing what she knew the moment she read Cilo's message: she was trapped when she needed to fly. "And so now we're here, and there's nowhere to go in any great hurry." There was another question she needed to ask, but he cut her off.

"We still need to keep moving. It's only the direction that you have to choose."

Maia wanted to ask what choices he had, but looking at him now, she was afraid that she knew the answer. They had to keep moving, running, and she was suddenly afraid that the truth might be more than she could bear. She could live without that answer for now. "You chose west for a reason. I assume that has to do with not being expected? Is there another reason?"

He rubbed his eyes, trying to see more clearly into the possibilities. "It's easier in some ways to stay on the roads. There's food and shelter. Although, that might change." He shifted uneasily on the bench. "I guess the other reason I want to go this way is because my parents are at Glevum; it used to be our base. I'd like to see them. I want to talk to my father but it can wait. If you want to go north, that's what we'll do."

Maia chafed, for all he said Luc was always able to leave too much unsaid. She could see shadows that moved with his unspoken thoughts, feel the tension in the silence around him, and the unknown made her skin itch. "How do we go north from here?"

"We go cross country. We make sure we're seen here, or in town, and then we double back, one good days ride north until we get to Verulamium. Then we're back on sealed road, and it takes us straight through to Viroconium. There'll be much more traffic, more chance of being recognized and stopped, but it cuts a few days off the trip."

"One more question, then that's it for today. I'm exhausted." She drank down another gulp of the wine, felt it run warm fingers into the knots in her shoulders. "Why

don't you want to go that way?"

Luc stretched his arms up, arching his back as he uncramped tight muscles. "I told you, I'll go whichever way you choose. We can go south, or east. Just choose."

"No, there's a reason you don't like that route." She finished the goblet and set it down. "Well, I don't know. I want to decide tomorrow. I'll sleep on it."

His smile grew into a yawn. "Next problem. I would have slept in the stables, but I don't like our host's attitude. How do you feel about sharing the room?"

There was not much of the room to share. Maia sat on the hard pallet bed unlacing her sandals and taking in the room and its smells. The floor was hard packed earth and the bed lumpy straw on a low plinth, covered by a dirty sheet of linen. By the time Luc returned with their packs she had used the small bowl of water in the corner to wash her face and hands and had wiped what she could of the horsehair away from her legs.

The sour wine had eased some of her cramps and she shook her hair loose and scratched her scalp as she watched him squat to rummage through his pack. The fabric stretched tight across the muscular contours of his back, moving with a kind of fluid grace, taut and controlled. His hair reached the neckline of his tunic, short but curling up at the touch of the fabric. Although the tan from his time in southern Gaul had long faded, the tips of his hair remained sun bleached and coppery glints showed in the stubble of his unshaved cheek and chin.

"You need a shave," she said absently.

He looked up from his search, moving shadows in his eyes forecasting the silence of things he was not going to say.

"I'll do it for you; I shaved Papa all the time. If you want one." She stood as quickly as she could, moving the water bowl from the stool on which it sat, and bringing the stool to the middle of the room. "Have you got a razor?"

"Yes." His reluctance made no sense to her, it was irritating, but he did take a small brass and iron razor from his pack, walking it to where she stood.

"Good. Sit. Have I got any oil?" In her satchel she found Bryn's meagre stash of toiletries and a small vial of oil, then handed the bowl of water to Luc and slipped the rings of the razor over her fingers. From behind, she gently pulled his head back to lie against the hollow below her left shoulder. The oil was mild, softly musk, and she rubbed it lightly over the bristles, smiling down into his eyes. "I won't cut you. Probably won't, anyway."

Luc didn't speak; he kept his gaze steadily on her face. Her breath washed over his cheek, as exquisitely soft as the breast that pillowed his head. As she concentrated tiny frowns played across the smooth cream of her brow and she bit her lip or the tip of her tongue. Every time she sluiced the razor in the bowl she reached across him so the ivory skin of her arm brushed his freshly shaved cheek, and he longed to turn his face enough to feel its warmth on his lips.

Maia pulled the skin taut with the fingers of her left hand as she drew the blade over the last few strokes and Luc closed his eyes. Shocks of relief rippled through her, goading her heartbeat faster, threatening to buckle her knees. The intensity of his scrutiny throughout the whole shave had made her want to whimper and turn away. She'd felt the constant burn of his eyes, felt them searching, questing over her skin.

She couldn't meet his eyes. If he looked too closely, sooner or later he would see her as she really was. He'd see her guilt, her failures, and she'd be left alone again. A lump burned up into her throat, choking and rasping at her breath. She swallowed hard, using a handful of her shawl to wipe over his cheeks to cover her trembling. "All done." She stepped back.

His voice was dry, thick with the ash of doused fires. "Thank you."

The air away from him was suddenly cold and she looked at her feet, as if she might find guidance there, carved into the dirt of the floor. Apologies burned on her lips, but she had no idea how to say she was sorry for being so much less than she should be.

"Maybe this is not a good idea," he said, and her heart jumped up into her throat.

"No! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be angry or ungrateful before. We can go west to Glevum, see your father. It won't make any difference, a few more days." She'd stepped forward, pleading. "Don't take me back. I don't have anything to go back to. Please Luc."

He frowned, shaking his head in confusion, then dropped his shoulders and smiled with relief. "I meant me sleeping in here."

"You can have the bed. I'll sleep on the floor."

This time he laughed out loud. "No you won't." Before he could stop, or think, he pulled her gently against his chest and folded his arms down over her shoulders. "The only way we won't go is back." The flash of contact with her body brought him instant clarity. He had no right to touch her, no right to look at her. She was too far above him: pure, fragile, and vulnerable. And she belonged to Cilo. With Cilo. In another world. "You have every right to be angry," he said. "You know your choices are right, and I can live with mine."

He'd been too long away from comfort, too far from peace, and his whole body ached toward the softness of her. Her perfume rose on the heat of his skin and she pressed against him, warm and gentle. Now, in just a moment, he would make his arms release her, step back and not make this mistake again. In just one moment.

Maia didn't want to hear about his choices; she couldn't bear the cost. Their weight might crush the little courage she had. She closed her eyes, shutting in tears that might have fallen, and let the moment stretch. The world could stop, the gods could end it all in fire and ash, if she could just stay like this; pressed into solid warmth by strong arms, held and safe and real.

Luc lay with his back to her in the absolute blackness left by the burned out lamp. Lying silent, she listened to the rhythm of his breath, letting its gentle wash carry even the immediacy of aching muscles to a bearable distance. There was no way to be sure if he was asleep. She needed sleep; every part of her ached for rest. Morning would come and with it the need to climb up into the saddle again. She groaned and covered her face with her hands as if she might somehow hide from the approaching need.

There was no going back, nothing to go back to. Only the shadows ahead held any future and they were as dark and unreadable as any forest murk. Galloping down those unseen tracks as a child, feeling terror blowing into her face and laughing, she had always followed Cilo. He was her rock, her safe place. She trusted him.

And he had left her behind. He'd lied to her: about their marriage, about their future.

The pain of it tore something in her chest. Savage, violent, desperate pain. He couldn't know what his decisions had cost her. And yet he knew the Stepmother and her cruelty. How could he think she could survive it alone? Even when she'd followed him this far, he'd refused to come back for her.

Turning carefully, as quietly as she could so as not to disturb him, she moved so she could hide her face against Luc's back. It was safe there, warm. If he could live with his choices, then she would trust them too. She wrapped her arms tight round her chest to hold herself together. Tomorrow they would keep moving west.

Someone called her name and she struggled toward the sound, but thick black silence paralysed her limbs, smothering her.

“Maia.”

She knew the voice, could feel the warmth of it flooding her limbs like fire in her blood. She forced her eyes to open.

“Time to wake up. I got you some warm water to wash.” He was smiling. She was aching all over and there was nothing to smile about.

“I can’t. I’m dying.” She tried to move her head, but her neck was too stiff. Her shoulders burned, her back throbbed, there was no part of her not screaming obscenities. And he was still smiling.

“Believe it or not, it’ll feel better once you start to move around.”

She tried it, moved to raise her head, to rest on her elbows. “No it doesn’t.” It was pitiful and she had to laugh. Laugh or groan out loud.

Dredging up sufficient grit, she sat up, swinging her legs to the ground and combing her hair back with her fingers. He was wearing his suede trousers, laced into his boots, and crossed tight at his hips. His tunic was shorter, sleeveless so his shoulders were unrestricted, his arms bare.

Maia shivered. “Don’t you feel the cold?” She stood up, groaning again as she gathered the black woollen cape from the bed and pulled it around her shoulders.

“It’s warmer out by the fire. The sun’s up and it’ll warm up soon.”

With the packs standing against the wall, the space beside the bed seemed small, too small for them to move easily. She could feel heat radiating from him, he was so close. She could have moved just a little, leaned toward him, against his chest, and felt his strong arms around her again. Safe.

But she had no right to ask that of him. He had already given her more than she could have hoped for, and she had the feeling she didn’t know the half of it. She looked up at his face and away quickly as she found the awkward intensity of his gaze fixed upon her.

“I’ll go and get some breakfast organized.” He started for the door, then turned. “Here. It’s the money from Cilo.”

She looked at the pouch he held toward her. It was heavy. “You keep it. It’s safer with you.”

Shrugging, he dropped its lace back over his neck and settled it inside his tunic as he stepped out the door, closing it behind him.

The water in the bowl was warm and a square linen wash cloth was folded beside it. It seemed clean; Maia smelled it and dropped it into the water. Stripping off her *tunica* quickly, she rubbed the cloth hard over her face and arms. The air was icy, forcing her to hurry as she used the damp cloth to wipe her belly and legs.

It was rushed, not nearly enough, and yet Maia felt clean. There was no itch, no filth. Her skin was pale, tinted blue against the frigid air, but fresh and comfortable. Soon enough they must pass a bath house. It was a rare Roman city that didn’t have at least one public pool and baths. And a laundry. She held up the long *tunica* she had worn.

Leather grease stained the back of the skirt and damp and sweat had crawled through the wool like mould. She rolled it over her arms and put it aside, seeking in her pack instead for Bryn’s lighter tunic. It was many sizes too wide, the shoulders hanging half way down her arm, and it dropped to below her knees. But its length was good for riding, better than her own that had to be hiked up. A cloth strip made a workable belt and with her *palla* draped for warmth and her sandals laced up to her knees, she was comfortable with its modesty.

The front room was empty when she entered and she moved quietly to the table closest the fire, busying herself with tying and pinning her hair back. When the landlord festered out of the kitchen, moving crookedly toward her with the breakfast tray, her first impulse was to size-up her chances for a bolt to the door. Her stiff legs would never carry her there, not at speed. Her only choice was to stay put, watching him, keeping as much defiance in her face as she could manage.

As he put the tray onto her table, he smiled showing rotted brown stumps in red gums, and he rubbed his hands down his belly. "You're new here. I haven't seen you working around here."

Fear hammered Maia's chest as her body responded to the unspoken threats in his presence. "We're travelling," she answered, forcing her words into stone.

"Travelling, are you? With him? Where to?" He looked uncertain, reconsidering his assumptions, then he took a step closer. "Not many girls would be travelling far with a soldier, would they?"

Maia skidded back along the bench, keeping an even distance between them. "Londinium," she said. "We're going to Londinium."

"That's the way you came in from now, isn't it. I can't see as how you'd be going back that way." His breath was hacking over his double chin, the smile becoming fixed as his eyes ran up along her thigh.

She pulled her shawl down over her legs and stood. "I can't see how it'd be any of your business." She stepped to the end of the table, moving sideways to keep it between them, pressing every bit of her strength into keeping her knees from giving out. "He'll be back in a minute, why don't you take it up with him?"

That at least seemed to give him pause, and he tapped his hand on the table thoughtfully, then backed away. "Londinium, yes all right," he muttered, waddling slowly back into the hidden parts of his domain.

Maia looked to the door again, hoping her legs would carry her across the distance, but before she could force herself to move, Luc appeared. He slapped specks of lucerne from his pants as he entered the room and she let her legs buckle onto the seat.

Concern lit his eyes as he approached, scanning the room for the source of the threat. "You look like you saw a ghost, what happened?"

"That man was here," she hissed. "The way he looks at me makes my skin crawl."

"He thinks you're a prostitute. Are you all right?"

She nodded, and let a shiver run up her spine. "Yeurk. He was asking where we were going." She reached to break off a chunk of bread. "I said Londinium, but he didn't believe me."

Luc shrugged and nodded noncommittally.

"Why does he think I'm a prostitute?"

He looked at her like she might be joking, but her frank gaze was as clear and artless as ever. "Because any girl alone at an inn is a prostitute. Any girl travelling alone, without chaperons or family, is a prostitute."

She looked appalled. "But what about this?" She held up the wedding band on her finger. "Does this mean everywhere we go that's what everyone is going to assume?"

"Very likely." He grinned. "You just travelled halfway across the world with prostitutes, why get tetchy now?" He tore off a slab of bread, dipped it in a bowl of honey, then into a sop bowl of wine, and ate around a laugh.

"They were priestesses. It's different. Anyway, Justicia always made sure I was safe." She found her appetite, sopping up the honey and wine, waiting for the warming effect in her muscles.

"Priestess? That's just Tish's sense of humour; it's one more way to dig at the

social mores. She's no more a priestess than you are."

"She made that all up? The whole thing? The temple, their rites? Wolves? Everything?" Maia blushed at her own naiveté.

"Aye, all a lie, and she'd keep you safe, right up to the point where she decided you were a threat and it was in her best interests to put you at risk. She keeps her friends close and her enemies closer." He nodded to himself and picked at some dried fruit.

"Me? How could I be any sort of threat to her? Anyway, she took to me because I remind her of her daughter, that's all."

He watched her eat as he considered that, watched her wipe stray wisps of hair back. "I don't know what it is you see when you look in a mirror, but I promise you, whatever it is you find so," he paused, searching for the words, "so lacking, or worthless, it's not what others see from the outside."

The terrifying vehemence shone from his eyes and she tapped her foot nervously, wanting to slip out from under his gaze. She dropped her hands to her lap, carefully rubbing stains from her palms, avoiding him. "I want to keep going west." She watched his hands tear bread. "And I need to move slower than we did yesterday, I can't keep up that pace. And I need a town with a bathhouse and a laundry, or spare clothes."

"Calleva is easy enough." When she looked at him he was mulling over maps or familiar countryside, calculating. "Good. Eat up, drink the wine, it'll help. The horses are saddled. I'll go in and get the gear."

"No. What if he comes back?"

"He won't. I'll be just behind that wall, you will be fine. Now, eat."

As he tied her pack to the back of the saddle, Maia held her horse's nose, mixing their fogged breath, stroking the soft skin of her muzzle. She wore her black cape with the cowl back so the frosty air bit at her ears, but she was warm enough, even beginning to be anxious to start moving again.

"Stretch," he said. "Even if the muscles pull, you need to stretch them out before you get on, or you'll cramp." He watched her bend, the mocking smile touching his lips. "Squat."

"You're joking. If I squat down, I won't get back up." But she did as she was told, crying out as the muscles in her thighs screamed.

He held out a hand to steady her. "And again."

"You're too used to giving orders." She put her weight into his hand and forced her legs to bend again. When she straightened, he led her down into the narrow space between himself and the horse, drawing her sideways so as she lifted her face up to his, her chin brushed the soft fabric of his tunic. In an instant she moved from a cold world filled with aching limbs and aversion, into shelter and warmth where the only sound she could hear was the racing of her heart.

The smile slid away, his eyes were darker, softer, and even his perpetual frown had eased into uneven rubble as he slipped his hands onto her hips, her waist, and lifted. The bare skin of her knees clashed against the roughness of suede, and the bruises on her bottom made sharp contact with the saddle, snapping all her attention back to the real world. Quickly steadying herself by gripping the pommel and cantle posts, she wriggled, adjusting her balance, then painfully moved her right leg over, and slid down into the seat. "Thanks," she said. "A little warning next time."

He smiled as he moved around to the where his old bay horse stamped impatiently. Before vaulting easily onto its back, he pulled a heavy cloak from his pack and once he had his seat, he adjusted it around his shoulders. "How bad is it?" he asked as the pair moved out into the foggy morning.

"Bad. Awful." She smiled across at him. "I'll toughen up."

“You’ll have to.” He laughed.

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CHAPTER NINE.

“Is it like this everywhere?” Maia asked, her question muffled by the heavy cowl and boredom.

“It’s the time of year; it warms up through spring and summer, but it’s swampy around here. Marshes and forests.” He tousled his own hair roughly, shaking away condensation, and pointed out through the white mists. “There are mounds along this side, a line of hillocks that mark the edges of the watercourse. You might think the road would follow them, gain some high ground, but no, Roman roads run straight. Don’t go around a marsh when you can cart rocks into it and go straight through.”

She laughed. “That makes sense, I suppose. Why go up and down hills when you can go straight through a marsh. The fog will lift, won’t it? Sooner or later?”

“Aye, by late morning it’ll be clearer, if it doesn’t rain. By then, though we’ll be into the forest. Not much chance of warming up there, either.”

By the time the sun had torn away the fog, it was high enough to throw a spear of warmth along the road ahead of them and it seemed to thaw the conversation. Luc studied the trees as if he might somehow recognize an individual, a form or colour standing still from the years of his youth. “I used to ride this road with my brothers. It hardly seems to have changed in, how many years, fourteen, fifteen?”

“How many brothers do you have?”

“I’m last of five. I tagged along to Londinium with them sometimes, and with soldiers at the close of campaign season. It seems so long ago.”

Maia gazed back into the trees, as if they held the secrets of history. “Maybe you passed my family along these roads, do you think? We came from somewhere in the south, I don’t know where.”

“Maybe. Although I’m sure I’d have remembered you if I’d seen you.”

She laughed. “Oh yes? I was a toddler and gone from here seventeen years ago, when you were still at home with your mother.”

“Aye, even so. Even so.”

Searching for something familiar, Maia looked around and up at the sky. “I don’t feel at home here. I don’t know if I expected to feel like I’d come home.” All she genuinely felt right then was cold and stiff and saddle-sore.

Lifting it from beside his food pack, Luc handed her the wine skin. “Top up. It works best on an empty stomach.”

“I’m sure it does.” With one hand on her hip in an attempt to force her back straight, she poured a steady stream of vinegary wine into her mouth. “I hope they sell better wine in Calleva.”

“There are temples all over the city. I never saw a priest of any god who didn’t demand good wine. And there’ll be a bathhouse and laundry.” When he took the wine back, Maia watched the clench of tension in his arms. There was aggression in the set of his shoulders, the hard sure muscle of a warrior moved under his skin, and there was no doubting the competence of the man. But it wasn’t a want of violence that strained the hard lines of his face, and there was no anger in his grey eyes. It wasn’t evil temper Maia read there, but pain. Old and soul deep pain.

She had no doubt she had made the right choice when she elected to follow the road west to Glevum, even though she didn’t really understand why. There was something in the choice that at once pleased and tormented him. It was as if he was

riding into a crisis and was relieved by the prospect, even anxious to meet it. The feeling was contagious.

Although she had chosen the route that would take longer, days longer depending on how far the front line moved between now and then, she was still impatiently trudging to a resolution which might save or damn her. To Cilo and the answers he did not want to give. All of her choices carried her deeper into shadows and uncertainties. Secrets, Neria had said. Everyone has secrets.

Cilo had always trusted her to keep up before, always believed in her enough to know she would follow him, that she trusted his choices. But that was the boy, perhaps the man had other weights to balance. On their wedding day he had shouldered a burden she couldn't know, and he'd chosen to carry it alone. She deserved to know what his choices were, now. After all, he'd left their weight for her. Now she faced another bank of shadows with only her own hopes to follow. And Luc.

Calleva Atrebatum emerged slowly from the forest. The smells of cooking fires and stock animals stained the crisp air of the dusk well before the first of the wooden homesteads materialized. Post and rail stockyards grew from two or three sides of every building, forming an unruly, organically inspired grid where the road marked the only visible order. A constant in the midst of flux.

Sheep and goats huddled under hay chutes, and pigs, stied and unseen, were discernable by their odour. Where the city wall rose into the silvering sky, the wooden houses had congregated like petitioners, clustering against the towering pikes of the barricade.

Still outside the wall, a road running off to the right led up to the town's amphitheatre, barely visible where the forest stood its ground, and a steady throng moved toward it.

Luc drew the horse's line to the left-hand edge of the road and slowed to watch the people passing happily toward their entertainment centre; some in *pallas* and togas, the majority in the rough tunics and brecks or kilts of peasants. "A nice night's entertainment," he muttered, looking back to where Maia followed. Even in the hooded shadows, her eyes were black against stark, bloodless cheeks, her lips a sharp line of dread.

Moving against the steady trickle, they entered the city gates between the twin temples of Hercules and wandered down through another huddle of low wooden homes. Pausing to remember and take a point of reference, Luc waited until she came level with him. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, but the look of horror had frozen on her face and her movements were stiff, jerked out of limbs that struggled against her fear. All too familiar tension burned in the muscle of his back and shoulders, but overriding that came the urgent need to ride closer, to hold and protect her from something unseen. Her fear rolled out against him in icy waves and snagged at his attention as he moved forward again.

Inside the walls, the city was less than a mile across and the wide squared mass of the central forum set the standard for the straight, if somewhat irregular, grid of streets. Turning to the left again, he followed the city wall down a gentle slope to where a river spur entered, scanning for the stonework of the large local bathhouse.

"I'm not sure how this is going to work," he said as they dismounted in the foreyard. "I want you to wait here with the horses. I'll go in and talk to the owner, try to get you a hot room and bath to yourself. It'll be men only until after midnight, and if he's too busy, we may have no option but to wait."

She nodded and tried a tense smile, pushing her back hard up against the stone wall of the yard as if it was the only safe place in the city. When he walked away, she let

her legs bend, sliding down into a crouch with her eyes closed tight, trying not to think about fire closing in and rafters sagging. The earth under her was damp and she balled its cold clag in her hand, hoping the chill would be enough to hold off the fear.

She opened her eyes as footsteps approached and forced her tired legs to raise her back to a stand.

"You've got a room; it's a quiet night." As Luc untied the packs first from her saddle, then from his, he slipped the dirk from his sword belt into the calf strap of his boot. "I'll be outside, just in case there's anyone who objects."

The room was small and steaming hot, holding only a bench and the small pool. The warm air encouraged her out of her layers, stripping down quickly, eager to step into the welcoming heat of the water.

In the public baths in the outer room, only half a dozen portly merchants availed themselves of the warm water, and only one of them paid any attention as Luc stripped down and stepped slowly into the bath. The Roman fashion of stripping body hair with pitch and gum had not reached these distant parts, and Luc's admirer displayed a thick black pelt across his shoulders. The welcome in his smile was a little too warm and Luc nodded sharply and took a seat in the water near the doorway through to Maia's hotroom.

"Your friend is shy, is he? All cloaked like that?" The gentleman breast stroked awkwardly to where he sat.

"That's right, yes."

"Very small, I thought. Petite." He smiled showing even, startlingly white teeth. "I haven't seen you here before, have I? I'd remember you. Is your friend local?"

"Yes," Luc answered vaguely, deliberately ambiguous. "Mister, my companion and I aren't interested in any company."

"No? What a shame." He seemed chastened but made no move to leave.

Luc rubbed warm water through his hair and rested cramped shoulders back against the side. "I do need to find a decent inn, if you can recommend one. Good food, clean rooms?"

"You could stay with my wife and me. We're going to the games with everyone else tonight. You should come, too."

"I think just an inn. We won't be going to the games. We need stables, some food and a clean bed. And a laundry. That's all."

"Well, I won't insist," his admirer ran his eyes wistfully up and down Luc's length, "but it's the spring games, you know, the city is full to brimming. If you can't find rooms just ask anyone for the home of Gallus. Really, you should just say yes. You're not in any danger, you know."

The offer was worth considering. The city was the capital of the Atrebatii tribal area and it lay on the intersection of four major arterial roads. It was a temple city and had a large number of trade guilds and artisans. There would already be a large itinerant population, and with the coming of spring when there were so many religious celebrations going on, decent lodgings would be hard to find. "Maybe I should accept, but I'd like to ask my companion."

"Do. Do. I'm not going anywhere."

As he stepped up out of the water, Luc motioned to a boy for a drying cloth. He rubbed vigorously at his arms and chest, wrapped it around his hips and walked to Maia's doorway.

He stepped into stasis as the warm vented air of the hotroom lifted the curtain lazily out toward him. Unable to draw a breath, he stood, unmoving as hot air broke against his chest, skimmed over his shoulders and slid down his stomach. Somewhere

deep inside a voice urged him to move, to close his eyes and turn away, but he chose mute deafness.

The graceful curve of her spine drew a shadow, ivory on alabaster, leading his burning gaze down over curves his fingers ached to trace. Knee deep in the bath, she leaned away, smoothing a rough cloth down along her leg as she lifted her foot onto the step. Reaching to her calf and ankle exposed a rose tipped breast until she quickly changed feet, hands flowing gently over that thigh in turn.

As she straightened, she drew her hands up over the soft curve of her belly and down into hidden shadows and he groaned softly, swallowing.

“Ah, I see. There’s a scandal here, isn’t there.” The voice beside him slapped his cheek. “Dear boy, you will have to come to my house, now. We have to have the details.”

Luc turned, placing himself squarely in front of the defile. “This is no scandal.” He leaned toward Gallus, the set of his shoulders ensuring the older man stepped back. “This is no grist for rumours. This is her life, and mine, and I won’t see that endangered for the sake of gossip, understand.”

“Of course it’s a scandal.” If Gallus was intimidated, he showed no sign of it. He seemed gripped by delight, an overwhelming enjoyment of the intrigue. “It’s settled, then. You will stay at my house. There have been riders through here, you know that? Looking for a couple.”

“When?” Luc snapped, moving from the curtain to the bench where his clothes were piled.

Gallus followed, almost skipping with joy. “This afternoon, early. Two of them, they were moving fast, asking everywhere about the sister of a tribune travelling with a soldier.”

“Cavalry?”

“No, dear. Not regular army at all. Mercenaries, I would guess from their outlandish clothes, but they may have been militia.”

Justicia? At least if her goons were travelling fast, she was probably banking on him having taken Maia north and was just running a scan over the roads to the west. He dragged trousers on, sitting to lace his boots into place. “Where can I find out which way they left here? I need to know if they went north from here to Dorcic or west toward Durocornovium.”

Gallus looked pointedly at the dirk Luc slid into his calf strap, his smile a little less sure. “I can ask around tonight at the games. There are so many strangers in town, but someone might have an ear to the ground.”

“Good. Do that.” As he pulled his sweat stained tunic down, he surged to the curtain, Gallus still at his heels. “Maia. We have to go. I want to get the horses under cover.” His voice was low and he waited, unsure whether she had heard him. When the curtain parted beside him, the smell of sandalwood oil on her heated skin groaned into his gut on a caught breath. Her hair was wet, dragged straight back from her face so her eyes were huge under a tense frown. Questions crouched unasked on her lips, as she read the concerns on his face and then ran to the packs to begin restuffing them.

Dressed only in his clean tunic, she crouched over her task and he forced his eyes away from her thigh, from her hemline and all it promised to reveal at every sharp movement. Pushing himself into the room, he picked up the packs while she settled the heavy black cowl around her shoulders.

“Ready?”

She nodded and turned the arresting purity of her eyes up to him, dark with fear and excitement. His diaphragm clenched as visceral warmth spread up through his

stomach, fogging his thoughts and leaving his knees unsteady. Dragging on air as thick as honey, he forced momentum into his step, shepherding them both toward the curtain.

Gallus stood in the antechamber, statuesque, as a slave wrapped his toga, carefully folding and laying pleats so the drape was perfect. He smiled as they entered. "Your companion might ride with me in my litter. It's more discreet."

Luc nodded. "Are any of the men here tonight likely to pose any kind of threat?"

"No dear, I should think that by leaving with me you have painted yourselves as rentboys. If you can live with that, I can." He smiled warmly, as Maia threw a wide-eyed question at Luc and pulled her cowl right down.

Riding through the darkness behind the carriage, Luc ran over scenarios. If the riders went north, it was possible they would keep going that way, confident that was his chosen path.

If they went west, they would go only a short way, maybe one day more, before they would turn and retrace their steps more slowly, looking for information along the way. Intuition screamed that was what they'd do and it made his choices harder. Tugging Maia's mare up closer, he wriggled, trying to adjust his seat against a growing discomfort.

Gallus maintained his grin over the course of the journey, turning it toward Maia at every chance. "He's very attractive, that one. Are you lovers?"

"No." Maia stumbled over the word, rushing to pull her hand from the folds of her robe and show it like an alibi. "I'm married."

"Oh." He paused, nodding. "Northern, is he? Pict?"

"Caledonian. I think. I'm sorry, I don't know how much I should say." He reminded her so much of Bassus, Maia almost wanted to hug this tactless stranger. Only the desire to mimic Luc's habitual caution held her back. "Why are we staying with you and not at an inn?"

"Because I love a drama, dear. I told your friend about the riders who have been looking for people like yourselves, and I think he decided my hospitality was less risky than a public house."

"Less risky, not safer?"

Gallus laughed heartily at that. "When I was a child in Rome, there was no need of public *tabernae*. Travellers were always offered lodging; it was an excuse for a feast at our house." His smile softened and he looked fondly at memories. "It's a different world we live in, here."

He put a reassuring hand on hers. "In this city we are controlled by the guilds. The villains here are all organized, playing for money. I see very little danger to my family from a sweet old fashioned elopement."

"It's not an elopement," she gushed. "I'm going to my husband. Luc is my friend, my husband's friend."

"Are you sure?" Gallus was sincerely shocked. "Your gallant soldier doesn't look at you like a friend. Or does he love you so much he'd give up his life for your happiness? Or, tell me, if you're travelling together alone and yet you're not lovers, could it be he loves your husband enough to risk the 'Labours of Hercules'?" As his imagination drew fanciful possibilities, he offered them to Maia.

His playful dramatics wounded her, left her staring feebly at possibilities she had refused to acknowledge. Unaware, she sat shaking her head, denying circumstances she could never answer for. Weights shifted, grinding in the pit of her stomach, doubling her over. "Give up his life?" she whispered.

It had been enough to borrow his friendship and to let herself hope there was one person alive who thought her choices mattered. But Gallus words pushed her closer to

the awful questions raised by Luc's choices. He was, after all, a soldier.

"I've upset you, I'm so sorry, that was never my intention. I was just wondering out loud." He was patting her hand like an ineffectual aunt, appalled by her reaction to his presumptions. "I've only just met you both and I've leapt to conclusions. I'm sure you have worked all this through carefully. I'm sure you have a better grasp on the consequences to you both than I could ever have."

She brought her horrified gaze to his, still shaking her head, denying. "He has. I trust his choices."

"Good. Good." His relief was palpable. "Here we are, look. Home. We'll eat and everything will be all right, won't it." If his reassurances worked for him, they left Maia cold and afraid. As she stepped down from the litter, one stabbing relief overrode all else for the moment and it was reassurance enough. The house of Gallus was mud brick.

Gallus' wife was every bit as excited by the notoriety of their guests as her husband had been, laying her closet open for Maia and insisting Luc wear a toga from Gallus' best selection, as if he too was Roman nobility. They were warm and welcoming; they had food prepared and laid out for their guests in abundance, and slaves were appointed to have their clothes laundered and their every whim met.

Maia had known so many like them, she had to choke down good food and wash away the bad taste of her memories with too much good wine. It helped her to fix a polite smile on her lips; it helped her make small talk and answer what she could of their questions. These were the people she had grown up among: the bored rich.

She and Luc were a diversion for them, being dressed up like dolls. Their lives and their ordeals were no more than a source of kudos in the days to come, and their fates were of little or no consequence. These warm and generous people simply took what pleasure they could from whomever and where ever it was available, without cost and without conscience. They were playing at intrigue like spoiled children.

Luc was tense and uncomfortable, just as he had been each time she had seen him at Bassus' villa. Roman houses, Roman etiquette, Roman lifestyle: they were foreign to him and he had no apparent regrets about it. His brow bunched and eased over answers to questions she could not imagine, weighing costs and consequences. And how much of that cost was hers?

When their hosts left for the night games in a whirl of giggles and promises of gathered intelligence, they both felt a wash of deep relief. Luc stripped to a linen tunic, folding the length of the toga onto a couch, and stretched out on a fur rug in front of the fire. Maia thanked and dismissed the servants, gathered a wine ewer and two goblets and sat on the floor beside him.

The questions she needed to ask were tangled knots in her chest, and she sipped the wine, looking for a way to set words in motion. "What next? Where to?" Her voice was too thin, frail even in her own ears and she wanted to clear her throat, to sound like she was up to the journey ahead. At least her mouth had formed the words and his answer would give her time to find more.

He didn't answer, not in words. He shook his head, rubbing his eyes with his palms and pushing away the image of her exquisite softness.

Eventually she asked, "You don't know? Yet? At all?" The words were a little stronger.

"Yet." He rolled onto his side, facing her so the soft red half-light of the fire missed his features, removing his concerns to the shadows. Propped on one elbow, he sipped the wine and made himself breathe as he watched the fire turn her skin into clouded gold.

"Are you worried about what Gallus will say tonight at the games, when he has an

audience and a great story to tell?" The choke of her question was rising closer. "I don't know about tonight," she said carefully, "but after we leave, everything we've said will be embellished and broadcast." She paused. "Is that going to be dangerous?"

"Yes. Maybe the more he distorts the truth, the better. He doesn't know enough to do too much harm; it just depends on who gets the information." He drank down the wine and Maia refilled his goblet, wishing she had chosen to sit on the other side so she could see his face clearly, could watch his eyes.

"Who are we running away from?" The question was too sudden, too sharp to her own ears.

"This two?" He turned his face down so there was no way for the light to expose his words before they were spoken. "They'll probably be on Justicia's payroll. They're not regular army, so mercenaries."

"Why would she send armed men after me? If she sent anyone it would only be to bring me back. Why would she hurt me? Look at all she's done for me already." Again there was no answer and shadows covered his eyes and smoothed the lines around his mouth. She tried again. "I've trusted you to tell me what you know." The silence dragged over the lump in her throat and made her want to gag. "Please don't keep secrets from me."

"I can't say what she would do or why," he said to the floor between them. "I don't know."

"So I should ask her? You're avoiding the question, just like you do when I ask you about Cilo. There's something you don't want to tell me." Her eyes caught the firelight as they had once before.

Luc held too tight to his wineglass, pushing from his fingers the urge to reach and touch her cheek. "Justicia keeps too many secrets. Tells too many lies. They all do. I don't know what she might or might not do. I can't always tell what's true, or who is being honest and who's not. Why do you expect me to understand people better than you? Make up your own mind." He lay back with his hands locked behind his head so they could not reach out.

Too many secrets. "Gallus thinks we are a couple, an elopement." She fidgeted with a raffia tassel on the neck of the wine jug, filling the silence with small movements. When he remained quiet, she said, "He said you were risking your life for one of us, Cilo or me, for an impossible task. The Labours of Hercules, he called it."

She could feel him watching her, feel his nearness like the warmth of the fire, but the sound of her own shallow breath filled the space between them, and every time he turned to her the shadows reclaimed his face. Prickling heat crawled up under her cheeks and watered in her eyes. "What have I cost you, Luc?"

"I told you. There is no cost, nothing you owe me. I've made my own decisions and I can live with them. That's all. I told you when we began; I will take you where ever you need to go." Struggling against the weight of her fears, he forced himself to sit. "If you want to go back, if you decide it's too hard and you'd rather wait in Londinium for Cilo to come and put all your fears to rest, then I will find a way to get you safely back to Londinium."

"If the cold and the damp get too much and you want to go home, then do it. I'll make sure you get there. You don't owe me. Your husband is paying for the trip, after all."

"Wh...?" She stopped, hearing his answer in spite of the questions she was rushing to ask. "You're doing this for Cilo? Is that what you mean? You're keeping me amused for him?"

He started to laugh; he lay back onto the rug and laughed a deep gravelled laugh.

“Just keeping you amused?”

“Don’t laugh at me.” Anger and inadequacy grappled behind her eyes. Had her small hopes blinded her to a simple truth? Hoping for his friendship. Hoping that she mattered, or her choices mattered. How naive could she be? What arrogance, to believe a man like Luc would put his life at risk for her.

Trusted into his care, Cilo’s letter had said as much. Taken on an adventure that would keep her running after her tail, while Cilo got on with the life he had chosen. And who could he trust with a woman alone? Who could be guaranteed to keep her safe from harm, and keep her virtue unsullied? “Tell me the truth. Would you really do anything for him?”

“Aye. I told you that the first time we met.” Chuckles kept rolling away from him, unbalancing her in a spinning moment of confusion.

“Luc, do you love him?”

“I do. Just the same as you do. Exactly the same. I would go anywhere and do anything for him, just like you. And just like you, I have no idea how far he will go for me. That’s a gamble we’re sharing, you and I.”

Shock and bewilderment spun through her head like a cold wave of vertigo, shaking loose all the solid ground she had gained. Small confidences she had collected seemed to dissolve in a wash of reassessment. Her face cracked under the strain of holding pieces together, tears streaming silently over her cheek.

Luc moved onto his knees, so he faced her squarely with his back to the light. Gentle fingers reached under her chin, bringing her face up to his, but there was no way to see his eyes. “Now. You tell me why you care why I’m here. Do you know? It’s important.”

Wine and misery swirled around in her head making it hard to concentrate. She wanted to start again at the beginning and rethink every choice she’d made. Nothing made sense. She couldn’t answer him, she couldn’t even speak.

“No? I’ll tell you why it’s important that you know. You need to get to your brother; you need answers from him that are going to make your life make sense. Okay, I’m here to help you to do that. But once you have his answers then you have to decide what you want from me, because there’s one big difference between him and me. He’s your brother and I’m not.”

“What?” Still none of it made sense. When she had her answers from Cilo? When he’d admitted he’d indulged her like a spoiled child? There were too many things she could not hope to understand, and the shadows hid too much. “How do you do that? Talk in circles. Say so much and still not answer me.” She rubbed her eyes, pushed her hair back and sniffled miserably.

“What about you, Maia. Just how far are you willing to go for him?” he asked. “Why did you agree to marry him?”

That question jabbed at painful memories. Old scars refused to heal and at a touch released waves of shame and self-loathing that raised her heartbeat like a guilty secret. Luc watched her and waited for an answer. The question seemed to strike her like a physical blow. When she brought her eyes back to him, they were pained.

“Because he loves me,” she said.

His arms ached to hold her. She may have depended on Cilo, belonged with him, and there was no doubt that she loved him, but it was clear she did not understand him. If he loved her, it wasn’t the sort of love she deserved.

He had no more questions for her. And no more answers. A hot lump of frustration burned in his throat, fisted his hands and flashed across his furrowed brow. She had come so far, thrown off everything, believing that somehow Cilo would provide a home

for her and safety. And honesty.

As much as he loved the man himself, Luc could not share the faith Maia had in her brother. He knew him too well, and his bloody-minded devotion to the army and to winning every contest at any cost. Scowling, Luc stood up abruptly, striding away from the cold frustration and the heat of desire that had risen in his blood. "Our hosts will be home soon," he said, and he walked away, out into the frigid night.

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CHAPTER TEN.

Maia woke to voices and rose quickly to her feet. The empty ewer sat beside her on the floor and she scanned herself urgently, pulling her robes straight and feeling her hair for hanging pins.

Gallus' party returned from the games in high spirits, and Maia struggled to meet them against dizziness and a numb mouth. She smiled, resting her hand on a couch to ensure she didn't stagger.

"We're back," he informed her unnecessarily. "Where is Lucius? We have news. The whole amphitheatre is buzzing with the gossip." Slaves had appeared in numbers, swarming around him with goblets of wine and food platters. Maia swept the room but Luc was nowhere to be seen.

"I don't know where he went." She forced the words off her thick tongue, feeling lost and a little bit vacant.

"You come here, then. Sit. Sit." He motioned for her to take a seat beside him on a couch.

"No. I won't understand; you need to tell Luc." She walked carefully to the couch and sat listing against her confusion. He put an arm around her and his wife handed her a goblet of wine.

"First," he said in conspiratorial tones, as if spies might inhabit any corner. "There's a crimewave sweeping through the midlands. Merchants are withholding produce or sending it down the western roads to avoid bandits. Are you travelling north?"

"Also, there's a handful of auxiliaries from the Twentieth Legion coming this way. Talk is that those riders that came through here were running ahead of them, trying to get to you first."

Adrenaline was fighting to clear her head as Maia recognized the critical importance of this news, but not what it meant. She looked around the room again, hoping Luc might have materialized without her notice.

"Also, the two riders are paying exorbitantly for word of you and a bounty to anyone who holds you." Gallus and his wife were transported. This diversion was just getting better and better.

"A bounty?" Maia shook her head. "No. Not Justicia. She knows I would come back to see her at some time." She searched her hands, trying to read possibilities the way Luc did. "She knows I have to talk to Cilo. She knows Luc will keep me safe. Why would she do this?"

The wine was trying to settle in her stomach, but wasps, trapped and frantic, were beating their wings there in time with her heart. She grabbed the one question she knew Luc would ask, the one thing she knew he needed to know. "The riders, did anyone know which way they left here?"

“West. They’re talking a lot and throwing money about like rice. I don’t know why, do you? Won’t do them much good when they’ve already left town, will it?” He was tiring, maybe drunk or simply exhausted by glee. “It’s not far off sunrise, where could our Lucius be?”

Where was he? Maia touched the arm of a slave girl she recognized from earlier in the night. “Do you know where he went, tonight? Did anyone see?”

The girl looked terrified, unwilling to be singled out for any attention. She dropped her face and shook her head. “He came for his clothes,” she answered. “They were clean.”

“Did he?” All the warmth in her body cooled around Maia’s heart. “Is his horse still here?”

The child looked up, then away, and shook her head, no.

The bed was comfortable, the sheet of linen soft and the blankets warm, but Maia lay in her own private winter. Chills rattled her teeth, and she balled herself against her knees, trying to fill the space against her stomach with warmth: trying to sooth the place where his absence throbbed inside. The memory of his arms about her flashed over her skin, leaving her feeling foolish and betrayed. Feeling alone. Abandoned. Again.

She had almost dared to hope. Luc was Cilo’s friend, they’d been inseparable for ten years, and Maia had never had more than borrowed time. But he’d made her feel worthwhile. He’d made her matter, and her choices matter, and he’d made her feel real.

But he was warmth she could never have, that she didn’t deserve. Life and time had taught her the futility of such dreams and she had learned the lesson well. Time and time again she had seen that refusing to hope was easier to bear than to beg and be denied. Still the hope wailed inside her chest, small and afraid like a lonely child.

When she did sleep, she was lost in profound darkness, blind and groping, fleeing hopelessly from a danger she couldn’t know.

She woke with a fright at movement near her side.

“Luc?” She sat up to find the same young slave placing neatly folded clothes on the shelves beside her wash stand. The child was startled, spinning toward Maia, her face turned down. She raised a timid hand and pointed out through the door.

Maia followed the finger with her eyes, but it took her mind a moment to register what she meant. When the realization hit her, she flung off her blankets and rushed out the door, running barefoot over cold stone floors.

He was squatting at the fire, holding his hands out to the flame, and he started to stand as she ran in, stepping backward to keep his balance as she hit him full run. With her arms locked around his neck she hung against him, sobbing into his shoulder. “I thought you’d gone. I thought you’d left me here.”

His arms hung impotent at his sides, not daring to return the hug, not trusting himself to be able to let her go. “I don’t have anywhere else to go, I told you that. Do you not believe a word I say?”

Maia longed to hold her place, breathing him in until he filled her up and healed the cracks inside. Her heartbeat caught and tangled in her sobs, making it hard to breathe, and she longed to feel his arms wrapped tight around her.

Slowly he bent, lowering her feet to the ground so she could step back. “I went to the arena. I needed to hear for myself who’s going where and who’s doing what.”

Luc turned back to the fire, squatting to warm his hands. It was easier to look into flame, than into her eyes. “Tish has these boys well heeled. They paid anyone who even

looks like they might see us.”

“And the bounty,” she added, smearing her eyes and rubbing angrily at her running nose.

“You’ve heard? And the bounty.”

“They’re coming back, aren’t they? That’s why they went through so fast. They travelled overnight so they could get ahead of us and then double back, knowing everyone is on the lookout for us on their say so.”

He looked around at her, realizing he’d underestimated her. He’d started to believe the lies she told herself. He’d accepted her doubts. Shaking his head, he answered, “Aye. And they won’t be far away, half a day, a day maybe.” Her hair was loose, falling down over her shoulders in silky waves and her eyes were huge against her ivory skin. Kohl had smudged on her cheek where tears had been smeared away, and the marks accused him. Everyone she trusted hurt her, and now he’d done the same thing. He wouldn’t share in their lies, but he hadn’t told her the whole truth, either.

“And the men from the Twentieth will be coming from the east. They’ll be making ground on us, how far away will they be?”

The words pulled his focus from her delicate features. “What men from the Twentieth?”

“Gallus said a handful of auxiliaries from the Twentieth are coming this way.”

“Damn it.” He ripped a tuft of fur out of the rug under his feet. “There’s my answer from Cilo, huh? He’s sent my own men after us.” He launched into a hard stride, pacing like he was tethered to a stake. His face was thunder.

“That might not be a bad thing. Maybe they’re an escort.” She twisted her toes in the fur. “He knows I want to come to him, doesn’t he?”

“They were an escort, Maia. Now they’re following different orders.” He paced away, leaned over the fire on arms that looked like they might crush the stone.

The world tilted again, spinning through fear and confusion. Her heartbeat once again began its climb toward hope. Cilo had ordered Luc’s men to follow? “If we turn north the roads are full of bandits, so Gallus said.”

“That would be one way to beat them, but we won’t go north. How are you feeling?”

“Sore. Better than yesterday.”

“There is a way we can get ahead of them, but it’s going to hurt like nothing you’ve ever done before. That’s a promise. Are you willing to try?”

She looked at him. The muscles in his shoulders and neck bulged like fury, his shadowed eyes glittered feverishly, and his hands were clenched. Even if there was too much he left unsaid, Luc had not lied to her. She wanted to hope. Like a frustrated child stamping a foot, she wanted to hope. She wanted to trust him, had to trust him.

She didn’t know how to live in this world without him. “Okay,” she whispered.

“Strip the packs. We’re taking nothing we don’t need. Food and water. A blanket. Got it?”

She nodded, and he headed out the door to the stables.

In her room she quickly considered the length of the borrowed *tunica* she wore. Luc’s dagger sat on his pack and she used it to cut away the fabric at her thigh.

Digging into the bag, she pulled out Bryn’s split leather leggings and held them up in front of herself. He was not as tall as Luc, but they were still many sizes too big for her. She wrestled them up her legs, crossed the waist ties around herself twice and cut away the legs at her calf. They didn’t fit like Luc’s did, they bagged out from her hips, but the suede was worn enough to hang and they felt more unusual than uncomfortable. With her sandals laced up to her knees, she resumed dragging everything else out of the

packs.

Maia followed Luc between the horses as he checked and rechecked their girths. "What are we going to do?"

"We're running, off the road when we can. It's twenty leagues to Glevum and I want to cover that by tonight. Sixty miles in twelve hours. We'll be stopping as often as we can to water the horses, and every time they drink, we eat." He turned to face her, concern creasing his forehead. "You can't guess how hard this is until you've done it. If we need to stop, we will. If you start to feel like you're going to fall, you have to tell me."

"What about you?" A frown held his eyes so deep in shadow Maia longed for the courage it would take to stroke her finger over the clenched flesh and ease the stresses there. "You hardly ate. You haven't slept."

A crooked smile touched his lips and he ducked his head. "Sometimes I prefer not to sleep," he said. "If you're ready, we'll go."

The first hours were hard.

Following the road, often back in the tree line or over high ground when it presented itself, the horses held a steady canter and Maia tried to relax into the gait. Every time she found her attention fixed on Luc's broad shoulders, she tore them down, forcing herself to concentrate on balance and her seat.

Her first stitch had come and gone and she pressed her fist hard into her side as another one threatened to start. Luc was right. He had offered no more than to take her to her brother, that had been her only goal, and why should it matter to her why he had chosen to do so. It didn't matter, she told herself. It didn't matter at all.

He wasn't her brother. He asked for nothing and he owed her nothing. It had been foolishness to let herself hope for anything more. After all, Gallus' words had been much more profound than she had realized. Luc had told her himself, no woman travelled alone unless she was a whore. People would assume they were lovers because if she were any other woman it would be true. Luc wanted nothing from her. He had made that clear in his actions. He gave her the distance and the respect due to the wife of his friend, and she should not hope for anything more.

And if Luc and Cilo were lovers?

It need not be so. She rubbed her fingers hard over her lips and shook her head. He loved Cilo as she did. She shook her head again and wished she could believe it didn't matter why he'd chosen to stay with her.

Cilo had sent men after him, not as an escort, not for their safety. They were the same men Luc had travelled with to Gaul and back. His own men. Coldness set in her gut at the thought of what it meant for him.

Through the long afternoon they made good time on the hard surface, but when Luc called her to the high side of the road and pulled them both to a halt behind the cover of trees, she had long ago stopped caring where he led. She thought about nothing but staying in her saddle and keeping up with him.

Where they stopped was dry, there was no water hole for the horses, and she looked about vaguely for the reason they were here, and still. Luc put a finger to his lips and shooshed her as she started to ask. Under her the mare drew huge breaths, spume flecked away from her nose and painted white streaks up the reins toward her hands.

When she actually heard the approaching hoof beats, she had already sipped some water and was reaching for figs. She froze.

Riders moved along the road toward them at an easy jog, two men dressed in theatrically studded leather and steel armour. Their horses were black, the chest plates and saddles were gilded and rough with brass studs. One wore twin swords crossed on his back, their hilts rising over his shoulders. The second sat over the hafts of war axes, passed under his knee on both sides.

Silently they watched the riders pass and waited as their clatter vanished into the distance between the trees.

"Might as well look the part," Luc said at last, and Maia stifled a nervous laugh.

"They must be very good to get away with that." These men were killers, she had no doubt about that. They were mercenaries and they wore the regalia of their trade like a beacon. She pulled her horse around and followed Luc at a walk through the trees. Unclasping her cloak, she slipped it back and bundled it behind her saddle.

"Bluff. It's half the battle won. Anyone who sees them coming will be stunned while they wonder whether to laugh or cry. That's the time when the fight is won." He smiled over his shoulder and Maia wondered if it was confidence or bravado.

"What if you see them well ahead of the time they catch up, what then?"

He laughed again. "You don't let them catch up." It was confidence.

When he moved up into a canter and ran down onto the hard surface again, she dragged her cape across her thighs and resigned herself to endless hours of running.

As the roadside cleared and the land began to buckle and rise around them, they rode out wide of the road and Maia drew up level. "It's going to rain soon, do we just keep going?"

"Yes."

"All right. Before it starts I want to stop."

Luc turned the horses down the slope they rode along, heading into the tree line where it marked a watercourse below.

Maia stretched out flat on the shaded grass while Luc checked the horses' backs and girth for any signs of rub. "How long?" he asked, towering over where she lay like a Titan.

"A few more minutes, that's all, why?"

"If we're here any longer I'll let the horses drink their fill. If we're leaving now, I'll hold them off."

"Logistics." She put out a hand for help to her feet, and groaned as she stood. "A few more minutes and I would have had it." She smiled, trying to lighten the burden of her own spiralling disappointments.

"Had what?" He stooped and lifted the cloak she had been lying on.

"An answer to why it matters whether you're here or not."

He stopped in front of her, the cloak hanging between them and she took it carefully from his hand. There was no levity in the lines around his eyes as he studied her face and she backed away from her words, suddenly afraid. There was too much awareness of him, here, so hard and so close. It was a throwaway line, a thought that slipped out and left nothing in its wake.

The silent grey intensity of his eyes stabbed into her like a knife, as if he could look beyond her eyes and read her deepest thoughts. His hand was steadier, but the haunting fatigue that rode his shoulders and hardened his expression filled the air like a jarring cry. A light that could have been hope or madness glowed at her, daring her to answer her own question.

"And?"

Silence cramped her chest and echoed loudly in a rush inside her head. Sweat rose and itched over her throat, flushing the skin and heating her cheeks. 'Don't look at me,'

she begged, but the words were dumbed by humiliation. She had no good answer but to tear her gaze away from him and let her silence save or damn her.

When he finally turned away to saddle the horses, she rubbed her palms down the rough fabric of her leggings and let the breath she'd held slip away silently, as if even the sound of her breath might shake the delicate balance between calm and catastrophe.

The hours that followed blurred into progressively sharper pain. The muscles in her arms and legs burned or trembled with fatigue by turns, and her back jarred and jolted on every step. No matter how often she forced her shoulders to relax, they tensed again and again until they drove the tension up her neck and into a hot spike at the back of her skull.

By the time it was growing dark, she had entered an enervated fugue where only sheer will kept her upright. They had been travelling cross country for hours and when Luc moved onto a hard surface again, it brought her to half-awareness.

He watched the grey shadow of exhaustion spread to tarnish the flesh of her cheeks; dark circles like bruises lined her eyes. Her lips were blue. He pulled the horses back to a walk and let her move up beside him. "We're there, just about."

A grunt was all she could manage and he looked down, watching the catch in the mare's walk. The horses were blown, dead on their feet and moving because that was what they were told to do. If he could have stopped there on the road into the city, he would have, but he had no choice. If it killed them, the horses had to carry them just a little further.

The chill of his wet clothes ate through his skin. Maia had to be chilled through to her bones. Her lovely eyes were clouded and heavy; it looked like she no longer knew where she was.

As he picked his way down quiet streets, the smell of cooking pots reached her and she retched like she might vomit out her own lungs. At last he stopped, slid down and walked around to her side. She leaned down to him and fell into his arms. Propped against him, grasping his hand like it was her lifeline, she watched a man walk out of the darkness, appearing it seemed from thin air.

"What are you doing here, boy?" was all she heard as her knees buckled and she dropped down onto the mud.

"Put her there, lad." Luc's mother was not more than an inch or two shorter than her son and her words were rarely spoken twice.

"She needs hot water, she's frozen," he said as he laid her onto the pallet in the main room of the house.

"She's past drinking for the moment; you go and get warm while I get her dry. Stoke up that fire."

He threw faggots onto the grate, fanning them to hurry the blaze and dropped the kettle lower on its chain. "I've got to tend the horses."

"Leave the horses to your father. You get out of the wet clothes, warm your skin." As she moved about, calm and controlled, Aila stripped Maia's saturated tunic and breeches, covering her with a rug, and gathered bedding to pile on the floor in front of the fire. Luc tied a dry loin cloth at his hips, and she placed the flat of her hand against his chest, clucking her tongue. "Get a fur around you, you need to warm her and you have to be hot to do it."

Panic lit his face. Every minute of their journey he had droned a solemn mantra. She was too far above him. He couldn't touch her. She belonged to someone else. But

just as every fallen supplicant, his flesh betrayed his higher self. When she brushed against him, or the perfume of her skin and hair touched the air over his lips, his whole body ached to fold her to his chest.

When she held her pain so clearly in those haunting eyes and stood with only courage to hold her up, his heart broke. And when she reached to take his hand, or wrapped her arms around his neck and sobbed her fear into his shoulder, it was only the iron self-control that carried from those words that made him let her go. She was too far above him. She belonged to someone else.

"No, I can't." And if he held her, his body would refuse all logic.

"Are you soft, lad? Of course you can. It's you do it or your father. Or should I take her out and tie her to the cows?" There was no more argument, only resignation, and she nodded sharply at him. "You put her there and I'll cover you."

Lifting her from the bed to the floor, he laid her gently onto the piled rugs, stretching out beside her so her icy skin was pressed against his, her back to the fire. Her touch was frigid; there seemed no blood left in her veins to carry life. She no longer even shivered, except for the occasional harsh spasm that ran through her.

"Put her face under your arm, that's it, now I'll get you covered. What have you done, Luc? No, don't tell me, it'll wait." She piled the last of the furs over where he lay and sidled past them to where the kettle boiled steam into the air. "I want to know as soon as she starts to stir. We'll get some broth into her. And don't let her smother."

Under the cover he massaged the skin of her back and down her arms, drawing the endless coldness away from her and into himself. When at long last she started to shiver and her body struggled to restart its own warming mechanisms, he pulled her closer against himself, breathing warm moist air down over her face.

"Well, you're wasting no time, son." His father laughed as he entered the house and Aila hushed him with a smile.

"The poor wee thing is near to death, let him be."

"So are the horses, how hard have you pushed them?" The tone was gruff, but concerns echoed in the words.

"Calleva this morning, to here."

His father cursed and walked a tight circle to the door and back. "You should have fed her up before you left, lad." He paced his circle again and came back to squat near his son's head. "So, do you know how far behind you they are?"

His mother looked from her husband to her son and back. There was no need to ask who was following or why. She had five boys and none of them would arrive in this state unless trouble, serious trouble, was not far behind. She handed Luc a mug of bitter herb tea and watched him sip, screw up his face and sip again.

"Three days. I hope." His own exhaustion was fogging his brain and the heat of the fire forced his eyes to close. Maia coughed against his chest and he roused himself, refreshing the air around her, and then covered her over again.

"Is she shivering yet?"

"A little, she's breathing better. Will I wake her?"

"Try, she may be too cold yet."

He held her face, patting her cheek. "Maia. Wake up. Come on, Maia."

She pulled her face away from his slap and her eyelids fluttered, but she couldn't break the bonds of her winter. Deep in the icy fog she wanted to pull her legs up, to roll into a ball against the cold, but no part of her body would respond. Ice was her whole reality. Shivering. Her teeth cracked and chattered together, it was all she could hear.

"You drink. You need to warm your insides or your skin won't be hot. I'll give her hot water when she can sip."

Luc drank the tea, lifted her head onto his arm and relaxed down into the softness of the furs. Fatigue worked its way past his efforts to stay awake. He could do no more now. Holding her close, he drifted away from reality and for the first time in an age, he slept.

Maia felt someone holding her face, calling her, a woman's voice, but she couldn't wake. She tried to open her eyes. Now and then she felt the warm edge of a mug against her lips and she sipped. Small sips. Then she crawled back away from the voice, climbed back into a nest of warmth and safety, and wrapped herself tighter around the heat.

Infernal waves rode nerve endings up his throat and over his cheek, where the smell of her hair washed in and out with every sleeping breath. In the midst of exhausted sleep, his body knew every swell and crease of her soft nakedness and where it pressed onto his skin. She was fragile, precious, perfect. Each contact sparked smouldering fires, and desire throbbed against her, as his hand traced the curve of her shoulder, down the arch of her back, around the swell of her hip and down her thigh where it crossed his.

Through the night the cold had gone, and in its place was shared heat. His body had drawn it away, seeping through her skin and onto his, warming the flesh under his fingers. He held her tighter as she wriggled closer against him and her breath shortened on his cheek.

"Luc." His mother's hand was on his shoulder, her voice soft, and the morning was bright around him when he woke. "Get up, son. Leave her to sleep. You come and eat."

Maia's cheeks were coloured. Darkness clung under her eyes, but her lips were no longer pale and her breathing was even. Carefully he recovered her as he slipped out of the bed. His trousers had dried beside him and he struggled into them. The room was comfortably warm and the smell of seared meat drew him to the table. Aila put tea and a plate of mutton in front of him and sat down opposite. "As soon as your father comes in, you'll tell us what's happened."

She said no more, just sat watching him eat.

"The mare's gone lame, off foreleg, and she's cramped. The old horse is not too bad. He's stiff but he'll do." Bragon walked in and sat beside his wife. "Neither of them are any use to you from here."

There was an air of trial in their faces, of waiting to hear the worst. That was exactly what he had to tell them; the whole long story from beginning to end. The problem was where to start. He started with Maia.

For a long time Maia listened to the murmur of voices. Foreign voices. They were speaking in another language, quietly, somewhere above her. She tried to move, to push the furs back from around her face, but the pain in her arm was more than she could stand and she whimpered. As she opened her eyes, a woman's face blurred into focus. Masses of ginger hair fell forward as she leaned over with a mug of broth. She was smiling, and the tattoos that covered her left cheek and forehead wrinkled as she did.

"You're back with us then, good. Luc, ask her if she can sit up."

Relief flowed into her marrow when she saw him. He was smiling. "She'll keep talking at you whether you can understand her or not. Just nod at her and she'll leave you alone." The woman slapped his shoulder. She clearly understood what he had said, but when she spoke to him it was still in a different tongue. "Can you sit up?" he asked. "She wants to see how much you can move around."

"I need to get up." She moved aching limbs slowly, but bit by bit they responded and she managed to rise to a sit. Her arms shook with the effort and her head fell forward into her hands. "Where are my clothes?"

He reached for his tunic and handed it to her. "Best I can do for the moment."

When she looked up through the shirt as she slipped it on, she sat transfixed. His bare chest was tattooed, the pattern running down his stomach as far as she could see. She pulled the tunic down and her fingers trembled toward the colour, her fingertips brushing the skin as if they might smear the lines.

The woman came to stand beside her, took one arm as Luc took the other, and gently lifted her to her feet. Draping a woollen blanket around Maia's shoulders, his mother said, "I'll take her through," and they limped together through the only door and into a washroom.

"It's a high price you've chosen to pay for another man's wife, lad." His father toyed with a spoon, watching it move scraps around his plate. "She's a big step up from the whore, but still."

Luc cut him off. "Don't call her that."

"You'd still defend her? She'll kill you before she'll let you go, or do you think the men you saw only want to play? And think on what will be left of your sweet little *shidh* if they find you." He smoothed the ragged curtain of his moustache down over his lip and chin thoughtfully. "Don't hunch your shoulders up at me, boy. If you've come to hear what I say, then listen."

As Maia re-entered the room and carefully took a seat, he smiled and nodded to her, breaking the tension for a few moments at least. His hair was fair but greying, pulled back behind his neck in a thick plaited rope. When he spoke to her, she could barely understand his Latin through the thick accent and the veil of his moustache. "You're more alive than dead, today lass. You need to eat and rest a bit."

A steaming bowl of broth and a cob were placed in front of her, and she forced twitching muscles to move the food to her mouth.

Reverting to Celt, the older man continued speaking. "You're a dead man, lad. You've just not laid down yet. There isn't anywhere you can run that's far enough away from Rome."

"We're all dead men, in that case. It's only what we do until we're buried that matters. And I don't need to keep running forever. I just need to get far enough north to find a safe place. Or to make one."

"Oh aye. Where's that? Where's safe? If you're not crucified as a deserter or lynched by bounty hunters, you can look forward to the Games in Vespasian's new playground in the capital, and your lady here'll go back to the life she knows."

"Had you thought of that? Once you get her back to where she belongs, what then?"

"She is where she belongs."

"Ah! You're kidding yourself. D'you think she'll stay with you?"

"No." Luc clenched his fist and frowned harder at the plate in front of him. "No," he said again. "Maybe."

"Even if she would follow you, how are you going to give her villas and servants? At least the whore could have kept you." Bragon drew breath and glowered at his hands. "Lad, look at her; a spot of rain nearly killed her! And you want to take her to the Highlands? You'd best feed her up. Will she freeze and starve with you? Will she live under a sod roof and fight off the neighbours when they want your bit of land?"

"Rome will get there, too. If you have to fight all your life, you might as well choose the side that's going to win. You might as well choose comfort and medicine and roads and food and sanitation and some peace at the end of it."

"That was your choice," Luc said. "My choice has already been made, Dad. Right or wrong, it's not open for debate anymore. What I need to know is what to do next."

His mother broke into the argument. "What's her choice, Luc? Where does she want to go? And why? And what will she do when she gets there? She'll see it's all too hard and go back the way she came. She belongs to someone else, son. Are you ready to take her back to her Roman life? Would you die for that as well?"

Over her meal, Maia watched the faces, feeling like an alien. Occasionally fingers jabbed in her direction, but the gist of the debate went over her head and she tried to read the ebb and flow on Luc's features. He was calmer than his parents, resigned.

"I'm not worried about dying, even if some deaths are better than others. But I am finished with killing. No more. It's too much blood; I've no stomach for it any more. I would rather die than go back and yes, if I die with her or for her, then that's as it is."

"As you say, boy, the choice is made." His father rose from his stool and clapped Luc on the back as he passed. "But you have to know, if you're to stay alive you're not finished with killing. Not yet. We need to think on where to go next. I'll trust she's worth the price."

To his back, Luc said, "There's no cost." Then, to his mother, "I don't know what she wants to do. She doesn't yet, even if she thinks she does. She'll tell me when she knows. I can wait."

As his mother walked back to her fire, he turned to Maia and smiled reassurance. "Sorry. They're not thrilled with our options."

Maia nodded. "I guessed. Are we? Can't you at least speak Latin so I can understand some of it?"

"What would be the point of talking about you if you could understand what was being said?" He smiled.

She sopped her bread around the bottom of the soup bowl. "I've had enough of toughening up. This is as tough as I get, right?"

He laughed. "Right."

"Tell me we're not going anywhere today."

"We're not going anywhere today. Or tomorrow I hope."

"Good." She picked a piece of mutton from his plate and nibbled at it.

Beauty like this could never be real. So bruised and injured, and yet the light stayed in her skin as if she glowed from within. He lifted a slip of hair away from her eyes. "If you need to stay longer, we can cross the river here and go down into Cambria. No one will look for us there; you can take your time."

"Then all the hard work yesterday was for nothing. We lose the time we gained."

"No, not for nothing. We slipped the net and they have to try to work out which way we went."

"And Cilo?"

"If we wait long enough, he'll come to us."

She glared at him, a frown piquing her brow as she heard the contempt in his voice. "You're sounding like he's a threat now, too."

"He's an unknown; it's the best I can give him."

"Cilo would never, never hurt me, Luc. Never." Her hands bunched weakly. "And if he's so very fond of you, I would hope you'd trust him too."

"Cilo is a soldier. First and last. He is army. He lives and breathes duty. I don't need to ask myself questions about trust, I know what he believes. I only want to know what he'll do about it."

"Don't you dare make him a villain. You're the one who talks about choices and consequences. I made these choices. You did. You can't blame him that we're here."

Luc stood suddenly. "What? Why *are* we here? I thought he was the whole reason we were busting our arses to get to Viroconium or Deva. His choices are what put you

in this place. I thought he was your source of wisdom, the only answer that makes sense.”

His mother stood with her arms crossed, smiling, watching the escalation, while Luc paced his father’s circuit between the bed and the door. “Why are we here, if not for him?”

“I need to ask him....” She stopped as if she had forgotten what her question was, searching the table in front of her for a clue.

“If you are worthless? There are other people who can answer that for you, but you don’t want to hear it.” He stomped through the door, slamming it behind him.

Maia turned to look at his mother, heat rushing into her cheeks, but Aila simply smiled and shrugged, then turned back to her fire.

Bragon chewed thoughtfully on his moustache. “You can follow the river, ride it where you can, that’s the shortest route unless you go cross country. Or you can stay on the western roads. Caravans are moving up and down all the time. Maybe you can get passage with one of them.”

Luc rubbed liniment oil down the horse’s leg, considering the possibilities as his father ran through them.

“I don’t think you’ve got the time you’re counting on, though.” Resting his crossed arms on the mare’s back, he smiled as Luc chafed his own arms and blew fog. “I think Cilo knows you’d come here and that you must be going to go up to him. If he was going to just stay put and wait you out, that’s one thing, but he hasn’t.

“Our boys coming up behind you might not be in any hurry to catch you, not if they can harry you into trying to move faster than you need to. It’s worked so far, too. It’s not the purple on his robe that got him where he is, you know that. He plays this game well and he plays for keeps.

“As for the other two, these mercenaries, you can’t even guess where they are now.

“Take her somewhere else, lad. Convince her she’s better off without him.”

“No.” Luc shook his head. “As it is she thinks I’m coddling her as a favour to him. I didn’t tell her that, someone else did. But I didn’t set her straight.”

“Oh aye. And did anyone tell her about her husband and other women?

“No.”

“Why?”

“It just seems like a complication when she’s already confused. He doesn’t love her, who he is with makes no difference to that fact. And she doesn’t want him to swear undying love, either. She wants to know how he could let her down when she trusted him. He’s her brother. He’s all she had.”

“You tell her why. Answer for him.”

“That I can’t do. I can’t understand at all what he was thinking, or why he won’t speak to her. She deserves better than the way he’s treated her.”

“Listen to yourself boy. You’re justifying yourself to me. She’s the one you have to tell. She’s the one who needs to know the whole story. This is not protecting her, you know.” He spoke too clearly, forcing his heart into every word, and Luc moved irritably to the horse’s other foreleg, shaking his head as if that was denial enough.

There was nothing he could say to Maia that wasn’t begging. He had held himself back and kept his own counsel, but the memory of her skin against his drove anger and frustration into a savage point that churned at his gut. She was too far above him and she belonged to someone else. Yes. Yes. But she deserved so much better. She deserved

nothing less than the kind of love he wanted to give.

"Well, that aside," Bragon sighed, "I'm thinking we'll get a runner from Cilo sent down here charging you with desertion any day now. And word will be left along any road you choose to take. You'll be a marked man to any garrison, any unit anywhere who sees you.

"Whichever way you go from here, you'll have to go native. That'll change your mind about turning your back on civilization." He laughed deep in his chest, but there was pain in his eyes. "In the meantime, if you need horses I'll have to buy them now. Once word gets around that you're here, there'll be no chance."

"Aye. But I'm not sure Maia will ride anymore. She's had enough."

"Already? She'd better learn just how much harder she has to get if she's going to survive. Blisters turn into calluses, aye? Put the pack on her horse and let her walk behind. She'll soon get to thinking riding is better."

Luc laughed. "She isn't as delicate as you think. And she's not as stupid as she thinks she is. She's just naive; she only sees how much she doesn't know."

"You don't have to sell her to me, Luc. You've tied yourself to her; you make sure you can keep her alive."

Maia sipped her bitter tea and let her face screw up in irritation. What was it she had needed so badly from Cilo when she left? It seemed a lifetime ago, someone else's life. None of her certainties were solid here. The truths she'd held burned and drifted away here, like smoke and fog. Gossip and dinner parties and broken hearts were important then. Now lives were at stake.

She needed to ask him why he'd left her there. How had he thought she could bear to be abandoned again? Completely alone. With Lyvia.

From this distance, even the name seemed less potent and the threat less real. And in his note he had tried to give her an answer to the *why* of leaving. But it was more than that. He had made a bargain with the Stepmother where Maia's life was collateral, and he had not shared that decision with her nor explained his intention.

It was important. It was still important. But now it seemed the stakes had risen dangerously high, and there was always too much she didn't know or couldn't understand. Leaning onto the table, she stood and started toward the door. Aila was instantly at her side, steadying her, smiling. By the gods, was there nothing this family couldn't find to grin at?

She pulled the door open and leaned on the jamb, peering across the sleet muddied yard until she found Luc and his father studying the mare's foreleg. "If you didn't keep so many secrets," she called as loudly as her aching chest allowed, "I'd be able to make better choices."

"That's that, now. He'll be back in soon enough; you've got his only tunic. It's cold out there." His mother spoke the softly yodelled and coughed Celtic words, drawing Maia back into the house and pointing to the bed, patting the mattress. "Everything is always so important when you're too young to know you're wrong, isn't it. Living and dying. All for nothing if you ask me." She patted the bed again, motioning for Maia's to sit.

As Maia lay back onto the bed, Aila wiped her hair back. "I think my boy's made a good choice. So long as he doesn't get you both killed just because he won't throw you over his shoulder and tell you to mind him." She gathered the rugs, dropping a couple down onto the bed for Maia, piling the rest at her feet.

“I’ll make you more tea, you need to drink. And he can busy himself with firewood. We burned up most of what we had last night.” She chuckled to herself. “But you shouldn’t worry about that.”

Maia watched her move about, listened to the melody of her words, but had no idea what she was saying. She pulled the rugs up closer to her chin and rubbed at phantoms that brushed her skin.

Somewhere in her memory, or in a dream, was the echo of a touch. Each time she breathed the smell of Luc’s shirt her body rode a gentle wave of heat that rolled up through her. From a heavy pool that seethed low in her belly, it flowed out along her arms to break in a sweat on her skin. It rose on her breath and rushed over her flesh like a caress.

“Maia, wake up. You have to eat more and drink more.” He was sitting on the bed beside her, his long legs stretched out to the floor and crossed at the ankles.

“I need some wine. That helps.” She sat up and looked around. It was early afternoon; Luc’s father sat at the table eating stew, his mother stood beside him, arms crossed, smiling. She put a hand on her husband’s shoulder. “Looking at him there reminds me of when he got that puppy, you remember?”

They both laughed and Luc said, “No wine. You have to flush the poisons out of your muscles. Bitter tea, that’s all you get.”

He stood to help her to the table, clinging to the warmth of her hand as she limped across. “We’ve got fresh horses, and clothes, sort of. When you see you’ll understand.” The thought of more riding made her groan as she sat, and he continued, “I’m giving Cilo until tomorrow to show his hand.”

“How does he show his hand?”

“If a runner comes in tomorrow to charge me with desertion it means he has no interest in letting me get further than here alive. If he lets it go, he wants us up there and we might even make it. We wait and see.”

It was the word she’d so dreaded to hear, and now it was so suddenly on his tongue. He mixed it easily with life and death. Desertion. Crucifixion. Scourging. He had put his life on the line for her. For her. Closing her eyes over icy dread, she asked, “And the other two? What of them?”

“We try to stay ahead of them.” He shrugged. “And hope they’re as stupid as they look.”

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CHAPTER ELEVEN.

By morning Maia had drunk enough tea to feel like her eyes were floating and her appetite was insatiable. Aila kept up a steady supply of food, encouraging her to eat anything she could get down her throat. Warmth and sleep, broth and plenty of food had repaired some of the harm she’d done.

She wore clothes that Luc had procured for her: a heavy woollen kilt and a linen tunic. There was an overshirt in wool, a smaller pair of leather leggings and a sheepskin cloak waiting, but the warmth of the fireplace made them unnecessary.

Luc jogged in through the door, grabbed Maia’s hand and led her quickly through

to the washroom, putting gentle fingers on her lips when she moved to ask why. With his lips against her cheek, he whispered, "There's a rider here. Only one guard so they're not after an arrest. We'll just wait here until he leaves."

She nodded, holding his hand in both of hers as his breath against her cheek woke her senses with a coursing rush of adrenaline. In the shadows his eyes were bright and his frown drawn deep, but his arms were loose. He stood on one hip, close, his head cocked to one side, listening. Only just audible in the distance, she could hear his father speaking outside, laughing.

Maia studied the hand she held and accepted its small comfort. It was a big hand, long strong fingers with a row of pale calluses at their bases to mark his tenacity. In the windowless room, darkness covered the scars that dressed his knuckles, but on his forearm a deeper line ran up toward his elbow, and she traced its furrow across his skin with her finger.

These were the marks of his profession, his life and choice since the age of fifteen. And yet, knowing Cilo would want her safe, he had risked everything to protect her. Yes, Cilo was army. He was a soldier first, but he would never punish Luc for this. Not if she had any say in it.

When his father re-entered the house and closed the door, he wrapped his fingers around hers and led her back to the table. Taking the parchment from his father's hand, he slipped its tie and unrolled it as he paced. Confusion danced along his brow as he read, then handed it to Maia. She sat down and read, re-read, and read it again carefully.

"He just called me a barbarian," she said. Feeling all the cold of the Stepmother's cruelty, she handed the missive back to Luc.

"Not such a bad thing," Aila mumbled.

Luc laughed without humour. "He's not even speaking to me. Why Briana?"

"That was my name. My old name. My mother was Keely, I was Briana. On manumission Bassus named us Plione and Maia, after the stars, the goddesses. I haven't heard it for ten years. More."

"What's it say?" Bragon clasped his own hands roughly, sitting heavily, tense as a drawn bow.

Luc read aloud:

My dearest Briana,

In the end the Stepmother was right in this: blood will out. You have chosen to trust yourself and not me, so be it. I trust the gods will rebalance the fates you have set in motion; Justicia they can leave to me.

I trust also that my dearest friend will bring you safely to Viroconium in four days. It is as far as I can come to you and I will wait there until you arrive.

You are in my heart, as you have always been, Cilo.

"You'll ride into a trap, son." Speaking Latin so Maia would understand, Bragon looked at Luc, shaking his head.

"No." Maia was adamant. "No, you're wrong. He would never hurt me. You must know that. He loves me."

Luc finished his circuit, his eyes following thoughts that rushed through his mind. In this, his father was right. If he'd tried to explain some of Cilo's past, or any of his plans and passions, she would be better able to judge her own situation. Maia understood so little of the complexities of her brother's life; she could only see the writing on the page. When Luc looked at this letter, he heard the slap of sarcasm, the vicious thrust of threats hidden between words, and the bitterness of betrayal left

unspoken. "You're probably right, but...."

"No buts, I am right."

"But. You can't say the same for me, can you? The thing is, we can't do anything else." He sat down beside Maia, eyes focused on tactics and probabilities. "He'll be in Viroconium in four days, that's all he actually says. I don't know what orders have been left along the way, I could walk out the door into an ambush; I don't have to worry about riding all the way to him for that."

"Luc listen to me." She grabbed his forearm, pulled it toward herself. "He will not hurt us. You've come all this way on my word. If you won't believe anything else I say, believe this. Cilo will not harm us."

"It makes no difference whether I believe you or not, the only way we'll ever know what he's planning is to get to Viroconium. If we can." He had no smile for her this time. He'd have paid in blood for an ounce of her confidence, but he'd known his commander too long and too well to believe Cilo would ever overlook his offences.

"It does make a difference," she said quietly, nodding to affirm her own truth.

In Celt Bragon said, "That settles the route then." Luc nodded, but he had not taken his eyes away from Maia.

It was to her he said, "It's an easy three day ride straight overland. We can take longer, he'll wait. But there are no roads. No inns. Rain, sleet, wind. This is the last chance you will have to change your mind." In three days she could ask Cilo her questions herself. She could learn all her husband's secrets and the roll she would play in his dreams. Then she could decide for herself which life she wanted.

"I haven't changed my mind. I won't. It's nearly finished now, I'll see it through."

Luc nodded again. Whatever happened in Viroconium, nothing would be finished. Not for him.

Whining winds carried the smell of the river over the rooftops and dropped it between the houses, chilling the clear air. Maia dressed as she was told, feeling like she had strapped a mattress around herself, but confident at least of staying warm. She wore the leather leggings laced into her sandals, a kilt, a linen tunic against her skin, with a woollen overshirt. The cloak she carried.

New horses had been stabled several houses down and Luc was carting gear through the morning, impatient for the chance to be on the road. Maia paced.

A shrill whistle, sharp enough to make her eardrums recoil split the silence. Luc's mother dropped the pan she held and dived into the washroom, emerging with two swords and running for the door. Stunned, Maia stared, frozen by incomprehension, then ran to the open door. Bragon stood down the yard, holding both swords, facing the approach of two gilt-armoured riders on black horses. Aila was running back to the house. She pushed past Maia, ranting, and through to the washroom. This time she brought out a slim dagger, putting it into Maia's hand and folding her fingers over the haft. If she had no words, her eyes were clear. She expected Maia to use the weapon. She held a smaller sword, much lighter, and she walked out the door.

One horseman rode a wide circle toward the house, unhurried. Aila faced him, staying midway between him and the door. The second dismounted, unsheathing both swords from over his shoulders, balancing their weight in his hand as he slowly arced his way around Luc's father.

Luc rode from behind them. Swinging the bright menace of his blade as if its weight were no more than an extension of his own arm, he drove down on the

swordsman. With a savage double handed blow that ripped him from the saddle, he pivoted, twisting as the blade bit chest deep into the cleft of the stranger's shoulder.

Lifeblood drenched him in a scarlet fountain as he plunged down onto the corpse, rolling across it as he hit the ground.

The axeman turned and cantered forward with two long-handled battle axes drawn. One was poised down, its lancelike tip aimed like a spear toward where Bragon stood; the other tilted back against his shoulder as if in repose.

Luc bellowed, an inhuman roar of outrage as he reefed back, hacking his sword clear of the flesh that held it and turned beside his father to face the impending threat.

Bragon stepped sideways so Luc drew the axeman's aim across, standing square on, inviting the killing stroke. As the horse crashed between them, Luc leapt to the side and his father sliced back across the horse's hock, hamstringing the beast and dropping it onto its haunches.

It screamed and its rider staggered backward out of the saddle, dropping his weapons in the awkward struggle to gain and keep his feet. The horse toppled, striking out as it fell, its bulk rolling between Luc and the mercenary.

Pulling twin blades from his belt, each with ornate curled guards, the attacker faced Luc's father. The swords were short and he waved them with the mesmerizing skill of a snake charmer with flutes, taking short nimble side steps, dancing a shallow circuit.

Bragon was still, turning only enough to face his foe, waiting for the fight to come to him.

As the two men clashed, matching strength and cunning, Luc took three steady strides to reach their struggle. He stood a moment, watching the ebb and surge of the strikes, then raised his sword double handed and brought it down hard onto the single foe.

Staggering back under the weight of the blow, the mercenary raised his arm to block the strike, and Bragon swung up and across, slicing at the junction of his cuirass and kilt, opening his gullet as cleanly as if he hung on a butcher's hook.

Luc threw down his sword, ducking to grab and raise the fallen war axe high into the air. He screamed again as he brought it down with back breaking force onto the neck of the shrieking, struggling horse.

He dropped to his knees behind the dead beast: gore stained, shoulders hunched, head down.

A cheer went up in celebration. Around the yard, at neighbours' doors and nearby fences, men and women stood clapping and laughing.

Maia gagged on her own hard breath. Terror and shock filled her mouth with hot gall and sobs. A moment from start to finish, a single moment of stark reality. She stumbled out the door and vomited. She retched again and again until there was nothing more to raise and Aila's soft hand on her shoulder urged her back inside.

She turned to where Luc sat back onto his feet, unmoving. Her mind spun in a dark void, where echoes of horror were the only sound. Without thought, she began to run. In a moment she had crossed the distance to him, held his face against her and tried to soothe away the red horror with bare fingers. He looked up, his eyes opening a cold abyss of fatigue in the gory mask, and he closed them again. "Don't get blood on you," he said.

Slowly, as if he struggled up from beneath a mountain of corpses, he rose to his feet and rested a hand on her shoulder as they walked back into the house.

There was not enough water to clean away death. It soaked his hair, it ran down the back of his neck, it dyed the front of his tunic black.

"You need the river, son." Aila tossed a basin of red water out the window and stood beside where he sat at the table. "I can draw another bucket and warm it, but you need running water."

He nodded and flexed his left arm, rotating the shoulder painfully through its range.

Maia sat silently on the bed. Her hands had worked the blood stained front of her overshirt into a tight wad, and every time she looked down at it shakes set again in her shoulders and elbows. Frost had claimed and drained her cheeks, and her vision turned inward on images of gore. She wanted to bathe. She needed hot water, scalding hot, and rivers of hot water wouldn't scrub away the memory. But she had no words.

Bragon studied her, sizing up the tremors that jittered around her mouth. "Not so tidy, this life, hey lass?"

She looked up at him, her eyes wide.

"Leave her be." Luc spoke quietly, as if he was too tired to form the sounds.

His father had no intention of leaving it be, not for the moment. "This is the price of your choices. You'd best be sure you can meet it before you go any further on this road." His face was calm and there was kindness in his tone, but the words stabbed into the soft flesh of her belly. "Just a wee trip to see your brother, was it? Now what do you think? Is it worth the cost?"

"I said leave her be."

In Celt he said to Luc, "Stop carrying her, lad. There's likely worse than this ahead for you. If you trust her, tell her the truth." To Maia he said, "This is what we do, child, what soldiers are trained to do. Has it changed your mind about this journey?"

Everything had changed. All her perceptions of life and what mattered had changed in a moment, but she had no words to explain it to him, or to herself. Men had died trying to kill Luc. She'd watched them die in a wash of mud and hot red blood. Maia swallowed and forced the word out clearly. "Yes."

Luc groaned and let his head fall forward onto crossed arms.

Because she had no other way to hold him, she said, "I'm ready to go when you are."

Bragon nodded, resigned. "Do you want any of their gear? The horse needs spelling, but the blades are sound."

"No. Just a clean tunic."

"Aye, well, there's none. I'll get your horses." He turned his back on choices that weren't his to make and walked out the door, while Luc stood to hug his mother. She kissed his cheeks and forehead, holding his face and whispering to him, reassuringly. Like he was a small child. Maia turned to the door and started walking. Whatever Luc thought about choices, his family was holding her in debt and the cost was climbing. It was already blood. Hot red blood that stained whatever it touched black.

Maia hung back, riding behind so she could avoid the chance of talk, avoid his eyes. He pulled a shroud of cold air around his shoulders and hunched under pain like it was all the fuel he would need. The silence stung her ears and a cold lump of absolute futility clogged her throat. She wanted to cry, but tears seemed such a shallow thing. A scream hurt in her chest, burning to howl out desperate and relentless frustration.

Outside the city, moving slowly north, he stopped where the river Sabrina banked into shallows, kneeling at the edge of the water to wash the blood from his hair. He scrubbed like the stain could never be removed, like it ate into his skin as deep and

permanent as the marks on his chest. And as much a part of him, his heritage, his blood.

When he stood to dry off, he walked slowly to where she sat, silent, on the horse. "You don't want to get down?"

She shook her head, straining to force out a word. "No." She couldn't bear to look at him. He made her heart break: a silent pain that crushed her chest and made her want to double over. She crossed her arms over her stomach and pushed her horse into step behind his. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she blinked them away, rubbing angrily at the tracks they left, cursing the child within.

They had left the house in the early afternoon, and the warmth of the sun paled and failed against the stiff winds that scoured the river valley like the ghost of a flood. Luc moved at a steady walk, angling slowly northwest and away from the water, away from the roads and guard stations, following the rise of the mountains.

And the silence dogged them like noxious gas. The longer they moved in silence, the stronger it grew, eroding strength and courage, leaving a stark wall of cold confusion and reluctance between them. There was no time since she'd known him that there wasn't something to say. Now when nothing was more important, words had deserted her. She couldn't think about fates and choices any more.

And she was afraid. She had to know what was next, had to make herself ready for this place where nothing was as she knew it. Her life, Bassus and Lyvia, all their money and all it had bought for her was worthless, pointless. It was worse than that. Men like Luc and Cilo used their blood and their lives to buy people like her comfort and luxury. The empire ran on blood. This blood.

And she didn't know how to live in this world where men killed and died.

The people who lived in this land: her mother's people, her father, died or gave up all they had so that her class could eat peacock at appointed feasts and flay servants for staining a cloth. Guilt punched her in the stomach and she buckled again, leaning over the horse's neck, watching tears drip onto his mane.

Now she had brought them both to this. Living or dying in the name of a child's sadness. Endless aching sadness. The terrible loneliness of abandonment, of fear and guilt and shames too awful to look at.

Somewhere in her dreams she had held Luc, and he had wrapped his arms around her, and her skin remembered his touch, remembered and cried for its loss. But in the cold light of this horror, she could not go to him. Hurts she couldn't understand welled up in his shadow, hurts she had caused, and she had no right to move closer. Sorry was too small a word.

She knew now, she knew why Cilo chose this place over their home. She had learned to bury her grief and pain and it had blossomed into shame. His had thorns, sharp and deadly. His pain was anger. Rage. And he painted it in blood. She longed to throw her arms around him. She longed to say, I understand now. I understand.

She wept again, silently, for the years they had shared when she had been so blind. A child, never growing past her own pain. Never brave enough to step outside and run into the wind. And she had blamed him for her lack of courage.

As the sun rolled away the hours, indifferent to her distress, the mountains grew up beside them, hauling them over mounds and hollows older than the empire. They passed villages quietly. Luc kept to the outside, well away from these wary, inquisitive fingers of humanity.

They stayed in the shadow of the heights, moving around them rather than over and steadily north. There were ruins, too. Stone walls and mounds long abandoned by the vanquished. On the low ground, the hill fort stones had been dragged to remake a life, to form fenced yards for stock, and low buildings more like graves cut back into the

earth than dwellings.

Just past one cluster of lost hope they came to a riverlet, thick with grass and willows, and Luc stopped. "We'll stay here tonight," he said raggedly, as if his voice too had seized up for lack of use. "I'll cut branches to soften the ground, and we'll camp in the huts back there."

Maia nodded, wishing there was something she could say that would break the silence and the cold. Instead she turned back to the line of buildings, sliding off the horse so she could find a dry place out of the wind. They were pits, walled over. Hard, mean places to live, where only the broken would seek solace.

In one of the larger cairns a fire had been laid long ago, its ash now blown flat around charcoal chips, but the roof had held and it was dry; the doorway was wide and low like a turret. Maia sat on a rock outside the hut, holding her horse, waiting. It was too small a space for silence. She would have to find her voice or she would start to scream.

Shadows were grey and icing over when he walked up to her hut with an armload of willow tips. "Is this okay?" she asked, kicking her throat into action.

"Yes. Good. We need some firewood. Along the bank, even if it's damp, it'll dry."

She nodded and walked back out to the small waterway. Small sticks and twigs were common enough, twisted in the arms of the willows or lying on the ground. Away from the stream where a hillock rose lazily from the ground, a thicket held more, and when her arms were too full to bend, she carried them back through the dusk to the hut.

Already the saddles were in, the packs under cover and the horses hobbled on the pasture. Even if he had to walk the horses, it seemed his pulse drove him harder. Hard tensions gathered in his shoulders and his frown forced its way deeper into the flesh of his face. The roof was too low for him, and he hunched under its weight, kneeling by the fire when it was lit to stack the kindling.

"I want to go and wash before it gets too much darker." Maia managed the sentence, hopeful he would respond, hoping he would smile. But he nodded, his attention bent on forcing reluctant wood to burn.

She stripped to her linen tunic and kilt, sluicing the shallow frigid water over her skin just enough to feel she had washed. She held up the overshirt, stamped indelibly in black by a man's life. She dared not wash the stain away. If the day was damp tomorrow, there would be nothing warm and dry for her to wear, so she bundled it up in her arms and walked back to the firelight.

Luc had the fire bright and his stained linen shirt was drying on his chest. His cheeks bunched and clenched like he was chewing furies, and his stare was fixed into the fire. Maia crouched to where her blanket roll lay and unrolled it onto the leaves, then did the same with Luc's. She threw her fleece cloak onto it and stood looking at her work, searching for something else to be doing. There was nothing else. She had to go to sit by him now, or the silence would never end.

He was sitting, crouching, on a rock beside the fire, elbows locked defensively over his knees, staring out the opening and into the fire by turns. The hut offered no place to take a stand or seat. Bare earth, dry and forgotten was her only choice and she chose it, kneeling at his side.

"Luc." The word was tentative and it sent a shock through him stark enough to scare her back into silence. She watched the fire, felt its heat lifting layers from her face, like old skin peeling. There was nowhere to start.

"You've changed your mind. So what do you want me to do now?" He broke the silence for her and she felt his words glance like deflected blows, hard but pulled away from blood. The hands he flexed and drew into fists shook, and fierce lights haunted his

eyes. He looked like coiled violence.

"I haven't changed my mind; I've realized how much I didn't know. How real the danger is. What it's going to cost you." She needed some solid ground. "Tell me what we're moving into." What are the threats? Can you survive this?

When he faced her, his eyes were feverish, hopeless. "I can't."

"Luc?"

"I can't. I can't tell you what will happen, where you can go, when, who will be there or who will care. I can't do it." He picked up a stick and prodded at the fire, resting his chin down onto his arm.

"We've come so far." She didn't mean only the miles, or what had happened. She had moved from one life into another. "I need you. I don't know how to live in this world without you."

"That's why I can't do this anymore. I can't see the future and I can't stand your trust. I can't live up to it."

"But we've come so far. I've followed you so far. If we can't finish this, why did we start? I don't know what to do now that I'm here. I need you."

"Maia I didn't take you out of your home, remember? You left. You ran into the forest after Cilo, and he was looking the other way. You decided you needed his courage, no one else did."

Inadequacy rose back into her throat and itched like filth in her palms. "You didn't have to help me. You needn't have given me cause to hope." She should never have hoped; hope always cost too much. She'd had no right to ask any of this of him. "If you told me to, I would have stayed in Londinium. I believed you told me the truth. I trusted your judgment." Silent tears welled up, forcing their way out. "I still do."

"Don't."

She rubbed her eyes, cleared them. "Then why are you here? You asked me why it's important to me that you're with me, that's my answer. Because I need you. You make me real. You make me important. I don't want to go anywhere or do anything if you're not there with me." It wasn't hope, it was real. It was a small thing, but it was the truth and she had never learned to lie. "That's why. Now, you tell me why you're here."

He dropped his face between his knees and braced his hands over his neck, waiting for an axeman's blow. But he said nothing. Silence climbed up her shoulders, tickled the hairs on her nape and burned in the back of her throat. She stood, walked in front of him so her back was to the fire. "Tell me. Do you know? It's important."

He laughed. It was no more than a cough, but it gave her some confidence. He looked up at her. "Do you remember every single word I say?"

"Yes."

"Then why do you never believe me?"

"Why are you here?"

"Because..." He sighed and tried to find somewhere else to look, but his eyes found their way back to hers. "If you asked me to take this mountain down, stone by stone, and rebuild it over the river, I would do it."

"If you want blood, I would bleed for you. Only for you." He didn't look away and stark terror moved up through her ankles and knees so they shook. For her? In the silence of the cave, her breath rasped in her own ears and her heartbeat jumped into a gallop, but he kept speaking.

"You are honest and strong and have a courage that puts me to shame. You are all I've ever seen that is truly good, and right and clean. You are a jewel that a man like me could never hope to even see, let alone touch."

"When you're near firelight, all the stars I will ever need are in your eyes." His

words were little more than a whisper, a plea. "If I want moonlight, I only have to look to your skin." He raised a hand, softly touching the top of her arm, and fires lit along her nerves as he watched his fingers slowly sliding down. "And holding you against me is more warmth than any sun I ever walked under."

He looked away like he had no right to face her, and the terror moved into her stomach, burning inside her, low, like need. Her blood carried heat. Hot coals dropped from her stomach to her groin, gathering there, glowing red and compelling. She lifted his hand, put it on to her cheek so she could feel its strength, its warmth.

When he looked up again, more than the fire lit his eyes. "This morning I wanted to die out there because I should have kept you safe from that. You should never have to deal with blood and death and pain. You should have everything. I want you more than life itself and I have nothing to offer you but cold and darkness. Nothing but blood and fear."

The terror had moved into her throat, holding off words and her breath tore its way past the knot. Her eyes were dark; her heart beat staggered and raced. She stepped forward between his knees, pressed against him and bent her face down to kiss his lips.

Her skin ached. Nothing would force her lungs to draw breath and all she could feel was the softness of his mouth and the scratch of stubble on her chin. Her hands found his hair and she held him against her mouth, feeding her need on soft flesh.

Luc slipped his hand down her cheek, brushed her throat, softly over her shoulder and down to cup the perfect curve of her breast. Her back arched at his touch, pushing against him and throwing her head back on a caught breath. His lips moved down her throat, slowly, burning the skin with the heat of his mouth, to the neck of her tunic.

Gently he pulled her thigh forward, shifting her weight until she stepped over one leg, then the other and sat against him. Her kisses slid over his eyes, his temple, his cheek, his ear, as his hands slid slowly up under her tunic, brushing the bare skin of her back and setting it alight. Lightning traced his touch, small sobs stuttered from her chest as the heat of her need grew and burned low in her belly.

He slid his arms up, lifting her tunic and she raised her arms to free it, pulling his lips down to her skin, her fingers laced behind his neck. As he lifted her toward his mouth, sucking on to a rose pink nipple, she gasped and curled herself forward over his face, wrapping her arms across his head, longing to merge his skin into her own.

A sigh caught deep in his throat and he shuddered like he had been kicked and pulled his face away from her.

"Maia." He caught her face between his hands. Her eyes were on fire, dark under hooded lids, her breath flared over his face, she licked her lips. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

She pulled his face to hers, kissed him, opening her mouth as the yearning for him rose inside her.

"Maia." He pulled her face back again. "Are you sure?"

She couldn't speak, but she nodded, slowly, heavily. What focus she could manage was on his eyes and she nodded again. "Yes." No more than a hiss between kisses down his cheek. "Yes." Her hands raised the shirt from his back lifted it higher over his shoulders, up his arms. She dropped her face onto his shoulder, kissing into the junction of his throat, up under his ear. "Yes."

Crouching, crossing his arms under her, he stood and turned to where the blankets lay over a nest of willow shoots. Dropping to his knees, he sat back on his feet, pulling her hips hard against himself. The kilt she wore was fastened with a clip and he peered over her shoulder, feeling for the way to release it. She put her hands back, touched the clip without moving her lips from his neck, and it fell open.

A laugh almost slipped from his chest, but her nails raked up his back and he groaned into her mouth.

He leaned forward, laying her back onto the cloaks so he was raised on his hands and knees above her. His eyes shone from the shadow of a deep frown and she gazed up at him through dark shifting light. He trailed fingertips slowly up her breastbone, traced a slow line across her breast, let them drag over the tight bead of her nipple and up to touch the rapid pulse at her throat. As the trail slipped down her inner arm and onto her stomach he whispered, "I feel like I'm dreaming. This can't be real. I'm afraid to touch you."

Maia took his hand and pressed her lips into his palm, placed it on her breast, slid it down her stomach. She focused her goddess eyes on his. "I don't know what to do, Luc. Show me."

He sat back onto his feet, undid the crossed ties at his hips and slipped her kilt down over her thighs. The thin woollen cord of her bride's knot sat dark against her pearly skin, and he looked to her. "Break it," she said.

Luc's hands shook as his fingers explored her body. Her skin was hot under his touch and she moved against his caress; tiny moans of pleasure slipped from her throat as she gave herself to him, body and soul. Her eyes were dark, barely open, and she laid her trust before him. There was no doubting the honesty of her response. Every smile, every murmur, all the sweet wet welcome of her flesh was real, and unconditional, and his.

And yet the black ice of irrational fear crowded close against his sense of elation.

He drew the firm tip of her breast into his mouth and the hard reality of his own desire coursed up through him, boiling his blood and straining in his flesh. And still, he fought the terror that he would wake, he would open his eyes and she would vanish into mist and firelight, no more than the phantom lover of his dreams.

He was terrified of hurting her, afraid and exhilarated in ways he had never known. She had come to his arms, his angel, his goddess, and his heart couldn't hold all the joy or block out the fear she would disappear.

Maia groaned and touched her tongue to her lips, as his mouth moved fire over the skin of her belly. His touch brought her flesh to life, and made her spirit soar. She was safe in his hands; there was no part of herself she wanted to hide, no self-consciousness or shame. For the first time in memory she felt clean and worthy.

She ached for him. If she could have dragged him under her skin she would have done it. A primal need burned, yearned to have him in her and she writhed in the grip of sweet torture. Luc smiled at her impatience, and moaned against her throat as her fingers raked the slick muscle of his back, or softly stroked the silky heat of his erection.

She had instinct and Luc's gentle hands for guidance, and her pleasure hummed and throbbed against his fingers as they slipped inside her.

When he settled himself between her thighs, the warmth in her belly had become a slow burning weight, bearing down low into her groin, and she tilted her hips to meet him, biting down on the restless need in her blood. There was no pain when he filled her, and she gazed into his eyes, breathless at the rush of sensation, before she locked her thighs around him and pulled him hard against her.

Every nerve centred on him when he moved, gently at first, and she arched up to him, pulled his mouth to hers and knew the fierce burn of unendurable desire. No god ever moved her with such sweet and sacred promise and every ragged breath became a prayer.

Fires spread across her nerve endings, tore along her ribs and up under her

shoulders and when her climax sucked and shuddered around him, and pleasure thrilled through her, she cried out, panting, clinging to him.

All his painful longings burst as Luc thrust deep into her heat, with a rash of sweat climbing up his spine and his heartbeat raging in his chest. Maia tightened her legs around his waist and wrapped her arms around his neck, as if she had found her only hope and was never going to let him go. She had waited so long to be needed, desired, and she didn't want any part of him not held against her skin.

In the firelight the silence was right; there was nothing more to be said. He reached across her to his cloak, pulled it roughly over his back, and together they slept on the willow.

Fright woke her, her senses calling for him in a dark rush of panic, but he hadn't gone further than the fire.

"Sleep," he said. "It'll be morning soon enough and another ten leagues to cover."

She nodded, pulling the cover back for him to take his place beside her. With her head on his arm, she traced the lines etched into the flat slab of his chest. "I woke up and you weren't there. It scared me."

"I keep telling you I don't have anywhere else to be. There isn't anywhere else I want to be."

"And I want to believe that. I want to believe everything you said, but part of me is sure that you're going to look at me, and really see me, and you're going to wonder why you ever thought I was worth your time." She looked up at his face. "I think you want the dream of who I am. And you've given up everything for a dream."

"No, I know who you are." Even in the broken light of the fire, the intensity that made her want to squirm away, or throw up, shone from his eyes and she couldn't doubt him. "The first time I looked into your eyes, I saw the only pure, good, worthwhile thing in this whole pitiful world. I have never had any doubts about who you are. And I wished you were mine from that first moment."

Tears that rose on laughter and terror, relief and denial, threatened. The frightened child in her heart, smoke stained and ash smeared, wanted to hold out her grubby fingers and cry 'But...'

"Also," he went on with the same quiet certainty, "I haven't given up anything for you. You brought me the moment and the courage and the certainty, but I was going anyway. I've had enough."

Pain and bitterness made his words harsh, and Maia shrugged, almost whispering in the shadows, "You could have applied for a discharge. Now, because of me, you'll have nowhere in the empire you can hide."

"I have," he answered simply. "No one is released ahead of a campaign like this. They want the whole country bought under control, and that will cost lives. They've levied slaves and prisoners-of-war from Gaul and Germania, untrained forces, just to hold the numbers. I've got ten years experience and sixty horsemen behind me. I'd as likely get a seat in the senate as a discharge any time in the next five years."

"Cilo?"

His chest twitched, but if it was a laugh it made no sound. "I've argued about this with him for three years. He sees things differently. He wants to win. He wants his best men with him on the front lines."

It was hard to stand between the men she loved. She had seen the pain and desperation in Luc's features from the time she'd met him, without knowing what lay behind it. But she also knew Cilo's dedication to the army.

Silently, she snuggled closer under his arm and pressed her lips against his chest. The demons that haunted him moved behind his eyes and set tension in the lean

muscle of his side. "They can make you kill; you have to, to stay alive," he said. "But if I slaughter every man woman and child in one village, or ten, and their homes and crops are burned, it breaks some men and they won't fight back any more. But there's just as many are filled with hate and vengeance." He picked up her hand and laced his fingers through hers.

"And when we win, when we do more killing than they do, it fills your head with blood and screaming and it leaves a hole here," he moved her hand over his sternum, "and there is nothing can ever fill it. It's rot that eats you up from inside." He rolled onto his side so he could hold her against his chest. "You're my answer to that emptiness. You're the only thing that makes me feel whole."

"But you would have left anyway? Even if I'd stayed at home with Papa?"

Pressing his lips against her brow, he answered, "One way or another. I don't sleep much anymore; it's easier to make mistakes, harder to stay alive. But if I make a mistake, I've got sixty of my own men who'll pay for it. Dead or alive my decisions kill people."

These were his choices. And the future was bleak. To kill and die, or to live like a hunted beast.

"What do we do now? Where do we go?"

"I want to go north, up to my mother's people. It's harsh country, cold and wild, but Rome has never been able to hold the land. That's where I was going to go."

Colder and wilder than here? Maia shuddered and snuggled into his warmth. "Cilo had reasons for all he's done, and he will be waiting for me, planning his next move. Now I have changed everything. Everything. How am I going to tell him?"

"I think he may have guessed that was the case. And he'll know what your questions are. It's the answers he gives you that are going to matter." And how angry he is, and how he chooses to deal with it.

"When will we get to him?"

"At an easy ride with no trouble, two more days. There are too many things I don't know. All we can do is keep moving tomorrow. Tonight you should sleep."

"I don't want to sleep," she whispered.

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CHAPTER TWELVE.

Moving about in the freezing morning air made every sore place in her body ache all the more. Fire warmed the wine, which helped, but the wind found its way through every crack and crevice, whining in the thickets and crying out like a *bean shidh*.

Maia was ravenous. The weakness in her muscles cried out for health, demanding food, and she ate their meagre rations with relish. "I don't want to have to move," she said, cupping her hands around a warm mug of wine.

"It'll get better once we're into the trees ahead, not so cold."

Not so cold. The wind was broken and the fine snowfall had not penetrated the twiggy canopy, but the horses stepped awkwardly around spindly stalks and bent tree trunks. Shrubby thickets pushed into the tree line after them as Luc picked out a path through the uneven pockets of forest. Low branches, wet with ice, brushed their faces as they ducked beneath, and even the fleece cloaks were heavy with the weight of the cold, damp air.

Maia pulled the coarse wool of her blanket up tighter around her face, wishing for

the soft security of Justicia's cape to hide under. Subtle dreads picked at her tired senses, niggling at her back. Luc had slung the sword belt diagonally across his chest, so the hilt rose over his shoulder, and slipped the dirk into his calf strap again. It was the first time he had armed himself since they left Londinium and that fact dragged obscure perils along in their wake.

Reaching behind her thigh, she pulled Bryn's short bow from its quiver and tested its weight in her hand. "When we stop tonight will you show me how to use this?"

He turned in the saddle to smile at her and her heart burst into her lungs, stopping her breath. The soft dappled light of the forest caught in his hair and he shone like gold. He was strong and warm and gentle, and he wanted her. "Depends what you want to do. I try to play to my strengths and archery is not one of them. I can maybe hit a big target, at close range, if I'm standing still and if it can't hit back."

"That's okay. You know what to do, just show me."

"You don't have to wait until then. They're made to use on horseback. All you need is enough clear space to draw your arm back." She tested the weight of the string, pulling on it with a hooked finger and he added, "But you don't want to practice while you're behind me."

He stopped his horse, waiting until she'd walked up beside him. "Just hold it up and draw the string back so your finger is on your jaw."

"If it's that easy, why can't you do it?"

"I can do it. I just can't be sure of what I'll hit." The smile was easy. In truth, it was easier to smile than to keep a grin from spreading all over his face. When he closed his eyes he could see her. Her taste, her smell, the feeling of her skin against his were an impossible dream made real, and his nerves hummed in response to the memory. She had turned so suddenly, so unexpectedly, so completely into his embrace that his heart staggered under the weight of ecstatic disbelief.

The forest spread its arms, making travel less arduous. Following a watercourse where two hills rolled together, they picked their way easily between gnarled trunks and low branches. Sunlight had woken tender shoots in the heavy leaf litter, but the trees were not yet ready to unfurl their burden of green into the sharp clear air.

By late morning they had picked up a trail, well used but not worn, and riding abreast, Luc scanned ahead and behind as his senses stretched toward apprehension.

"Why are you so distracted? Are you expecting some sort of trouble?" Maia looked behind, then back ahead, reading nothing in the dappled light and shade.

"I'm not sure. People, maybe, and I'd rather see them before they see us, that's all."

"There's smoke somewhere, isn't there?" Maia tasted the air again.

"You smell smoke?" He looked at her, eyebrows raised. "Which way?"

She was unsure. "The wind is coming this way, and we didn't pass anyone so it has to be ahead, doesn't it?"

He smiled his easy smile and laughed to himself. "Yes, I suppose so. And that's not a bad thing."

"Why?"

"Because infantry march, and this isn't a marching track. If villagers are moving up and down these trails and they have a smoking fire, they're not worried about being attacked by bandits. It's better than it could be."

"Unless they are the bandits." She shrugged and he laughed again.

"Unless they are." He could smell it now himself. "We'll soon see."

Where the trees stood back from a pond, a wagon load of hay and perhaps a dozen small children stood to one side of a sheltered clearing. At a nearby fire, three women

straightened, moving forward as the riders approached, gauging the threat to their families. Luc spoke to them, moving in slowly, dismounting a short distance away. Maia followed, slipping down and standing behind him, between the horses.

"Their men are hunting boar. I asked if we can eat with them," he whispered as the children swelled in around them like a wash, staring wide eyed at these strangers, apparently unafraid. "I'm giving them the food we have packed. Look at these kids, they're near starving."

As he untied their packs, swinging first one then the other over his shoulder, Maia watched the children. There were fourteen of them, aged between four and ten. If they were any older, they were too small, their heads large and their bellies distended.

They were her.

She felt their emptiness. The desperate fearlessness that lit their eyes woke echoes in her soul. Somewhere in the deepest heart of her memories, she remembered this painful destitution. Smiling at them because she had nothing else she could give them, she rushed to follow Luc to where the women stood.

Already they were breaking up the cobs, calling to the children to take cheese and bread and fruit, preparing to mix cornmeal into porridge, and Luc laid the depleted packs to the side and sat on a log. When she stood in front of him, he pulled her close, resting his face on her belly. Her warmth soothed his skin and her perfume was a calming wash over his senses. "They say they don't speak any Latin, but it won't hurt to keep it quiet where they can hear."

She tousled condensation from his hair. "The horses can drink. Will we take the saddles off?"

"Not yet, when I've had a look at their men."

She slipped down onto her knees and kissed him, unable to return the smile in his eyes. "It's nearly finished, isn't it?"

"I'm trying not to get ahead of myself. It's enough we made it this far, we'll deal with tomorrow when it gets here." He slipped a strand of hair back behind her ear and kissed her forehead, nose, lips, her cheek, her throat.

"Even if there is no tomorrow, today is enough, as long as you're with me. If you love me, I have everything I ever needed."

"Then you have everything you'll ever need." He spoke the words like a vow.

"Good." She smiled. "Do you think there'll be anything left for us to eat? I'm starving." She kissed him again, teasing, her lips brushing his, and let her cheek rub across the rough stubble of his.

"There'll be meat, I hope, if these hunters get back. When it's cooked. Eventually." Soft kisses.

"Why did we choose such a crowded place to stop?"

"It's getting more crowded. They're coming down now."

She sighed. "Okay. Food will have to do, then."

While Luc sat by the fire with the men, Maia watched the children playing. The aim of their game was for some of them to hit the others with balls of wet clay. Once splattered with a mud ball, the child formed his or her own and tried to hit someone else. They ran, laughing, their bare feet skidding and sliding on the wet leaf litter, weaving in and out of the trees, under and around the wagon. She smiled, sometimes even giggling with them as they burned up restless energy they could not afford to waste.

When one of the smaller children ran smack into the side of the wagon, she started to stand, about to move to help. All the children laughed hysterically. Even the child on the ground, once he had shaken himself clear, laughed as he scrambled back to his feet.

Maia stopped laughing. She had never watched children play. In her whole life she had Cilo, no one else, ever. Lyvia had allowed no children in the villa. If they travelled, or in the markets in Pompeii, they rode in stately elegance, no urchins were allowed to distract from their graceful sophistication.

The cold agony of realization gripped her, a sickening mixture of clarity and relief, anger and loathing. "It wasn't my fault," she whispered to herself. She held out her palm, studied the pale clean skin, turned her hand over and watched the trembling of her fingers. "It wasn't my fault. I was little. I was only a baby." She buried her face into her knees and wrapped her arms tight around them, trying to hug away her own pain.

She rocked against her knees, comforting the horrified, guilt-racked child within until she heard Luc unlacing the surcingle. Pushing her eyes against the rough fabric of her trousers, she sniffled and pushed her hair back so she could watch him move. He was so beautiful it hurt; everything she never dreamed she could have. And she trusted him implicitly. Maybe he was even right about her. Watching him thickened the air in her chest and tears of joy threatened.

He was fated to rescue her. He was fated to hold her. The gods had let him love her. Being near him turned her blood to light and raised a rash of heat over her skin.

She walked to where he stood and wrapped her arms around him. "You're amazing."

"I'm pleased you noticed," he joked, handing her down her saddle. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. When do we eat?"

"Soon. Come on, I'll show you how to use this." Putting the saddles to one side, he handed Maia Bryn's quiver and led her down the slope to the water's edge. He marked a notch at shoulder height in the bark of a twisted oak and stood a few paces back, holding her hips in front of his so she stood sidelong to the tree.

"Okay. If you had an arrow nocked, you would hold this arm out straight. Good. Then use these three fingers to pull back the string. Pull." He laughed. "Further, pull it back so your finger is on your jaw here and your thumb under here."

She let the string go. "You have got to be kidding. Why is it so tight?"

"So the arrow will go through someone. But this is weighted for a man. And, once you get it back to there, you have to hold it to aim. It takes a lot of practice to nock, pull, aim and fire at speed, and these are used on horseback, as well. Still fancy archery?"

"Yes. Show me again."

"Right. Pull it back, further, and hold it there. Hold it. Keep holding." The muscles in her arm and down her side started to tremble and burn and he started to laugh again. Dropping an elbow back into his ribs, she reached down to the quiver. "I'm going to try an arrow. You ready?"

"Go. Put your feet like this, and don't lean back." He nocked the arrow for her and put his hands down onto her hips. "When you let go, hold the bow where it is, don't let it drop."

"Okay. I pull back like this, and aim, and...." The bowstring twanged and the arrow dropped to the mud a few feet from where she stood. When she looked up at him, they both laughed.

"No, that was good. You're getting the hang of it. Just a bit more practice letting go."

She bent to pick a new arrow. "I know. I'm a natural."

In the time it took for the chunks of pig to char, she had managed to loose some arrows toward the tree. Some had vanished into the woodland behind it, but none had hit the target or come close.

“You’re every bit as good as I am at this already.” He held her back so her weight was against him, sliding a hand across her belly and up slowly under her tunic. The touch was soft, no more than a breeze lifting the tiny hairs on her skin, but it raised gooseflesh and drew chills up her spine. Her back straightened and her breath quickened as she sighted along the length of the shaft.

His fingers traced a line along her lowest rib and his lips touched her hair so warm breath spilled over her ear and onto her shoulder. She released the arrow to skid across the leaf litter and dropped the bow and cocked her head to the side, opening her throat and shoulder to his rough chin. The bare heat of his fingertips found her breast bone, painting a line of fire on her chest, tickling slowly up to her neckline.

She shifted her hands back, reaching behind to hold his hips harder against hers and smiled as his hand fanned sideways, drifting into place over her breast, the nipple caught gently between two fingers. Primal rhythms moved her hips slowly against his. She groaned. Then sighed, and opened her eyes as a voice called from the camp above.

“Food’s ready,” he breathed into her ear.

“Guess so.” She shook herself awake and moved his hand. “I’ll collect the arrows.”

Riding behind the families into the late afternoon, Luc watched the run of the wagon and pulled over closer to where Maia rode.

“The cart is running too heavy. And look at the way the sheaves have been laid. There’s an even line around the sides where the kids sit, then even layers over the top, but they don’t line up.”

Maia watched the oxen struggling over the uneven ground, watched the wheels bite into the gravel and leaf.

“They say they’re just taking feed from their farm up to the next village, but they’ve been travelling longer than a few days; the beasts are hungry and the harnesses are rubbing. And my guess is they’re heading a lot further than the next village.”

She nodded. “If it’s weapons, they’ll be used against our own men, won’t they?”

“Aye.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know it is weapons.” He was quiet a moment. “What would it take for you to load your starving family into a cart and risk smuggling over the front lines?”

She turned the clear gold of her eyes up to his, searching his face for a right answer, for any answer that wasn’t utterly insufficient. There wasn’t one. Instead she said, “You must look like a spy to them. We must.”

“Maybe. If they were worried we’d be dead by now. There’s no sense in taking us into the village, they already outnumber us. We need food tonight and we have to risk it. I’d hate to have to rely on our hunting skills.”

Luc lifted one of the smallest children up behind him and one in front, as the cart struggled to follow the track up from the woodlands onto an open hillside. Maia did the same, spreading her blanket to cover them as evening snow flurries blew against them.

Darkness deepened and the temperature dropped further. The women struggled, carrying their children, walking beside the cart up along a dark and unreadable path toward the distant torchlight of a village.

Maia moved closer, speaking as quietly as she could in the gusty cold. “What have you told them? If anyone here asks me questions, what do I say?”

"I said nothing. We're going north, that's all. I'm only hoping there's a fire, food, a roof, some beer and not too much company."

"And what are the chances of a hot tub and tallowblocks and honeyed wine and a soft bed and servants to comb my hair out?" She grinned. "Don't tell me, not good?"

"Not good. I'm going to go further and say the chance of a bowl of hot water to wash is beyond likely. Honey as in mead, maybe. Some skins on the floor. And I'll guess pigs, cows and sheep all living at the door because the pastures aren't warm enough yet. Want me to go on, or would you rather get a surprise." His smile was there, but not bright. "Let me suggest you drink a lot. Nothing matters so much, then."

"Cheers." She shrugged, it would be fine. There would be no problems as long as she could sleep in his arms.

There were no surprises.

They were made as welcome as the wagoners, invited into the warmth of the main village round house and fed on spit roasted beef and cheese, eggs and doughy bread. Luc grinned as he set a jug of beer between them. "Cheers, then."

When the village families had moved back to their own huts, the travellers were left to themselves. Maia moved a pile of bedding closer to the stone wall and looked suspiciously at the high cone of thatch that rose above them.

This was what her mother had left behind. Not by choice, perhaps, but it was no mystery why she didn't rush back. Lying down into the stale, smoky blanket in this fire-warmed communal hut, she tried to see a better tomorrow. It looked better as soon as Luc lay down beside her.

"I don't know if I could learn to live like this," she said.

He didn't answer and she lay listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, letting the beer turn fatigue into numbness. "Will we keep moving with these people tomorrow?"

"I think so. We don't need to rush and they have better local knowledge. And better food, when they can get it." He slid a hand down over her hip and pulled her thigh over his. Holding her closer eased the pain in his chest and the damaged pieces of his soul reached for healing in her warmth. "There's another full day and half travelling, and we're getting too close to the forts for my liking."

"Luc, we don't have to do this. We don't need to go one more step. There isn't anything I want enough to make the risks worthwhile. I don't care about the past, or what Cilo has done or wants to do. That's not true, I do, but not that much. Not enough." She held his eyes, pleading, assuring, offering an out.

"My mother believes that sooner or later you will realize you need to go back to your own life." He touched a fingertip to her cheek, traced a line down along her lip. "You have to be free to make that choice. So, I'll take you to him, as I promised. Then you can decide which life you want and at least you'll know this one doesn't get much better than this." He reached under her shirt to touch the skin of her back, to hold her closer and be sure she was real. Closing his eyes, he refused the fear that she would vanish, the dread that he would open them and she would be gone. That was foolish superstition.

Luc carried the weight of his fears and too many miles on weary shoulders. Even thinking clearly had become impossible. There was no longer any doubt that the family they followed were smuggling something, probably weapons, but he had no interest in the choices other people had. He watched Maia.

She glowed like candlelit alabaster, laughing with the children, delighting in their childish fun. She shared their resonance, the innocence and bright urgency that charged their need to move forward into the world.

Shadows of the past days and years clung in dark smudges under her eyes, her hair had grown wild, but a fundamental burden had fallen from her spirit. At some time, one he could not pinpoint, she had changed, emerged like a bud opening to accept the sun. Watching her raised a choking knot of terror.

He had lived through so much, so many years without knowing her, and yet now he did, nothing in the world would matter if she went away. Nothing and nobody. She had given him a reason to survive.

They were less than a day's ride from facing that possibility and he had no heart to keep going. He could read the excitement growing in her as the day dragged by, could see chances opening before her that he couldn't match. Given the opportunity, he would have gathered her into his arms and carried her to a forest glade, laid her on bracken and bluebells and made love to her until her eyes were dark with excess. He would have made her promises the world could not undo, given gifts that could never be taken away.

But that choice wasn't his.

If her choice was not with him, so be it. That weight was hard to bear; he had no use for a life without her. But he preferred to live and keep her with him, in any world she chose.

As the day stumbled toward its end, she moved to his side, wary, searching for the cause of his reticence.

"You'd better tell me," she said at last. "Whatever it is, it can't be as bad as it looks."

He gave her a crooked half smile that didn't touch his eyes and avoided the question. "You seem very happy today, excited. Looks like you're looking forward to getting to the barracks tomorrow."

"Okay." She sat on that for a few hundred yards, digesting the implications, searching for the question that hid behind his words. "I don't know where to start, or what words will explain how much I love my brother. I owe him my life." She paused, looking back over a life of fears and losses. "When he joined the army I hated it, but he always came back. And I never doubted, whatever everyone else thought about me, where ever he was, he loved me. That made me real." She pressed her hand against her chest, against her heart, and frisked his face for signs of ridicule. There were none.

"When he left without a word, and wouldn't answer me, and wouldn't come home when he could have, everything I believed fell apart.

"You were right, exactly right. I needed him to tell me I wasn't worthless." She sighed. "And it had to be him. So, here we are. And now that I've dragged us through it all, I at least need to see him and tell him I don't blame him. And to ask him why? I could have done that from home, and saved you all this."

"He can take you back home if that's what you want. I can't."

Looking at her hands, she turned over futures silently for a moment. "I don't know where I belong. There isn't a home for me anymore. Or you." When she turned her face up, he was waiting. "So I will follow you, anywhere. I don't belong any place if you're not there."

"Don't make that choice until you know what he has to offer."

"I've already made my choice." She smiled and he could see the truth in her.

The sunset opened above them: broken clouds cupped in colour like faded petals, and Maia watched them shift and gather in the cold air. Each step brought her closer to

the sky as it widened, spread out and dropped below them to the horizon. The trees stepped back from the crest of the ridge, as the track dipped and began its descent. It dropped away suddenly beneath them, running down a long escarpment, and from the brink the world below unfurled in heavy greens, brushes of skeletal trees, and wide swathes of grassland.

The updraft of frigid air stole what breath she had, and she tightened her cape and wiped the tip of her nose. Smoke rose from the trees below and she could make out the tracing of a cluster of buildings in the shadows. Fire, food and not too much company. It was a good philosophy to travel this country by.

Wooden huts shuffled past and Maia held herself tight. Toward the centre of the village the houses were stone block, their outbuildings wooden lean-tos and stock fences. It was big for a British village, its ditch tracing back into the trees, wide, clean and uncluttered. When they reached the centre square a bonfire had been piled, and with the deepening night it was lit.

One of the women they had travelled with took hold of Maia's hand and tried to lead her from Luc's side. "No." She pulled back. "Luc, where is she taking me?"

He listened, then said, "Seems most of the kids are hers. She's organized a place where you can freshen up before the feast they're having, to thank you for the food we gave the children."

"No, thank you." She shook her head, backing up, clinging in to Luc's side. Fear lit her face and she rubbed her hands down the rough wool of her kilt. "I'm not going into any of these wooden houses. Tell her no thanks."

He spoke again and the woman nodded and walked into the shadows between the houses. In a few moments she returned and took Maia's hand again, tapping Maia's cheek with a forefinger and explaining something to Luc that made him smile. Suppressed laughter glittered in his eyes, and he said, "It's okay, she found a stone house you can go to. It's not a problem. Go."

Maia threw her saddle pack over her shoulder and trudged after the woman.

In the single open room of the house, a fire burned bright and a pot of water heated on its chain. The villager put a basin and a bucket of cold water beside her at the fire and started speaking, pointing at the water, at the door and back to Maia. It was enough to know she could wash; the rest of the story could wait 'til she was clean. As the woman hurried back into the night, Maia stripped and bathed, mixing the hot and cold water to perfection.

As she sluiced it down over herself, the woman returned with a long tunic and a woollen cloak. The dress was clean and soft, not rubbing on her thighs or chafing her calves, so soft she felt almost naked. The woman hurried around, spreading Maia's damp travelling clothes by the fire, taking her pack from her hands and putting it over by the wall. Finally she started explaining again at some length, leading Maia back through darkness toward the bonfire, nodding and smiling as they went.

In the crowded warmth of the firelight, Maia took a seat on the ground between Luc's knees. Children brought platters of food and the men brought jugs of beer. Spirits throughout the village were high and rising as the beer flowed. One of the little girls sat at Maia's side painting her nails with the juice of berries, while the fire burned lower and singers filled the night with long ballads.

"Can you remember the way back to the house?" His lips were soft against her ear, his breath warm and malty.

"No." She laughed. "I'm not sure I can even walk straight, direction will be a serious problem."

He smiled into her hair. "Right, the plan is, we sit here and look lost until someone

takes pity.”

She lay back against his thigh and giggled, watching the firelight in his hair. “I love you.” The words came easily, tickling in her chest as she twisted to see him better. “This life isn’t so bad after all.”

“That’s the beer. I told you it works like that.”

“Yes, well.” She stood up, dusting away grit and gravel. “I think we should make the most of it.”

He took her hand and pulled himself up. “You came from that way, so that’s a good start.”

Wending back between the wooden huts, she walked closer and held his hand tighter but the round stone building was not hard to find. “There,” she said. “Unerring judgment as always. I am a natural navigator as well.”

At the door he stopped her, caught her up into his arms and kissed her. “When and where you are Gaia,” he said, “then and there I am Gaius.” And he stepped over the threshold.

She grinned. “You’re not even Roman.”

“No, but Jupiter won’t care if you don’t.”

“I don’t.”

Her used water was gone and another kettleful boiled over the coals. Luc threw some bound faggots onto the grate and brought the fire back up, then mixed the hot kettle into the bucket of cold.

“Whose house is this and why did they leave it for us?” Maia asked.

Laughter lightened the tension in his body as he pulled his tunic over his head. “Superstition. It’s a wonderful thing.” He walked over and tapped her cheek just as the woman had done and laughed again. “They thought you were one of the hill people, the fair folk, because of your eyes. When you wanted to be surrounded by stone they were sure.” He was still more amused than Maia. “Maybe we got the house to ourselves because you looked after the kids, or maybe because no one else is game to sleep under the same roof.”

“Is that good or bad?” She grinned and lay back, watching him strip. Her eyes followed his hands as they lathered circles of creamy tallow block across his chest, under his arms, down the flat plains of his belly. Each breath she drew pulled more warmth into her chest, and she loosened the cape, let it slip from her shoulders. Its nap raised gooseflesh as it slid down her arm and she found her fingers bunched and tangled in its softness.

Quickly she stood, moved behind him and soaped her hands, smearing her palms across his back, moving the oily foam slowly up and over his shoulders. His skin was hot, the hard muscle smooth beneath it, and her fingers moulded over every curve and hollow, tracing the lines of his body. She slid her hands down, following the firm contours to his hips, letting the thick lather paint proof of her touch over his buttocks and up around his flanks.

She stepped up against his wet body where the hot moisture from his skin seeped into the cloth of her dress, and the softness of her breasts yielded as they met hard flesh. She closed her eyes, rested her cheek, let her hands slide silently. He flinched as she traced lines over his belly, as the fingertips of one hand found the faint raised scoring in blue and followed their cryptic paths up onto his chest.

Her back arched, swollen nipples aching in the constriction of fabric, her legs restless with the delicious impatience growing in her loins. A purr rose in her chest and he turned in her arms, his fingers twining through her hair as he lifted her face to his and kissed her. Stretching on tip toes she strained toward him, yearning for his mouth until a

whine like a petulant child slipped from her throat. She opened her eyes and he was grinning, teasing, his lips held just out of her reach.

A frown of agitation made a lie of the smile she returned and she stepped back expectantly, waiting while he lifted the bucket and doused himself with hot water. The bulk of the suds slid into the basin at his feet and she took his hand and led him closer to the bedding. When he sat, still laughing quietly, she pushed his shoulders back, straddled his hips and lifted her wet dress over her head, holding him where she could reach all she needed.

Maia woke with a chill on her skin and lifted her face from his chest to look around. The fire was low and she rose quietly, trying not to wake him. After piling sticks in the grate, she straightened Luc's clothes and turned hers over, shivering. Through the doorway, a grey dawn crept across the village, but it seemed no one planned an early start today.

She climbed back under Luc's arm and pulled a cover up over them both. "You can't slip away like that," he whispered, folding himself over her. "That's how your gods work, isn't it? When they see you have nothing they bring you something wonderful, and when you can't live without it, they take it away. All the nightmares stopped when you came to me. If I wake up alone, they'll start again."

"Maybe they're just gone now, finished."

"Maybe. Or maybe you're the bandage that holds me together." He touched a fingertip to her nape, let the barest touch follow the indent of her spine to its base. "Tell me about the houses."

She was silent a long while, drawing circles in the fine hair of his chest. "When I was little, most of the villa was built from timber, only the main house was stone.

"My mother had twin baby girls with Bassus, and when they were about a year old we were in my mother's suite." Silent tears wet the skin of his chest, rolling unnoticed from her eyes.

"I think I was five, or six. I was doing something, I don't remember really what it was, but I knocked down an oil lamp and it started a fire. It just spread. You can't believe how fast everything was full of smoke and flames." She shook her head, shaking away the images, unable to look at them. "I tried to carry the babies, but I couldn't and they were screaming and coughing and the roof started to sag down, and the walls were buckling.

"Cilo and Appius and my mother all got in, and Cilo found me, and we got out, but then the roof fell in." She wiped her cheek, smeared a hand over the wet patch on his chest and lay her head back down. "They all died."

"He told me once you were all he could save. Now I understand what he meant," Luc added quietly.

She nodded. "He still loved me, even if I caused the fire. And he'd lost his own mother just a few years before. But Lyvia never missed a chance to tell me I killed them all. I believed her, too, until I saw these children. They're little kids, they do stupid things. They don't know how much harm can come of it. I was so small. I didn't know what to do."

"I'll tell you what," he said. "I'll keep the roof from falling; you keep me from falling apart."

"That's a promise," she whispered.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN.

Where the road left the forest, curving up to cross the bridge at Viroconium, Luc whistled a signal and the rider paused. His thick fair hair was drawn back, braided into a thick cord over his shoulder. A lance crossed his horse's neck, and an oval shield covered the bulk of his form. He turned, narrowing his eyes and cocking his head to the side, as if he might follow echoes of the familiar sound to its source.

Pulling her closer, Luc wrapped his arms around her waist and held her back against him, burying his face down into her shoulder. "Stay safe," he whispered. "I don't want to let you go."

"I'll be fine. I keep telling you, he will never hurt me."

The rider moved a few paces forward, still scanning the forest around them, looking for any sound or movement that would betray their presence. Then he called, "You're a dead man, Luc. You're commander of nowt but shite here, and it's only our mother'll coddle you. The order will come and I'll come after you myself."

He pushed his lips against her ear. "My brother. He loves the sound of his own voice."

Maia turned to look at him as he slid down from behind her, fears and second thoughts crowding into the hollow that formed in the pit of her stomach. "Wait for me?" she said and he smiled.

"Forever."

There was desperation, an aching fear of loss in his eyes, and she kicked the horse forward from the thicket before she could change her mind.

The *vicus* surrounding the fort at Viroconium looked cleaner than most villages she had seen, less mud. The wooden huts were wider spaced, and not so many of them crowded stock against their walls. Even the streets between them were evenly gridded and tidier. Maia sat straight and pulled her arms in tighter against her sides as if she might increase her distance from their threats.

Luc's brother invited no conversation, fixing his clear blue eyes ahead and refusing to interact more than to lead her down the straight streets and into the fort. Following the straight path between barrack squares, they came at last to the wide, low frontage of the tribune's house.

It was done. Through fear and uncertainty, courage and sacrifice, she had gained this place and all her futures waited through the door in front of her. Just as they had once before. And just as before Cilo waited in their midst, balancing scales against weights she couldn't read. This time she felt their presence, she waited in the shadows they cast, and this time she knew how deadly they could be.

Her knees jarred with every step, as if all her fatigue and all her vulnerabilities had weakened the muscles of her thighs and made balance dicey. Her hands shook, and she rubbed them down the rough suede of her pants, wiping away evidence of uncertainty as her escort opened the door and led her through to the warmed room beyond.

Cilo stood as she entered. Against the dark stubble of his chin, his smile was pure white, wide, and all she could see through the rush of elation. She had run to him and thrown her arms around his neck before she could consider caution, and he caught her hard against his chest, hugging her tight, turning into the momentum of her run.

"By all the gods, look at you." He sobbed or laughed against her cheek. "I can't believe you're here."

She couldn't make her arms let go. She wanted to hold his face, to study the familiar lines and shadows and read his journeys in his eyes, but the sudden relief of holding him stretched time around them into a small eternity. His arms around her were strong and his confidence swelled through his flesh, filling her, removing doubts and worries and fears.

When her feet touched the ground she stepped back, taking both his hands in hers. His clear green eyes shone from under heavy brows, dark with thick black lashes. Beautiful. Breathtaking. "Are you well?" she managed, knowing at once that he carried fears and doubts he wanted concealed. They were hurts too big for the shadows, and they hung behind his eyes like warnings of a storm to come.

"I am. I've got food ready. You probably want to wash. And change." He looked at her leather pants, cocking an eyebrow quizzically. "Going native has done you no harm that I can see."

"I want to talk to you, Cilo. There are so many things I want to ask you. Things I want to tell you. It's been too hard getting here; it's cost so much."

"I know. I know. That's why I don't want to rush. There's time to eat. There's a tub through there, and I know you don't really want to refuse a chance to soak for an hour or so." The smile had slipped from his mouth, but his eyes were pleading.

"A brazier, warm floors and hot water?" she asked coyly. "And hot food? Sauces? Fresh fruit?"

"Yes." He laughed. "At your command. Whatever you want, you've got it." He led her to a curtained room where a large copper tub stood beside a small brazier. "I'll even get you some decent clothes. It won't take long."

Although there was no soap with the wash cloth, the steam cast perfume into the warm air and Maia quickly stepped out of her clothes and into the heat of the water. In that instant, it seemed all the hardship of the last days had been aching toward this moment of blissful calm. Every bruise, every throbbing muscle and joint hushed its relentless groaning and she lay back into ecstasy.

She slipped down, letting her hair spread in the water and her ears fill. It felt like home. It felt like the world was right and there was no danger and time could take care of itself. It was as it had been the moment Luc held her against himself and asked nothing more of her than that she accept her own choices.

When she sat up Cilo was sitting on a couch by the wall, picking meat from the frame of a bird and dipping it into a sauce boat. "You want this where you can reach?" Without waiting for a reply, he pushed the table closer to the tub, then dragged his couch closer too. Her stomach remembered food as soon as the smell came to her and it growled.

"Oh, this is too good to be true." She stuffed her mouth full of fragrant spiced meat, licking sauce from her fingers and diving back into the platter for more.

"Clothes are coming. It will take a little while to find something nice enough. There aren't many ladies who live near a barracks, you know." His smile was devilish, just as she remembered it. "The prostitutes out here are gross sluts, and the boys who frock up are all much bigger than you." She shot him a doubtful smile and put more food in her mouth, while he leaned to pick up the suede pants she'd dropped. "Can I burn these now you're here?"

Her eyes shot wide and she struggled to swallow. "No. I'll be keeping those."

"You won't need them now. The barbarian stint is over. You're safe, the gods only know how, and I'm not going to let you run headlong into danger like that ever again." He was looking at his food, choosing, as if his next mouthful was as important as her future and to be decided in the same way.

"Cilo, I'm not staying here with you." New confidence in her voice made him pause. Her eyes held his face still, forcing him to hear her.

"But," he frowned, "the letter. The runner Luc sent said you had followed me to Britannia and needed me with you. Now!" He smiled. "So, I'm with you, now."

"You didn't come, remember. I waited, and you said were too busy. You chose the army over me. Again." She sat forward, annoyed by his assumptions. "And you know, after all the miles of getting here, I want to tell you that I understand that choice better now, but I don't understand, I can't understand, why you put me in this position in the first place."

"I didn't expect you to *be* in this position. I didn't expect you to rush across the world alone once, let alone twice. You can have no idea how dangerous what you've done is." There was no anger in his response, it may have been apologetic, but his eyes betrayed the complexity of the emotions behind it.

"I wasn't alone. If Luc knew how dangerous it was, he kept it from me. My choices were important. It mattered to him what I thought and felt."

"Yes, well, he's always backed himself, that boy. I would never have gambled you against those odds. It's incredible that you made it safely. Unbelievable. I don't know if anyone else could have gotten away with it." Any irritability that had slipped into his words fell away when he paused. He sat up and clasped his hands between his knees. "But his luck can't hold, Maia. Even if he can outrun his fate, he won't make it with you in tow." Now there was genuine concern in his face. Pain rode down onto his forehead, furrowing his brow in hard lines.

"Fate has nothing to do with it, or luck. You sent his own men after us. You. Not the gods, not even the Roman Army."

Frowns twitched at his mouth as he stretched back onto the couch. He swung his legs back up onto the soft fabric and laced his hands over his chest, speaking softly. "Did he tell you how deserters are treated in this place?"

Maia thought over all Luc had said and nodded. "Except, I told him to trust you. I said you would never hurt me and you wouldn't harm him."

He shook his head and his lips twisted as if his mouth had filled with bile, refusing to look at her. "Did he buy that?"

"No."

"Good." He rubbed his brow and dragged his hand down over his face, speaking his thoughts to the roof above. "Then he'll know that if I had any reason to believe that he did more than ride away from his post with you, his men would be dead beside him."

She looked hard at her brother. Accusations and explanations formed on her lips and he held up a calming hand. "Don't tell me anything. As it is now, I know those boys did nothing to aid him or cover for him. I know that they left, as ordered, in pursuit."

Maia looked at the pale line of her thigh in the water, and nodded slowly. She could see there was a line Cilo rode between honour and duty, and words that wanted to rush became thick, curdling in her mouth.

"What happened in Glevum?" he asked, his fingers laced and still.

She was reserved, more cautious. "What do you know?"

"That a couple of bodies turned up in Bragon's yard. No mention of Luc, except that you got my missive so you had to have been there. How did you do that? Get there so soon?"

She shrugged and slipped back so water lapped against her shoulders.

"Mercenaries. Luc thinks Justicia paid them. They were dressed like something from the games. They even set a bounty in Calleva. It's wrong. It's.... I can't put my finger on it. It's hard to believe Justicia sent them. She demands a standard of competence. They

just weren't that good."

"The Stepmother."

"No?" She nearly leapt out of the tub. "Would she? Could she?"

He laughed. "That would be my guess."

There was a sharp knock and Cilo rolled off the couch. He walked back through the curtain, spoke quietly to someone then returned with a long linen *tunica* over his arm.

"Success. Don't ask. I'll get you a sheet to dry off when you're ready."

Luc watched the rider pace out the watch. Darkness had settled its skirts along the edges of the woods and mists had already drifted into banks along the river. The horse was not too tall, but he would have to time his jump perfectly or he'd end up with a lance in his side. He tensed, twisted the muscles down his back where they threatened to cramp, and waited. As the guard approached this turn, however, he pulled the horse to one side, peered into the undergrowth, and dismounted. Sometimes the gods really did favour the bold, even heathens.

When Luc's brother had scanned the darkness around him for the second time, he dropped his lance and shield, loosened the ties of his trousers and sat back over a log, concentration already set into the lines of his face. Luc caught the braid at the back of his neck and slipped a dirk hard up against his throat. "So Edan, this is the shite I'm commanding now, is it?"

The man moved to balance and Luc pulled back, keeping the advantage. "No no, hands forward. I want to see them."

"Luc, I'm not alone. Marcus is on this watch, too; he'll be along here in a minute."

"I know who's on the watch. I found you didn't I? Who else would be predictable enough to post a watch on the only road into a walled fort? Do you think I'm as thick as you are? Now, no more talk. Who has he brought down here with him, for how long, and where is he heading?"

"I don't know."

"And I don't want to explain your sudden illness to our mother." The blade tip pushed into the flesh, freeing a thin red line. "How many, how long, where to?"

"Just the four cavalry. Plus him and his Troll. He's got a *carra* in barracks too. We're heading back to the base at Deva tomorrow."

"Good. I'll just take your sword belt and I'll leave you to what you're doing." He tightened his hold. "Hands forward, that's right." Leading his brother backward by the hair, he stepped over the log and around to the side of the horse. "Just hang the belt on the saddle." As the sword belt clanged up over the back of the horse, Luc shoved forward and leapt up into the saddle himself.

"Not my horse, Luc. No!" Edan spat curses and fumbled his trousers back up from around his ankles. "I'll come after you, boy!"

In the cover of the undergrowth, Luc paused. "I need the horse. There's a nice black at Dad's; tell him I said you can have it." And he cantered into the darkness.

Where his own horse waited he stopped, taking the time to sort through Edan's pack. There was nothing they especially needed. He ditched the tools, checked the food bags and changed his damp fleece cloak for the dry woollen one furled in the new pack.

Back in the village, he bargained hard for precious parchment and ink. The money that was left he would give to the family when they cleared the fort in the morning. Where he was going there was no place for Roman coins. And if Maia didn't return, he

would have no need for money. He needed quiet. There were too many possibilities, too many ways it could go, and he had to have exactly the right words, or it was over before it could begin.

He had returned her to the arms of Rome and everything she knew, everything she deserved. Her brother could give her the empire. Luc stared at his empty hands. He could give her nothing.

As he sat in the darkness at the edge of the camp, he held his head in his hands and smiled. She was right after all. It was easy to gamble everything when you had absolutely nothing to lose.

As Maia dressed, the dead mercenaries cast up dark unanswered questions. What could Lyvia have known? How? Too many questions. But if Cilo knew more about them, he wasn't saying. He was keeping his secrets, as Neria had said.

The *tunica* he'd found for her was stark white, soft linen, caught along each arm on five jewelled brooches and tied under the bust with a golden cord. She clasped it awkwardly back against herself as she used the bath water to wash her trousers and tunic. It was not a dress made for domestic service. Laying the clothes flat beside the brazier, she walked out through the curtain, took a seat and began pinning her hair up.

When Cilo returned he had dressed more formally, with a black leather cuirass and segmented leather kilt over his tunic. The darkness polarized his image against Luc's. He was as tall, taller than most, and as wide across the shoulders, but he was more sharply defined. Each muscle in his forearm was finely cut, and he had removed all the hair from his arms and legs so his smooth olive skin seemed to glide over his limbs like silk. The features of his face were sharper, too. His nose was longer, straight with fine nostrils that flared over each breath. His jaw was squarer, his chin dimpled slightly and the dark shadow of his beard was never gone, even when he'd shaved.

And his eyes were the eyes of a god. Even as a child she had loved to look at them. So clear, the green of new grass, like glass set in clear whites with thick black lashes and brows.

Luc was golden compared to him: fairer, paler, heavier and his absence burned inside her like despair. As if her eyes betrayed their inner vision, Cilo walked behind her, put his hands on her shoulders and asked, "Where is he now, Maia?"

She reached up to put her hand onto his. "Not too far away. Waiting. You know I can't say where."

"You're not rushing back, so I guess he's happy to wait a few days. Is he going to wait?"

She turned to face him. "I don't need days." The smile faded from her lips. "I just need some answers from you. Honest answers."

"If I've made bad choices, Cilo, dangerous and stupid, it's because everyone keeps secrets. Everyone I trust has secrets to keep from me and so I don't know all the facts." She stepped forward, wrapping her arms tight around his waist. Looking up she said. "No more secrets. I love you and I trusted you and you deserted me."

He kissed her lightly on the crown. "Yes well, I counted on your trust. But you were my baby sister, I didn't count on the fact that you'd grown up. I didn't ask your opinion because I was just too used to making choices for us both. I'm sorry."

She stepped back. "Come and sit. I want to ask so many questions. Will you answer honestly everything I ask?"

Before she could drag him to the couch he broke away, moving to a decanter of

wine, and brought the tray with goblets to where she sat.

"Whatever I can answer, I will answer as honestly as I can. Is that good enough?"

"It'll do for a start." She sipped the wine. "Tell me, what was the deal you made with our stepmother? Why did you agree to the wedding, and why, most of all why, did you leave without telling me what was going on?"

He stood as if he was going to pace, then changed his mind and sat close, turning so his face was only inches from hers. "First, I should have talked to you about it, I know I should have. There isn't any way to justify that, except that I acted in your best interest, certainly mine, and expected you to trust my judgment." Small storms raced across his face, words and gestures that were considered, but left unspoken.

"I didn't want to have to leave here for Rome. Five more years was part of her side of the bargain. I took it. Not least because I talked to Papa about her ideas and he thought five years was long enough to funnel some serious money out from under her.

"He's well, by the way. Worried sick about you. He'll be happier once he knows you're safe here." Maia's face lit with pleasure for a moment at the news, then he took her hand and moved closer to her anguish.

"Your alternative was marriage to a freeman in the Seine Valley, you must have known that. She didn't even want to designate a dowry, but she knew I'd never leave you to that, anyway. She intended you to live like the peasants do, in mud and poverty. And she was getting desperate. She hates being there; she wants to get back to Pompeii. Even if she had to take you with her, it was only five years, Maia. Already half a year has gone. I didn't think it was too long to wait."

"It might not have been if I'd known what was going on. I woke up alone Cilo, and you just wrote 'No point in telling you what I'm doing, love and death and fate, love you, bye'. You were gone. What was I supposed to think?"

"You were supposed to trust me, that's all. I'm sorry. I thought you knew I would always look out for you. You trusted Luc to take you into danger instead and changed everything. But you're back and now I will keep you safe, always.

"Anyway. Papa has two schemes running, one to Rome, one to here. Gold is sent every month, in our names. He won't leave her without, you know he's fond of her for some reason. She's different with him than she was with us."

Heat needled over the skin of her chest and up her throat as Maia thought it through. "So it was all about money? All the pain and anguish and not knowing. It was all only ever about money?" The thought made her sick. "What else? Five more years and then to Rome. Why? Why leave yourself tied to me? And what about my happiness?"

"What do you mean, your happiness? Yes I should have talked to you about it, but what other hope did you have? Did you want to be married to a pig farmer in Gaul? In the real world there is no happiness without money. At worst it buys you a better standard of misery. You would get houses in Rome, be senator's wife, take lovers of your choice." He sat back, annoyance setting his frown more closely over his eyes. "All that is still possible. Four years in Deva and we're free. Then back to the capital with money and freedom and the empire at our feet."

"Lovers of my choice, even Luc?"

"No. Not Luc."

"Then I don't want it." She asked again, "Why tie yourself to me, Cilo? Why did you need this marriage? You didn't need vows to take me with you."

"I'll answer that one in a few moments, there's someone you have to meet." He swallowed a deep draft of wine, refilled his goblet and hers. "What else have you got for me?"

"Justicia."

"Ah, the lady herself. Right. What can I tell you about the good priestess?"

"What secret of yours does she know? What does it have to do with me? Why did she want to bring me to this cold miserable place? In fact why did she want to come here anyway?"

"I don't have any secrets, not from anyone who knows me. The thing about society is you need to be discreet and Justicia isn't interested in discretion, she plays for power. She's the perfect example of why women shouldn't have any.

"She was locked out by decent society and she'd do anything to get into a position of influence so she can take revenge on people who have what she wants. But paying for her to come out to Britannia was my own stroke of genius, I thought. There again you see, Luc changed the rules in the middle of the game."

"Luc?"

"Yes Luc. The golden boy. I think you were probably a pawn in her game against me. The priestess and I don't see eye to eye on many things. Maybe she wanted to conscript you to working for her and let me wear the scandal of that, or just to prove she could take you from me; I'm not sure. She must have been shattered when you took off with her beautiful boy."

"Luc?"

"Yes Luc. Are you struggling with this one? I thought you wanted honest answers." He stopped, watching her as she upended the goblet of wine and poured another. The colour had dropped from her cheeks.

"Maia, you know about them, don't you? You couldn't have travelled with them so far, for so long and not known why he was sent back to escort her out. Don't tell me you're shocked to find that he jumped from her bed into yours."

She looked blank, horrified. Shaking her head, she swallowed against a lump of humiliation.

"Have another drink. You should have thought about this before you let him touch you." His smile was cold. "So, you think everyone has secrets? If they hang the obvious in your face and you can't see it, whose fault is that? Did you think he'd told you everything there was to know? Maybe he thought you did know. Everybody else does."

Her eyes searched inward over the journey, looking for the obvious and finding it abundant. She fought to clear her mind as she stood. Pain spread along her nerves. It balled in her stomach and burned up into her throat as if something vital had been torn from her insides.

She felt humiliated. Sleepless nights at Justicia's temple left her in no doubt just how much she didn't know about making love. And he had been with the High Priestess! Shame and insufficiency crawled across her skin. She wanted to slide under a rock.

Her heart cried out his name. "I need to talk to Luc about this. I didn't know."

"Why? What do you care about the old bitch? She's nothing to you. And Luc is a soldier. He's been whoring since he was fifteen, all soldiers do."

She looked pitifully at him. "They were together ten years?"

He laughed. "No. She's been clinging and drooling over him for four years, since she saw him in Rome. Then she followed him to *Gallia Aquitania*. And now back here."

"But you said you brought her here. I didn't even know he'd been in Rome." Her head was buzzing. "I need to talk to Luc."

"You can't. Not yet." He pulled her close and held her against the hard leather of his cuirass. "Just relax and take your time with all of this. Everything fits and once you've fitted it all together you'll know what you need to say to him. Everything will

make sense again.”

A sharp knock at the door shocked her and she gasped as if she'd been slapped.

“That'll be another of your answers now. Are you all right?”

She nodded and tried to find her voice, to apologize for something she couldn't name. “Yes. I'm sorry.”

As he rose to answer the knock, his frown pinched in confusion and he smiled again. He hadn't underestimated her at all. She was still his sweet, shy, dutiful, baby sister. A fragile, precious doll, clean and vacuous. But no longer pure and no longer only his.

Maia forced a smile, crushed the pain down inside and turned her gaze outward as Cilo led an older man in to where she stood.

His face was not handsome. It was coarse, like a child had formed some features from clay and lumped them roughly together. But there was something akin to humour in his dark eyes and crooked smile. He was heavier than Cilo, deep chested and shorter. His hair was clipped short and fine wisps of grey at the temples showed his age at about forty. He held out a hand to Maia, and she rubbed her palm down her thigh before taking it.

“This is my angelic bride, as you will remember.” Cilo stepped beside Maia, placing an arm protectively around her shoulder. “Maia, this is the person Justicia was probably bringing you to meet. This is Manius Velius. He is the love and death and fate that I wrote about. My love greater than distance, greater than life and death.”

“Oh.” It was the best she could manage. “Hello.”

She stepped back and sat heavily onto the couch and Cilo sat beside her, explaining, “This is why I agreed to the wedding. To have the life I want in Rome, I need a wife and children. But I need a wife who is discreet, content to have her own life and leave me to mine. You're perfect. Maia, are you listening?”

“Yes. I'm trying to. This is why you agreed to the wedding.”

“Yes.”

“Because you needed a discreet wife.”

“Yes.”

“Then you could have married anyone. You could have bought yourself a wife. One of Justicia's girls could have been paid to keep her mouth shut.”

Manius laughed at something obscure, and Cilo frowned his consternation, his voice rising. “I don't want any chanced slut with me. I want you, and I want you where I know you're safe. I was making sure you didn't end up living in filth.”

“But what about my choice? I don't want any life without Luc. He loves me. My choices matter to him, enough to bring me here.”

“He could have brought you here with an escort!” Spittle flew from his lips with his sudden vehemence and he wiped it away. “He could have marched you straight up the Watling Street with his men as a guard, kept you safe and not left his post. He could have come back here, too. He didn't. If bringing you back was all that mattered, he could have come back.” More quietly he said, “He made his choice and he knew the consequences. Now if he's smart at all, he'll leave you here and go.”

“He wasn't coming back, Cilo.” She held her forehead in her hand, trying understand how much had been left unsaid. Luc had chosen not to come back, and that choice was as important to Cilo as any danger she'd been in. Luc loved her, and for some reason that mattered to her brother more than he could say. “And he'll wait for me.”

Manius asked, “He's waiting now? Somewhere around the city here?” He moved like he might stand, then relaxed back onto his couch. “You've got to give him credit.”

“Yes, but credit for what? Guts and glory, when he should just put his tail between his legs and run while he’s got the chance. And Marcus and Edan are on watch. They’ll know where he is by now; I’d stake my life on it. He’s probably out there drinking with them.” Cilo stood to pace, striding down to the brazier and back.

“He knows you’ll be looking for him, he’ll keep his head down.” Maia’s words were ghostly as she watched her own pale fingers knot together.

“It won’t make any difference. He’s too close and he’s too tired. I haven’t issued any orders yet, I couldn’t risk you getting caught up in a fight. I’m clear to do that now, and he’s run too hard for too long to get away from us once we track him.”

Air stuck in Maia’s throat. She was waiting for him to go on, to qualify or excuse or even explain his words. It was getting harder to rationalize her brother’s love and duty. Her heart could not hold to the logic. It raced. It choked into her chest and kicked into her stomach. Disbelief was slow settling. It lit fear in her eyes; it shook her head in denial as she looked up. “You won’t do that, though.”

“I have to. A thousand men just two day’s ride from here all know him and they know what he’s done.”

“How do they know what he’s done? The men he left with won’t even be back here yet. No one need know what he’s done if you choose to keep it that way.” There was pleading in her voice.

“I can’t find a way to fix this for him,” her brother stated bluntly. “I can’t absolve him or cover for him or order them to forget about it. Any one of them would beat him to death, or crucify him as a coward.”

“But he’s not a coward. You know that. He just can’t do this anymore. He can’t keep killing.” She stood to face him, took his hand, needing to fall to her knees and beg for a different truth.

Cilo put his cool palm against her cheek. “He’s fatigued. It happens. There aren’t many men who can just keep cutting through blood and not have nightmares. Last season was brutal. But in the end I gave him other duties. I sent him back from the front to his slut, even paid for her to come to us. Unfortunately, you were in the wrong place at the wrong time. He found you and a chance to get away and he took it. I don’t blame him. I just can’t fix it for him.”

“Me?” She slid to her knees, holding on to his hands.

“You can’t blame yourself entirely.” He laid a gentle hand on her head. “You were there, it could as easily have been Justicia or some other whore who kept him grounded. That doesn’t matter. Not anymore. He can’t think straight when he gets like this. You can’t take all the blame.”

“Stop it!” Static buzzing grew louder in her ears and old fears filed back into place. She wanted to close her eyes, to crawl into the place where humiliations no longer touched her. His words cut. They made her feel dirty, made the depth and width and height of Luc’s love into nothing more than an act of desperation. “It’s not about sex.” It was about life and death.

“Of course it is.” He dismissed everything she couldn’t say without bothering to listen. “He has everything else he could need. I’ve given him everything.”

“Then why won’t you give him the freedom to leave?”

“You just don’t understand the army. I do. Sometimes he stops sleeping, stops eating, and he needs a break. I let him go and blow off some steam, clear his head, and then he comes back. He’s very good at what he does, Maia, very good. And he always comes back.”

“Until now,” Manius said, almost to himself.

“That’s not how it is.” She struggled to explain, desperate to justify herself. “He’s

all right. While he's with me, he's fine. He's not sick, he's not crazy, he just doesn't want to come back. He doesn't want any more to do with this life."

Cilo's eyes set in icy clarity; he drew his lips back and sucked a sharp breath between clenched teeth. "That's where you're wrong. He belongs here. He could have come back." He growled the words like a vicious dog separated from its bone. "You, on the other hand, belong in Rome. Look at you, you're exquisite, perfect I would say. And that is all. Exquisite and fragile. What can you offer a man like Luc?"

His tone changed abruptly, became apologetic, pleading. "Maia, I need you to listen to me. Listen carefully. You need to hear me and you need to believe me." He looked at Manius conspiratorially, as if he needed his support in this. "I can do one thing. Only one thing. I can give him a few days to run. Is he heading north? It's what I think he would do. If I give him a couple of days to get clear, he could make it past our northern line."

She looked from one to the other. He was right, Luc was exhausted. Too many miles, too much cold and not enough food, not enough sleep. "Then I need to go with him. Give us a few days."

"No! He has to run hard if he's going to have any kind of chance, and he won't make it if he has you with him. On a fit horse he'd have covered fifty miles a day. He'd be safe by now if he hadn't waited for you. I know that and he knows it. You have to stay here."

Viscid cold filled her chest, and half-hearted denials. "I told you I didn't want to stay here. Does it matter at all to you what I want?"

"I'll keep you safe, Maia." He smiled a placatory smile. "I'll even take you to him. But only if you'll tell him you're staying here."

"Let me get this straight." Her breath was unreliable, constricted, as if she was being crammed into a tighter and tighter space. She felt trapped. "I'm the reason he deserted. If Justicia had had her way, he'd have been fine, spent a week in her bed and then just got on with the next round of killing." Her nostrils flared and her chin dimpled. "Or even if he had still gone, if not for me he'd be safely away by now. He'd have run to the hills in the time it's taken to come here to you."

"And now that I've cost him all this and dragged him to outside your walls where he's a sitting duck, you want me to take you to him? Have I got the basics?"

"I am trying to save his life, not trap him. This is the only way I can do anything for him." He dropped into a squat, his gaze intense, pleading. "You have to tell him to go. Give him a fighting chance."

"I don't believe you."

"Almighty gods, Maia! What did he tell you I'd do? You know he didn't buy your *safe conduct* promise."

"He said you're a soldier first and last and duty is all that matters to you. He said he loved you and would do anything for you. He said the gamble was knowing how far you would go for him."

His eyes flared like he'd been hit, hard, and he heaved to his feet, striding away. Over his shoulder he said petulantly, "His gamble was bringing you into this mess. He raised the stakes here, not me. It's not just army anymore. He had no right to put you in this kind of danger. If he loved me he'd be here tonight. He'd accept discipline for leaving his post and he'd be back in the barracks. No, he can leave now, alone. Or I will issue orders tonight and he will be hunted down."

"Then you don't need me to find him for you." Tears burned her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. "Am I your prisoner here? Do you think forcing me to stay will make me change my mind?"

“No. I am just going to keep you safe.” He almost ran to her. “You can’t live like these people, you’re Roman. You can’t live in huts and wade through sheep shit and have no baths and no heating, no decent food. I won’t let you live like a savage. He knows that. He can’t offer you anything else.”

He gripped her shoulders. “I can rally the army of Rome around you. He can’t do more than keep running ahead of them. Think about it! You can’t live like that and if he’s thinking clearly, if he cares about you at all, he won’t ask you to.”

Manius rose slowly, moving to answer a knock, deliberate in his movements, wary. His voice was clear and deep, echoing in his chest. “Cilo. He’s gone.” He walked through with Luc’s brother beside him, saying, “Tell him.”

Edan looked uncertain, embarrassed. “Tonight, sir. He stole my horse and gear. Said he needed a fresh horse. He left south. He hasn’t crossed the river, so he can’t go north or east. He won’t go west, so he’s gone south.”

“Well then my sweet bride.” Cilo sighed into his cupped hands, still for long moments. He was shaking with profound relief as he stood and offered Maia a hand up. “It looks like he thought it through after all. I won’t have to do anything about the orders until we’re back in Deva, and we can leave in the morning.”

In the fire warmed half-light of her bed, Maia tried to weigh possibilities. Everyone had secrets. Luc, Cilo, Justicia. Even when she believed she knew the whole truth, always there was more, just under the surface.

Cilo said running was Luc’s only hope for survival. Maybe he was right. But he only cared that she stayed here with him, safe and clean and Roman. Pain painted in blood and retribution.

Luc said he would wait for her and he had never lied to her. He may have gone south, the village was south. Maybe he didn’t think she could live in the cold and the wet. Maybe he was right. But he was waiting. She was certain that whatever he let Cilo think, it need have nothing to do with the truth. He was waiting for her.

Whatever they said and did, fact or fiction, there was one solid truth she could use. She knew who they were. She knew Luc. And she knew her brother.

Shuffling through the unfamiliar house, she made her way quietly to Cilo’s room.

He sat in the darkness, perched on the edge of his bed chewing hard on a thumbnail. He’d found no more cause to sleep than she had. “I don’t want to be alone,” she whispered. “Shove over.”

Manius stirred as Cilo lay back, making room as he did for Maia to stretch out against his chest.

“Are you heartbroken?”

“No. Only days ago I would have been shattered. My world would have crumbled. But I saw men cut in half for money and jealousy and some sort of sick bravado. My safe little cocoon with all its pain and anguish was nothing compared to the price people pay in the real world.”

“And so now you don’t care if he left you behind?” His disbelief was plain.

“I’ll get to that. You know I only ever had Tiberia. There was nothing she ever heard or thought that she didn’t say. She told me everything. There was never a secret, and if there was scheming going on in the big house, I heard whatever she and the servants overheard.

“In this world, everybody lies. Everybody. And I can’t stand it. They all decide what the truth will be and how much of it they’ll share. And it’s a deadly game. People

die for their choices out here.”

“That’s why they lie,” he said. “Everyone is looking out for themselves. Everyone keeps the ones they love safe, first.”

“Yes, exactly. Like you. As I see it, for a thousand years the greatest generals have had their lovers, the poets have joked about their pretty boys and the philosophers have goaded each other about rent boys and no one seems to care. And still, you wanted a mute wife so you could meet the hypocrisy of society, and I was the price you were willing to pay for that. You were willing to trade off all my choices to live your own lie.”

“That’s not true. I was bargaining for you, too. You didn’t come out of it a loser.”

“Yes I did, because I didn’t have any choice in the matter.”

“None of us have choices, Maia. It’s all just as the gods play it out. We’re pawns in their game and we make the best of it.”

“I don’t believe that. But you paid a high price for your choice, too. And that’s what I’ve been thinking about. Justicia said we all make fools of ourselves for love. You gambled your life, for five years, for the chance to be with the one you love. Even if either of you could be killed tomorrow, you took that wager for the hour, or the day or the year you would have with him. You wouldn’t change that, would you?”

“No.” He paused like there were qualifications, other important truths he had omitted. “But don’t try to tell me you’re in the same position. You’re not. I have a fighting chance. I can trust my own strength and ability and experience. You don’t have those things, and I won’t back Lucius, not if you are the cost of the wager.”

Even in the darkness, his eyes glowed. The pain behind them was incandescent, burning. “I lost so much in the fire. You are all I have left. All I could save. He had no right to put you at risk.”

“I lost everything too. And so did Papa. And now I owe it to my mother to make a life. She would never have hidden away. She would never have hidden *me* away. She went out looking for happiness. She risked everything.”

“It’s not the same thing. She moved you from this backwater to Papa’s villa. She chose civilization for you.”

“No, she chose your father and a new life. She followed her heart.”

“But you can’t. You don’t have that option anymore. Luc has already decided for you. He knows you should have safety and a comfortable life. Either he doesn’t love you the way you think he does, or else he loves you enough to leave you here with me.”

“That’s if he did leave. And if he did, then I’ll give you the same choice he had. I know where he’s going, I know more about staying alive than I did, and I will follow him.” She paused to be sure he had heard her quiet threat. “He didn’t take me anywhere; he just stayed with me, that’s all. I risked everything because you left me with nothing to lose. Now I’m back to that, and I will go after him.”

“You don’t think he’s gone, that’s why you’re not rolled up in a ball.” He rubbed his brow, forcing lines away. “Why, Maia? Why won’t you believe he would do what’s best for you if he really loved you?”

“He does love me; I wish I could convince you. And he doesn’t deserve your anger; these were my choices, not his. If only you would talk to him. He hasn’t asked me to choose between you two, you’re doing that.”

“You don’t know him like I do. I have lived with the man for ten years. I know him like I know my own flesh, and I can promise you, he has nothing to give you and he will leave you here, safe with me. You’ve known him a month, how can you possibly be so certain he’s waiting for you out there?”

“Because I know he would never take the risk that I might try to follow him.” That

was the stone cold truth. “And if he didn’t leave he will come back for me. Give him a discharge, and I will go home and wait for you. You can still have everything you want. You can win, here. All I need is some money. The gold Papa sent you for me, where is it?”

“You can’t have it.” His agitation was obvious. She could feel it. It swelled in his chest with every breath, and raised the veins in his arms and drove the pulse in his throat harder. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore, go to sleep. I need to think.”

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN.

Tension knotted her shoulders and impatience rolled in her gut. Sitting neatly in the two seat *carpentum* was at once both familiar and annoying, its wallowing progress too slow and too confined. After only a few hours Maia was ready to walk rather than have to remain seated behind curtains. There were five mounted men arranged around her, and the chance Luc would try to reach her past all of them in this wide open country was too slim to consider. She was stuck in these shadows, unknowing, and the unknown made her itch.

There was no jar when the wagon stopped, just a gradual slowing into inaction. She peered through the curtains, past the driver, at the road ahead where a wagon of straw bales blocked the way while men stood about in conference.

Cilo called curt orders and the horsemen moved in closer to her wagon, suspicious of the delay as an ambush.

Maia held her breath. She recognized the wagon and the men and the swarm of small children who swept down around her *carra*, running under the feet of the mules, climbing up into canopy, ignoring the anger of the soldiers they taunted. Silently she took the rolled parchment from a child’s grubby hand and smiled as she slipped it into her *tunica*.

From the driver’s seat, she heard Edan’s laugh as he untangled small limbs from the fabric and dangled urchins down to the ground and gruffly sent them on their way. Cilo circled angrily, ordering him to push around the obstacle, anxious to keep moving. Maia braced herself on the seat as the wagon tilted sideways, struggled and bounced down the ditch at the edge of the road, then settled and righted itself as it climbed back up onto the solid surface.

Twice before she’d been left with a note. Both times she had been abandoned.

She checked the curtains were tightly drawn so the *carra* was dark and private. Hardly daring to breathe, she took out the missive, untied the ribbon, and read.

Maia,

Your old life is in his hands. Will you take it and all the wealth and comfort you deserve? Will you live safe and warm with your brother’s love?

Briana,

If you take my hand I will build a world for you. I will give you the sun so you will never be cold or dark. I will give you the moon, you put it to shame. I will take down the stars so you can pin them in your hair. They are all I have to offer. You already have my heart. If you don’t want these things, I have no need for them. I will come for your answer tonight.

Luc.

She read it again, grinning. And again. Then she rolled it and slipped it into her *tunica*. She gathered a rug around her shoulders, lifting it so she could pull it up over her head. Shoving the curtains aside, she staggered forward, hiked the fine fabric of her skirts and climbed into the seat beside the driver.

"Hello," she said, smiling at the fierce scowl. "Edan, isn't it? You look like your father." There was no answer, so she took the time to look around at open fields that spread away to a blue ridge at the horizon.

"Would you really have killed him?" She touched the cut on his throat. "If the situation had been reversed, I mean?"

He flinched away from her touch, snapping, "Aye."

"Your father wasn't angry, you know. Or surprised. He said men choose their battles. Your mother seemed to think it was all a joke. She smiled at everything that happened, everything that was said."

She smiled again, looking for any softening in his glower. "Why are you angry enough to kill your own flesh and blood? What's he done that affects you that much?"

"Done?" he spat. "He let himself get... overwhelmed by your obvious charms. He stopped thinking. He's soft, too long on his mother's tit, that one."

"Oh." She nodded. "You think it's my fault, then, not his?"

"Lady, I don't care. I have nothing to say to you, and except that it's your brother riding up there I would slap you down off that seat. You're a spoilt little girl and you're playing with the lives of men worth ten of you."

"He's worth that much, even if he's soft? And it's not his fault anyway, it's mine, and you'd stand in front of your father and say the same? You see, I saw your father kill a man who wanted Luc dead. But I suppose he's retired already; he's not festering over having to stay here another ten years. And before I go, just so you know, I'm not playing with anyone. I'll see you again someday, I hope."

She slid to the side of the seat and called to Cilo. "Come along side here, I want to get on behind you."

His horse jumped sideways when her blanket slapped down around its legs, and she caught her balance and gathered it up tighter around herself. Leaning to hold on around Cilo's chest she asked, "Have you thought?"

"Yes. And no, I won't let you go with him. And no, I won't give you any money."

She let it stand for the moment. "Where are we going and how long 'til we get there?"

"Why?" He pointed to the wagon. "All you have to worry about is staying warm and dry and comfortable in there. I will take care of the rest."

She shrugged. "Can we ride beside Manius; I want to talk to him."

"I want you to get back in the wagon. When did you get so demanding?"

"When I realized I had the right to be angry and afraid and informed." She laughed. Joy fizzed in her blood, even if it should have been terror. "It's a recent thing. Come on, over there. I want to talk to him."

As they fell in beside him, Maia asked Manius, "Does he ever ask your opinion or consider your point of view?"

"Yes, but then we always agree. We agree he's always right and that way there's no argument." He grinned. "It's worked well so far."

"What do you think he should do? Should he let me make my own choices? If I trust him with everything precious to me, should he trust me, too?"

Manius shrugged, frowning. "He should. And he will. But it isn't you he doubts, is it. It's whether or not he'll forgive Lucius. That's the issue here."

Maia reached into her *tunica* and pulled out the parchment, handing it over Cilo's shoulder.

He read it and laughed sourly. "This is your proof of love?" But it didn't sound like a question.

Cilo held the parchment open, reading it through again, and Maia wrapped her arms tighter around him. "That's my stake. That's my whole life and I'm trusting you with it. He does love me, as much as you do. Will you forgive him now?"

A groan quaked through his chest and armour. "Maia, this is impossible." He slowed, waiting for the wagon to draw up beside. "Just wait in there. We'll be in Mediolanum by tonight."

When she had re-entered the *carra*, before they moved off again, he handed her Luc's letter. Frowning hard into her eyes, he said, "One of us is going to regret this forever."

"I don't care. I'm not going in there." Fierce ague gripped her; icy sweats froze on her lip and under her eyes. She pulled her blanket tighter and took two steps backward.

"Maia, it is safe. Safer than staying out here. It's already starting to snow and you need to eat and get to a fire."

"Very funny."

"I didn't mean that, you know I didn't. I've got three hundred men here," Cilo hissed down at her, "don't make me look like a fool in front of them." He dismounted, but when he walked toward her, she stepped back again.

Edan picked his fingers conspicuously and stretched his legs, certain he could break the standoff if only he was asked.

"There is no other cover. All the buildings for ten miles around are timber. They've been here for thirty years and I promise you they are not going to go up in flames tonight."

Stark terror numbed her throat, made her tongue thick and dry. "Don't make promises you can't keep. Just park the wagon here and I'll wait in that." She moved further from the bridgework that crossed the fort's defensive ditch. Luc's scroll was in her hand, and she tapped it angrily against her leg as she walked. "You go on in, I'm not coming."

"No! And wait for what? I don't care what he told you, he won't come here; he wouldn't risk it, not while so many of us are stationed here."

"Well there's another good reason I'm not going back through those gates. I swear to you Cilo, I'll start walking if you don't just bring the wagon back out here and leave it."

His fury scoured the evening air, snowflakes evaporating in the heat of it. "This is ridiculous. I will carry you in there myself."

"Then you'd better be ready to tie me up as well, because I'm not staying in one of those buildings."

Rage fired his eyes. "Edan. Back the wagon out. Stay here with her and if she tries to go anywhere, tie her to the damned wheel." He leapt to his saddle, spun the horse and flogged it in through the fort gates.

Manius followed with the other riders, chuckling to himself. To Edan he said, "I'll send some food out."

Maia waited until the wagon was still, its wheels were chocked, and Edan had moved to unhitch the mules before she climbed back in out of the weather. She had

redressed in her riding clothes and the few things left in her pack were strewn on the floor of the carriage. The pouch with her walnut and silver coin was tied on a shorter length of the woollen string, and it hung around her neck. Catching the increasingly wild mass of her hair together loosely, she twisted it up onto her crown, pinning it there. She slipped her bracelet over her wrist and re-read Luc's letter. She had all she needed and wanted. She sat back to wait.

The face that appeared at her side curtain could not have been other than Luc's brother. They were so alike her breath caught. His right arm from wrist to shoulder was tattooed in deep blue, a sinuous pattern of lines and angles that held her mesmerized until he spoke. "Do you still think he'll come here, then? With archers all along the walls? Half the men up there would kill him on sight."

"Only half?" she asked. "What would the other couple of hundred do?"

He laughed and the likeness grew even more profound. "It would make a fair gamble either way; any of us not trying to kill him would be ready to help him. Most of them are waiting to see which side Cilo is going to stand, and whether he issues orders."

"So am I. And you?"

He was still smiling and he nodded at unspoken words. "I don't have to make that decision, your husband does. It's hard to believe anything could have come between them; I had to have a closer look at what they locked horns over."

"Edan thinks Luc's chosen badly, but then, he thinks he walked out because of me."

"That's a common assumption. You don't think so?"

"I don't have to think, I know."

He laughed again, nodding. "I'll get you some of Edan's food. Tell Luc from Marcus, you need feeding up a bit."

"Remind my brother of that, too, for me. I think he's forgotten me."

Time dragged, and Maia pulled the rug tighter and pulled her knees up against the cold. She needed sleep but her eyes refused to close, so she lay watching the dark dances of the snowflakes as they crossed the darker sky. The air brightened suddenly and a voice called, "Edan, go in. I'll take over here." She struggled to sit. Mumbled conversations outside followed and the light of torches filled the carriage.

Marcus held back the curtain, and Manius planted two sputtering torches into the cold ground outside as Cilo stepped up into the interior. "If he's coming it will be soon," he said. "He's probably watching out there right now."

"Out of range of your archers?"

"They've been ordered to stand down." His eyes were dark with grief, pleading as they had the day of her wedding. He looked at her from under heavy brows. She wrapped her arms around him and clung to him like a small child clinging to her only hope. She didn't want to speak. Words were clamped behind the tight line of his mouth and she was afraid to hear them. Silently, he rested his cheek on her head, pulled her close against him.

At last he said, "I brought you this." It was a saddle bag filled with food. "And this." A heavy coin purse. "It's Roman currency so it won't do you much good up north, or anywhere else outside the borders, but it's yours. If you let me know where you are, I'll arrange to send more when you need it."

She sat back and wiped a tear from his cheek and then one from her own. "I don't know if I can do that."

"You have to. It's a condition of me letting you go. I have to know where you are, that you're okay." He cleared his throat. "If he ever hurts you ... if you realize you can't live out there"

"That won't happen." She forced the coin purse down into the side of her pack along with Luc's parchment.

"Maia please, don't do this. You don't understand, you couldn't possibly. That isn't your world out there. It's cold and ugly and brutal. You don't belong there."

"I don't belong anywhere. That's the problem. I'm going to have to build my own world." Uncertainty moved in the fine hairs on Maia's nape. She held the pack in her hand, and he gently pressed it from her grip until it lay on the floor.

"In a few months," he paused and closed his eyes, "by the end of summer, Papa is going back to Pompeii. He's left the villa to me and I will keep it staffed for the off season. You can't go there yet, not while she's there, but you could go there soon. You could wait there for me."

She hesitated, staring through the half-light, searching for implications. "And Luc?"

He didn't answer.

"And until then?" She knelt down onto the hard boards between his feet. She had tried not to doubt his love for her, but he had chosen the army and this life of blood over her before. He was desperate, there was no doubting that, but there was something in the rawness of his pain that confused her. "Will you give him his discharge?"

He shook his head. "Don't force me to this choice. I don't want to hurt him." Tears clung in his thick lashes. He caught hold of her hands and held them up to his chest. "You can still tell him to walk away. You can tell him you are staying here with me. If you stay, no one will try to stop him. He can take the food pack and the gold."

"No, I can't. I won't, and if you're planning to kill him then you will have to do the same to me. Dead or alive I will be lost to you forever, I promise you. I'm tied to his fate, Cilo. Where he goes, I go."

"That's the oath you made to me, remember."

"I remember. I'm surprised you do, you were very drunk at the time. And do you remember that Luc was there, too."

Although she was the one on her knees, it was him who begged. "Stay here then, both of you. Convince him to come back."

"No. That isn't my choice to make."

"Maia please. I've tried. I've pleaded with him to stay, over and over. He'll come back if you tell him to. Don't leave me with nothing at all." His eyes were bleak, searching hers for hope.

Frustration cramped her hands and roughened her voice. "Why won't you let him go, Cilo? Would you really rather have him hunted? You're the only one with the power to make a choice here. Discharge him and you will have everything you ever wanted."

His face fell, hanging in silence for long moments. Then he sniffed back hard and dragged his hands roughly across his eyes, mouth and nose. Crouching awkwardly, he leaned lightly on her shoulders as he stepped past her onto the step of the carriage and jumped down. He walked like a man in pain, like straightening might rupture something vital. "He'll be here somewhere," he said quietly. "Marc, let him know it's safe to come out."

Luc's brother whistled, two shrill blasts that stung against Maia's ears, then he leaned back against the wagon to wait.

Scarce moments passed before hoof beats clumped against the hard ground, and Luc led two horses from behind them where the road curved away behind the walls of the fort. Marc stood forward as he approached and they embraced, thumping each other on the back. "Edan wants his horse back."

"He can't have it." Luc smiled, but he was watching Cilo. Slowly he moved to

where Maia stood on the step of the *carra* and led a horse into her reach. "I didn't expect long good-byes from you," he said directly to Cilo as she stepped over into her saddle and pulled the horse around and away from the vehicle.

"No." The word was thick, forced from a raw throat, chewed and harsh. The hard set of his mouth spoke of violence so near he could taste it. His fists were clenched and his eyes burned into Luc's. "I won't keep asking you to stay, but I will ask you to go. Leave Maia with me."

Luc shook his head slowly and Manius stepped forward and kicked his knee sideways. Cartilage crunched and the old soldier caught his shoulders as he buckled, holding him against the dirk blade at his throat.

In that instant of movement, Marc had drawn a dagger and held its blade, frozen, ready at his shoulder, and lined up on Cilo.

Maia snatched the bow from her thigh, nocked an arrow and held it drawn, murderously close to Manius' shoulder blade.

Cilo glared at her. "Maia! No."

"Drop it," she hissed. Her arm burned. Her shoulder and side ached to tremble with the strain and she called every skerrick of strength she had into holding it steady.

Cilo held his fierce stare directly on her eyes, weighing out agonizing moments, then shook his head. At that range she couldn't miss. Without armour or mail, the arrow would go through both men. "Let him go."

Violence flared from Cilo's eyes as Manius held his ground a moment longer, then loosened his grip, stepped back and pulled the knife away.

Maia let the flight slide back into impotence, shaking with adrenaline and strain. Luc straightened, ignoring the man who had held him and making him nothing as he limped forward a step. Closer to his best friend. "I should have been expecting that. Your ogre isn't on his leash." The distance between them was love or hate; the promise of an embrace hung, then fell in icy flecks through the empty air.

Cilo chewed bile, his mouth twisting around the bitterness, but his eyes shone with unshed tears. "You're tired, Luc. You're making mistakes. If you ever let anyone hurt her, I promise you, I will take you apart with my own hands." He looked up. "Maia, I"

"Don't," she said flatly. "It's hard to call a bluff when everything you love is at stake, isn't it. I'll let you know if I need more money." She walked the horse up between them and leaned to kiss him. "You know I love you. The choice is yours, my offer still stands."

Luc climbed up behind her, leaving his horse riderless, and asked, "What are you going to do? Will I be charged?"

"I won't give you safe passage, don't ask. I can give you five days." His face was utterly bereft of colour, bloodless, like his heart had just broken and bled out. He stood absolutely still.

"Ten days." Luc said.

Marc caught Luc's bridle and pulled the horse around so he could mount. Maia watched them all in silence, a frown of confusion sliding over her brow.

"Five days. And I'll lock the gates tonight, now. It's as much as I will do. No more." He turned up to Marc. "You get nothing. You're a dead man. Go north, that's where we're going, and I want to come looking for you personally."

Marc shrugged crookedly, as if he was sorry Cilo felt that way, like the threat wasn't deadly serious, and turned the horse onto the dark road north. Luc kicked their horse and followed at an easy canter, letting the night cover their backs and the stone of the road sing their progress.

As soon as they were out of earshot of the fort they slowed to a walk and Maia twisted, barely holding her balance as she reached to pull his lips down to hers. After-shock rushed through her veins, shaking her and she clung to him, sobbing and laughing, weak with relief.

“Are you okay?” She searched the darkness for signs of injury.

“I’m all right. Ah, you smell so good.” He pressed his face into her hair. “You have to tell me how you organized that. And you!” He turned his attention out to his brother. “Of all the stupidest, most idiotic...” He struggled for superlatives. “You pulled a knife on Cilo? Why? What were you thinking?”

“I know. I know. There wasn’t time to think. Would you rather I let the Troll cut you?” She could hear him grinning. “We’d better turn aside here; they won’t be too far behind.”

Together they turned the horses down the slope from the road, riding an arc down to the tree-lined waterway below. By the time they neared the woods, they were heading back toward the fort, but a couple of hundred yards downhill from the road.

“Where are we going? He said we had five days, and he was locking the gates tonight,” Maia argued, confused.

“He won’t give up that easily. Even if he thinks he’s lost this round, that self-pity will turn to anger in two minutes and he’ll decide playing catch up is a waste of time. Give him five minutes to call riders and get them saddled, and two more to get them this far.” Luc explained. “While it’s dark and there aren’t any drifts on the ground yet, we’ll just move out of their way. Let them run up the road there a way before they turn back.”

He turned back to Marc. “How well do you know this place?”

“I don’t. We’ve only been up here a few days. You saw the fort, there’s nothing out here, nothing to see.” They didn’t enter the trees, but followed their line through the darkness, using the small contrast between cloudy moonlight and forest shadow to pick a safe path.

“We need to go to ground. There must be cover around here somewhere. I left the smugglers this morning on the road just out of Viroconium. There will be somewhere that they planned to camp. I think we look for a village on high ground on the west side of the road.”

“I think tree cover east, and pick up the midlands road south tomorrow.”

Maia peered through the gloom at Marc. “South now?”

“South.”

“South,” Luc affirmed quietly.

The howl of frustration that rose passed as no more than a bitten sigh. Nothing was certain, her brain was filled with fog and her bone marrow throbbed with fatigue. She rested back against Luc’s shoulder. In the exquisite boredom of her suite in the villa she’d dreamed of galloping across endless fields, of tempting forest fates at full gallop. Now, a month without rising from her comfortable bed, Tiberia’s warm embrace, and good food all seemed like a dream from another life.

It was everything Cilo offered. There was no way back to it and no end of running ahead. “How long is it since you stayed in one place?” She lifted her hand back to Luc’s cheek.

“Just before your wedding. Seven, eight months.” Exhaustion wormed its way through his words, grating on the cold air.

“That’s why...” Marc paused dramatically, forecasting the impact of his words, “I think you need to get to Londinium. Fifty leagues, on the roads with inns and good food all the way.”

“No.” Luc said sharply.

Maia searched the darkness again for threads of understanding. “Why so far? There must be somewhere closer. What’s in Londinium?”

“He only has one safe place in this country. It’s where I’m heading. I’ve been dreaming about a sweet little blonde I met there once. Justicia wouldn’t cross the street to help me, but she’ll keep him under cover, and she’s the only person in the world with the resources to keep you both hidden from Rome.”

“No,” Luc repeated.

“There’s also a good chance we’ll pick her up along the road. She sent a runner demanding an explanation and an escort.” He laughed quietly. “She’s of no use to Cilo now, though. He’s doing her no favours.”

“Aye and she sent a welcome party after us, too,” Luc said.

Maia listened silently as the horrible reality of Marc’s plan crept over her skin. All her insecurities balled up in her innards, burning into a sob she could not release. She bit her lip, tasting blood, and swallowed. “Maybe not,” she said. “Cilo thinks they were paid by the Stepmother. I think he knows or suspects more about it than he told me.” Her breath ran out. There was no more for words.

Luc mumbled, “Aye, then it’s what he didn’t tell you that will make all the difference,” but he said no more.

Silence stretched along her nerves, broken only by the slow heavy tread of the horses. Images of Justicia: her cultured elegance, her cool superiority, her calm confidence, whirled across her mind’s eye like a storm of perfumed silk. And Luc in her arms.

The whistle, when it came, hit her eardrum like a stab. Luc cursed under his breath and pulled the horse to a dead stop.

“I thought so.” Edan’s voice was close, crowded with threats, hidden in the shadows of the trees. “Predictable pair of fuckers aren’t you. You’re lucky her brother can’t think straight around her, or he’d have worked it out too.”

Neither Marc nor Luc spoke, they were poised, waiting for an indication of the threat and where it would come from.

“I don’t want to kill all of you, so I won’t try for one. Keep moving nice and slow and quiet and we’ll say I never saw you, just this once. And Marc, that’s still my horse.”

Marc started to speak, but Edan cut him off. “Don’t say a word. It’s bad enough the rest of us had to live under the shadow of what he’d done, brother. Now you as well. It’s shame none of us should have to carry. I won’t stand aside for either of you again, I don’t care what Dad would say, you can believe that. Cilo will come to his senses and I’ll see you again then.”

Luc silently kicked the horse on, feeling the expanse of his back open up like a target. Hunger and fatigue were making his head light; he had no reserves left for fear. He needed to sleep, and he needed more than just a night. There was no place to rest. He shook his head and tried to clear it.

As soon as they passed under the fort, Marc turned deeper into the trees. Calling softly for Maia to follow, he picked his way slowly through the foliage, edging deeper into woodland darkness. Hours passed in dark silence, until silver began to catch in the twiggy canopy and the cold in the air became as solid as a wall. The path he chose moved upward, following higher ground and rising steadily with it.

As dawn greyness settled against the trees he looked around, seemed satisfied, and slid down from his saddle, saying, “I’ll make a fire.” He reached to offer a hand as Maia threw her leg over the horse’s neck and jumped down. Luc moved as stiffly as a puppet, limping and uncoordinated. Marcus caught his brother and slapped his face. “Come on, sunshine. Stay with us.”

Maia threw her cloak down onto the damp leaves and Luc dropped heavily onto it, rolling onto his back, covering his eyes with the back of a hand.

"The food he sent, will that be safe to eat?"

"Of course it is." Maia shook her head in disbelief as she answered.

"Aye." Luc mumbled. "He wouldn't take a chance on Maia eating it."

"Good. Luc! Wake up! Eat something." To Maia he said, "Get him to eat something." And he walked out of view, gathering drier twigs.

Sitting, wrapped around her knees by the fire, Maia sipped warmed wine and dipped bread. Luc slept behind her and Marc stared silently into the fire. The day had dawned with frigid clarity, chilling any hope, numbing her cheeks, her nose and fingers. No matter which way she considered it, there was only one way forward.

"How long ago did Justicia send the runner?" The words hurt her throat, sharp with ice.

"Seven days, or eight." He pulled his cloak tighter and rested his head back against a trunk.

"Theoretically, if she left without an escort, she could be what, two thirds of the way to here?"

"Theoretically."

"Or?"

"Or, it'll take her longer if she has to organize a militia guard. And if she didn't wait, they're bandit fodder somewhere back down the road, with no guard and a caravan that screams 'I've got money, rob me'."

She dipped her bread thoughtfully, frowns knotting the soft skin around her eyes. "Then why do you think she's the best option?"

"Look at him. Where are you going to take him? Britannia is a small territory; there's nowhere to hide and he's already knackered. He doesn't just need to get to somewhere safe; he needs to be able to stay there."

"Cambria? He said we could go west."

"We just finished killing everything that moves over there. We stirred up the Druids like kicking a nest of ants. There are some there who've given up, but the others will kill any Roman they see. When you're army you're part of a whole. When you're not, you're on your own. An easy target. No. Not west."

"Glevum?" She knew the answer before it was spoken.

He laughed dryly. "Don't take him near his mother, milk fed gimp that he is already. He's her baby, he can do no wrong. And how long did it take Cilo to find you there last time?"

She put down the mug and pulled her hair forward, scratching her scalp under the knotting waves. "He was guessing." It made no difference as long as he kept guessing right. "Okay. Does Luc have a say in it?" She and Luc were stuck between worlds and the gap between what they wanted and what they could have was growing.

"He said no, but he'll go where you go. There isn't a problem there."

"And what are you not telling me? What's the secret this time?"

This time Marc laughed genuinely, looking squarely at her with sparkling blue eyes. "What secret? Why would there be a secret?"

"Because there always is." She had no smile to return, she was too scared of Justicia and her secrets.

Progress was deliberately slow over the next few days, moving on or near the road, sleeping rough while the nights stayed clear. Beside the ancient Celtic highway south of Pennocrucium, Luc woke with a toe in his back. Carefully untangling his limbs from Maia's, he looked up through firelight.

“Your watch.”

He nodded, stretching. “Is there food?”

“Sort of. And I found some fresh horses. Three of them.”

Luc laughed and rubbed his eyes, yawning. “Where’d you find them?”

“Just over there a way, in a field. If Edan wants his horse, that’s where he’ll have to come looking for it.”

They both laughed and Luc rummaged in the pack. “Did you happen to find another saddle? Or somewhere we can buy one in the morning?”

“No, but we’ll put Maia on the fattest horse. She’s little, she doesn’t need a saddle.”

“You tell her.”

“No. I’ll leave that to you. Those eyes are getting to me.” He swallowed the last gulp from his mug and shook his head. “Cilo folds around her like a green leaf; he’s like a little kid. She talked to Edan for just a moment, or argued with him, and we didn’t get knives in our backs. You know he could have done it. Would have, too. Ma’d say she was fair and witchy. She’s *shidh* that one.”

Luc smiled and drank a long draught of water. “That’s what Dad said.”

“You should have listened to him.”

“Aye. That’s what I’ve been thinking. I went all the way out there to ask his advice, and then ignored it. Now I think he was right.”

“What did he say?” Marc asked. “Gods alive, what did Ma say?” He started to laugh at the prospect.

“He said she needed feeding up. So did Ma.” Luc stopped smiling as he picked through the bits of dried fruit. “He said the Highlands would kill her. He said even if I end up dead or in an arena, she’ll always finish by going back to the life she knows.” He poured wine into a mug. “Worst is, he said I should just tell her whatever she needed to hear and not waste time coming up here.” Drinking it down, he wiped his mouth and smiled again. “Ma said she didn’t know what she wanted, or needed. And she looked like a puppy.”

Marc nodded. “Where does that leave you? I can’t see how you won’t get caught if you’re living in a fancy villa somewhere. Especially considering your brother-in-law. A very nice villa she’d have, too, from what I hear. Expensive taste.” He stood up, straightening his blanket, readying to sleep. “How do you do it? All the rich and beautiful line up to keep you in style, and you still end up sleeping in the mud with nothing to eat.”

“Aye,” Luc said, fatigue and hopelessness eroding his words. “Dad said something like that, too.”

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN.

Fine drizzle greyed out the distance and made tree cover impractical. The horses jogged over cobble and clay, the riders cloaked but heavy with the growing weight of saturation. Marc had drawn the bareback ride and he was anxious to reach the *alae* fort at Mandvessedum where there was the possibility of finding tack. All three moved on the promise of hot food and a dry bed.

The *taberna diversoria* was no more than a road house with stables and feed for the horses, but it had a fireplace and a roof. Marc tried unsuccessfully to bargain for a

room, while Luc tended the horses and Maia knelt by the fire, shivering. Hot food would come, and at worst they could sleep in the stables. She closed her eyes, feeling the heat on her face ease away thought until awareness was nothing but the joy of warm, dry air.

When she forced herself to rouse, she pushed herself upright painfully and dragged her feet to the table and stools. The boys were eating stew greedily and she poured three mugs of wine before she sat. "Did we get a room?"

Marc shook his head, tearing bread from the loaf and handing it to her. "Nothing. There is another inn on the other side of town, but it's army. We could risk it."

"These stables are shite," Luc added. "He's sold you some tack. It's shite too, but it's better than nothing."

Maia listened without responding. She put food into her mouth and felt it warm her belly when it went down. She no longer cared where they went or slept. Taking a long draft of wine, she peered over Luc's shoulder at the doorway, watching darkness settle and the rain fall into occasional showers.

"Well?" Marc stretched his back, wincing, as he pushed his empty plate away. "How much do you want dry blankets? Do we try the other inn?"

Luc shrugged. "No. My vote is stables. They're dirty, but..."

Maia kicked his shin and nodded, wide-eyed, over his shoulder. A man had entered and stood talking to the inn keeper. He was in his late forties, thickening, with short sturdy legs and powerful arms that bowed out from broad shoulders. His tunic was knee-length over bronze grieves, belted at the hips with brass and leather shingles. A *gladius* and dagger hung from the crossed belt, and the hilt of another broad bladed sword rose above his shoulder.

His movements were clipped, there was nothing about him that allowed for extravagance or vanity. Maia felt the aura of calm confidence he carried, and recognized the potency of the threat he represented from across the room.

Luc met her eye and winked. He saw her recognize the danger, read her fear, and smiled what reassurance he could. Marc didn't turn. He reached under the table, checking for the hilts of the knives at his calves and hips.

The stranger looked towards them, following the inn keeper's finger and Maia reached for her wine, watching from under her brows. "He's leaving," she murmured from behind the lip of her mug.

Marc stood, stretched, and moved to walk to the door, rolling stiffness out of his shoulders. "Let's see if he's got company." He was grinning, his eyes glittering with captured firelight. Before he had crossed the floor, the stranger re-entered. With him was a small figure under a heavy black cape, cowed so her face was covered, a pale slim hand extended to the inn keeper.

Marc froze midstride and looked back over his shoulder. He raised his eyebrows, his grin was manic. Luc swore, his hands clenched and pulled back. Storms clouds gathered in his eyes and the line of his mouth went white with sudden strain.

Maia's throat clenched and her stomach knotted. She bit her lip as desolation washed over her, staining her grey, filling her lungs with dust.

The stranger held the hilt of his *gladius* and Marc stepped back, hands held out, palms open. "Whoa. I've got some urgent news for your employer," he said carefully, looking behind the man to the door. "I assume she's here somewhere."

"Assume whatever you like. I'm not expecting any news on her behalf. You might like to take a few more steps back to where you were."

Marc nodded and stepped back again, looking to the cowed figure beside him. She was looking past him to where Maia and Luc sat. Her face was in shadow but her

voice was clear. "It's all right Commander. Justicia will want to see him. Urgently."

The commander squared his huge shoulders, looking up at Marc, and said, "Drop them. All of them."

Keeping his movements clear and concise, Marc drew the sword from over his shoulder and laid it on the floor. One by one he lifted daggers from his boots and hips and those too, he piled onto the floor. The commander called a sharp order, and a second man took position in the doorway, while he made a sweeping gesture to usher Marc through the door.

Tics played in the muscles over Maia's eyes and tears burned to form. All her focus was on the man she loved, her heart screaming silently.

He stared at his fists, pain breaking in waves across his face. Thunder crashed inside his head and he closed his eyes. He had no courage to meet hers, no strength to try to run. He shook his head, denying everything. He had no answers. "What can we do?" he asked. Bile rolled up his throat, filling his mouth with the sour taste of hopelessness. He opened his eyes.

She reached a hand to his cheek. Her golden eyes shone and warmed his face like firelight. They held his heart, if they had filled with tears it would have broken.

"Stay alive. I need you." From somewhere past the keening in her heart, she found a smile. It was small but it was enough.

"You don't know what this will cost. She will make you pay for this 'til you bleed, Maia. She's cruel."

She nodded. "Maybe. I've played her game before. I'm smarter now."

He stood, limped around and pulled her into his arms. "When you already gambled everything and they call your bluff, what then?"

She kissed him. Holding his face as though she could catch the pain, she forced her throat to clear. "You call double or nothing and play again."

When Marc finally walked back through the door he waved away the guard, then walked silently to his arsenal and began replacing the knives. At the table he poured wine into a mug and drank it down in one, then poured another. "Want a drink?" he called, then downed that as well.

Luc shook his head. "No. Let's go."

"She's not happy, Stud."

"Shut up."

"No. I mean it. She's really not happy." He fell in beside Maia as they walked toward the door. "I'm not so sure she has our best interests at heart." He grabbed Luc's shoulder, forced him to turn. "She's dangerous, Luc."

"I know. How many men has she got with her?"

"I saw five, so say ten. Well armed. Veterans. All mounted. Three wagons, one supply cart, mules."

"Is she camped?"

"Aye, by the river. But they were up here looking to buy something. I don't know what."

Luc spun suddenly, lunging at the innkeeper, catching the front of his tunic before he could duck away. "What did they want?"

The man stumbled back, gasping, struggling to keep his balance. "Medicine," he wailed. "Poppy. And Henbane. I don't have any."

Luc dropped the fabric and let him fall. "Someone's hurt. Any sign of damage to the vehicles?"

"No."

"Whatever happens, you keep her covered, got it?" He didn't look at Maia.

As they left the inn she hurried to match their stride. In the stable they saddled the horses in silence, and when he boosted her into her seat Luc stood with a hand on her thigh looking up at her. He looked like Edan, his eyes had taken on the same cold precision. "Stay with Marc if you can. Do and say anything to stay safe."

She nodded and looked at Marcus. He was euphoric. A wide grin lit his face with terrible ferocity. If this built to a confrontation, they could never match it, two against a troop of veterans. It had to stop. Struggling to think through the rising storm of panic, she watched them mount and followed as they crouched under the rafters and rode out into the night.

Marc led the line across the road to the wide bank of the river, winding in behind the dark outline of buildings and fences. They picked up an escort from the shadow of willows as they covered the last distance to where the *carpenta* formed a loose quad.

A guard took hold of the horses when they dismounted, and Luc limped to Marc's side. "This is going to go all her way. I'm not going to have to worry, but once you walk through here there's no way out for you."

He grinned, sweeping his arm open to the gap. "After you."

As she stepped past, Maia grabbed Marc's hand, held it and smiled. "Stay with me," she said. He looked down into her wide unpretentious gaze, his hand in both of hers, and the smile fell from his face. Her breath was short, catching in her chest. Her hair spread over her shoulders, damp, caught back from her temples by long twisted strands. She walked into the camp behind Luc, pulling gently on his hand.

He balked, tried to hold back, then he stumbled into motion behind her.

Luc stood at the open flap of Justicia's tent. Braziers lit the space inside with a rich ruddy light that caught and danced off brass and glass. As he moved up behind his brother, Maia peered from behind Marc, but she heard the voice before she could see more than shadows. It was syrup, sweet and sickly; silky, like spider's web.

"Lucius. What a pleasant surprise." Justicia walked to the tent flap, both hands extended to take his. "And Marcus, is it? You boys all look alike to me. And to you, too, it seems little one? You're clinging to the wrong brother there in the shadows."

Maia tightened her grip on Marc's hand, and followed behind him into the tent.

"I need your help, Tish. That's why we're here." Luc's words were thick, rising out of his throat in a wash of resentment.

"I know that," she said sharply. "I asked the goddess to bring you back. I didn't stipulate how."

"As raw meat?"

"Very nearly, by the look of you." Her tone changed just as sharply back to sweetness as she forced herself to relax. "Luc, you don't need to live like a savage. It doesn't suit you."

"We need a place to lay low. You're the only safe place I could find. We need cover for a couple of months."

"We Luc? Who is we?" She turned suddenly to Maia. "Do you need my help again, too, my sweet Maia?"

"Yes. And Marc," she whispered, barely audible in the thick air between them.

"Aye." Luc looked at the priestess with calm indignation. "Are you going to help us or not? If not, say it. I want to get to somewhere warm and dry to sleep."

"How am I to decide whether I will help you or not?" She looked at Maia, taking her in from head to toe and back. "I would like to talk to my little lovely here. But you, I think, are just too tired to lie to me Luc. I think I should talk to you a while tonight." She walked to the doorway and made an abrupt signal. "Maia, Neria will take you and Marcus to a tent. We'll talk again later." They were dismissed with abrupt finality back

to the fire lit quad and her attention returned to Luc.

"She's transparent that one, isn't she? Do you think she ever told a lie in her life?" Justicia poured a goblet of wine for herself and one for him.

"Not that I know of." He was terse. "What are you going to do?"

"Let you stay. What else would I do? Have your throat cut while you sleep? Sit, sit. Not on the bed, not until you've washed." She stood in front of him, close, so her breath was on his cheek, and offered him the goblet. "I'm pleased you didn't come here pretending, Luc. It would have been demeaning for both of us. After all these years we both deserve better."

He limped to the couch and sat stiffly. "What are your conditions?" His voice wanted to rise, his face tightened over clipped syllables. "Just tell me what you want, and make it reasonable or I'll take my chances against Rome and Cilo's whole damn family."

"You know what I want Luc. I want you. With or without your love. And I will still give you everything you ever wanted if you will stay with me."

"We've had this conversation before," Luc hissed from between clenched teeth. Too many times, he was sick of the words. "You don't have anything I want. I haven't changed my mind."

"But you have my dearest, you have. You're here. This conversation is very different because this time I don't have to beg. You want my protection, these are my terms."

He dropped his head, leaning his elbows on his knees, lacing his fingers around the wine and waited.

"Also, you won't have failed to notice that you walked into an armed camp. None of you will walk out alive without my blessing." She moved to sit beside him. "But you won't let it come to that, will you?"

"I don't understand. I really don't." He didn't look up. "You could have any lover you want. Ten. You've made a fortune dragging men through your bed. What do you think you can gain from chaining me here? I don't know what it is you want from me."

"I don't want a string of lovers and I'm asking a lot less of you than you imagine," she snapped. "Except I'm not asking. I'm telling you, now, what you'll accept if you want my help."

"And that is?" He stood up, moved away to stand by the brazier.

She crossed her legs, turned away and picked at a disc in the bracelet she wore. "There are things you don't know about, Luc. Things I don't want to discuss under these circumstances." She took a deep breath, looking around her tent as if it was foreign to her. "You're wet. You need a bath and a shave, after that we can talk more calmly."

"I won't be any calmer. What about the other two? How do they fit into this arrangement?"

"They're an annoyance. We'll see. Let me talk to the little one, first. She certainly can't go back to Pompeii with her stepmother, but I could send her to the troops at Mandvessedum. Cilo can collect her from there if he still wants her. Or it may be worth my while to keep her. It might be very much worth her while if she learns how to use that look of hers. If not?" She shrugged and serpents moved behind her eyes.

Luc watched her feet with meticulous care. "Marc?"

"He's no use to me. Why is he here?"

"Insubordination. He pulled a knife on Cilo."

Justicia laughed. "That brings him up in my estimation. No, he's dead weight Luc. If you want him here, he's part of your debt to me. Otherwise he's a corpse in the river

by morning.”

He didn’t doubt her for an instant. “He stays.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t want it any other way. Now.” She stood, walked closer, touched a finger to his chin. “Your shave. We’ll need my tub. Let’s see if they’ve heated me some water.”

“I’ll go.” He moved to the tent flap, anxious to leave, to breathe.

“Oh no, Luc. That’s one other condition I should mention. I don’t know just how the situation stands between the two of you, but until I do, you won’t go near her. Understand? Not even close. Agreed?”

He bit his tongue while his eyes spat curses and remained silent.

“Is that your answer? It’s a very cold look, Luc.” She clucked her tongue and pursed her lips thoughtfully. “I’ll leave you to think about it for a moment. Remember, if you had any other choice, you wouldn’t be here.”

Black wool engulfed Maia as Neria hugged her silently in the fire lit quad. Two guards tended an iron boiling pot at the fire as they passed, but Maia didn’t see them. When Marc pulled his hand out of hers, she looked up at him in dull surprise, feeling cast adrift.

“What was that about?” he asked, rubbing the cold of her grip from his palm like it was a stain or an accusation.

She shook her head and said, “Shh.” Justicia had eyes and ears everywhere.

Neria giggled nervously as she ushered them into her tent, dropping the flap closed behind her. Maia turned, re-opened a slit and peered across to where they’d been, and Neria dropped her cowl back, smiling up at Marc. “You found another one, Maia?”

“Yes.” She was vague, watching Luc as he stood in the opening of Justicia’s tent. When he walked back in out of sight, she turned and looked around at her friend. “No, actually. He found you. He’s been dreaming about you, he tells me.” She tried a weak smile.

“Really?” Neria’s smile brightened still more. “I can’t believe you came back looking for us.”

Marc spoke for her. “At the moment all we’re looking for is somewhere warm and dry. Can we stoke up this fire?”

“Yes, yes. Take off the wet clothes, then. I’ll find something for you.”

“Not yet.” He piled twigs into the brazier then moved behind Maia to look through the tent flap himself. “What’s in the tent beside hers? She’s gone in there.”

“Her tub. They’re heating more water now.”

Maia felt the words hit her. Her nails bit into the palms of her hands and she turned back to the gap to watch.

“Come away from there, Sweetie. There’s nothing you can do that will change anything that happens out there, now.” Gently she pulled Maia to the middle of the familiar cramped space. “And take off the wet stuff. Even if Luc decided to fight his way out, he wouldn’t make it this far. Believe me. You’re here now; relax and make the best of it.”

Maia nodded. They had committed to this path. But it had come so suddenly and with such grim finality. Old fractures ruptured inside her chest and she hunched over them painfully. It was no longer the terror of a child that cried, it was her heart, and it screamed his name.

She stripped down to her linen tunic and Neria held a curtaining rug as she

dropped that too into a pile on the floor. She gathered the blanket tight around her shoulders and sat down on the edge of the bed, staring into the fire. It was when Marc turned away from the gap, unclasped the sword belts from his shoulder and hips and slung the blades to the floor that her silent tears welled and spilled. Luc wasn't going to fight.

As Marc stripped, Neria stood nearby with a blanket. "Tell me about these dreams," she teased. "I hope they were good."

Maia watched her absently. She genuinely seemed to enjoy her work, ministering. Standing close, her finger traced along lines of blue that rose over one shoulder, down the flat muscle of his chest and around onto his right shoulder blade. The pattern was similar to Luc's and Maia closed her eyes and listened to her mother's keening. The words had more substance now, the memories filled out by familiarity with the language. If Luc could hear the song, he would know her mother's words. He would understand the terrible pain of loss. He would hold her and all the demons of the past would be gone.

Luc laid back in the heat of the water, feeling it tease at the knots in his back and neck. He kept his eyes closed as the slick blade lifted the roughness from his cheeks and throat. Against closed eyelids he could see Maia's frown of concentration, watch her bite the tip of her tongue, feel the warmth and softness of her breath on the freshly shaved skin. He had no desire to open his eyes on reality.

"That's better. Your hair needs to be cut, but that can wait. Don't you feel better?"

"I'd feel better if I knew what you were going to do. You keep circling like a vulture." He lathered soap under his arms and up his throat, washing away the lines of bristle. "Every time I think you're going to speak, you back off again. Now the water is getting cold and the sun will be up before you get out whatever it is you have to say."

"Yes. This is not easy for me." She stood closer; the dark in her eyes was deep, her lashes black and extreme against her pale skin. For the first time since he'd seen her again, Luc looked at the familiar face and bit off a caustic remark.

She'd remained fully dressed, wearing not only a rich purple linen *tunica*, but also a thick woollen *palla* that she kept wrapped up over her hair and down around her shoulders. That was unusual. Unusual too that she hadn't claimed a place in the water. "Luc, when did you leave *Gallia Aquitania*, do you remember? It was when you told me you had decided not to continue our relationship." As she spoke she took his hand, opening his fingers, and placed it on the swollen mound of her stomach.

He started to answer, then snatched his hand away as if her flesh had burned him. His face was devoid of expression as he fixed his eyes on hers. "Seven months, a bit more."

"It was the Calends of August, the end of our last wonderful summer. I remember because it was the day the pain started." She walked around the tub, standing behind him, avoiding the shock in his face.

Watching from her seat on the floor by the door, Maia stared out across the square. The guards moved through speaking in hushed tones, and two other girls, cowed and covered, had emerged to eat, but the door to Justicia's tent stayed open and the bath tent closed. She had straightened the wet clothes around the brazier to dry and left the bed to

her roommates. Now as they slept, she watched and waited.

The soft crunch of footsteps beside her startled her from her lament, and she was on her feet reflexively. In a silent crouch, she reached for Marc's sword belt and dagger, dragging their weight back toward the bed. "Marc." She thumped the dagger onto his chest, and clamping the blanket under her arms, she stood straight to drag the heavy sword free of its scabbard. As he leapt to awareness, she hissed, "The door."

Flipping the knife to hold the blade, he motioned for her to sit, and they waited.

A hand reached into the slit, lifting the flap gently until the fire caught the face of the commander of the guard. He stood a moment, calmly taking in the scene, then nodded to them, chuckled and backed out of the gap.

Marc looked at her, frowning concern. "Are you all right?" She nodded and he reached to tuck a slip of hair behind her ear. "Try to get some sleep. Here, I'll make you some room." He gently turned the sleeping girl beside him and moved over so Maia could fit behind him. Clutching her blanket up tight, she lay down, staring at the patterns on the wall of the tent and listening to her mother's heartbreak.

Justicia hovered behind him, trying to speak the words she'd rehearsed a million times. If her next words brought relief to his eyes, she would have cut out his heart herself, so she refused to look. "It's not a child, Luc. Not a living breathing child. It may be a monster, born from resentment and anger, but it has no heart, no limbs. It just grows there."

She continued her round, moving back to look at him. His eyes were closed, deep creases cut his brow. She put a hand out to touch his chest, and he flinched at her touch like she'd whipped him. "The pain is awful. In the cold it has grown worse. I can't get warm; fires shoot into my chest."

"A surgeon..."

"Can do nothing. It drains away my blood, Luc, my life. It's eating my flesh. I take herbs for the pain and they make me sleep all day and all night. That is why I need you. I need you."

"What can I do?"

When he looked at her she searched his face for echoes of love. She found his native compassion, she found pain and concern, but if love had ever lit his eyes, it was long gone. Nothing remained. "If this is your doing, undo it. Free me from this curse."

"I did nothing to you, Tish. There aren't any gods who listen to me."

She took his hand, kissed his fingers, held it before her lips like they were joined in prayer. "Then stay with me. Don't let me die alone."

He was silent as he gently reclaimed his hand. He stepped from the tub and tied a sheet at his hips, batted the flap aside and strode back to her tent.

He paced the rich carpet, drinking down a goblet of wine and pouring another. When she entered behind him he turned on her. "Why didn't you tell me this before, on the trip from Lutetia? You knew then, why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought I had the time to tell you gently, to convince you. Even Cilo thought you would stay. He arranged for us to travel over. He arranged the escorts. All so he could be sure you'd stay there with him.

"I didn't know you were going to steal away with the little waif. Gods alive, Luc, why take *her*? What were you thinking? Did you think you would be able to keep her? Girls like her are high maintenance, you can't afford her. Did you want to hurt him? You took the only thing he loves more than you."

“No Tish, that might have been your plan, you brought her here, maybe you wanted to use her against him, but I didn’t take her anywhere. She was going to go. I just stayed with her, tried to keep her safe.”

“That’s not how he sees it. It’s not how it looks to me.”

“I don’t care how it looks. You could have told me. It might not have made any difference, but you had plenty of time. Days and days.”

“I’m trying to explain to you. You were barely civil on the journey here, when did you suppose I could have told you? I thought I should leave it until we were settled here; when everything was calm and back to normal. But you didn’t stay to hear, you followed Maia instead, and I won’t risk making the same mistake twice.”

The rap at the door was abrupt. Justicia turned to her commander in annoyance, but stooped to listen as he made his report, then thanked and dismissed him. When she walked back in she sat heavily onto the bed, utterly depleted or relieved. “I’m exhausted Luc. We should talk about that some more tomorrow.” She pointed to the open door. “Tie that closed and come here, sit with me. I have something more to tell you, and I want you close when I do.”

Luc looked out across the quad as he pulled down the flap. “You were waiting for that report, Tish. What was it?” He dropped the flap down. “If you’ve harmed them I will kill you.”

“Good, my darling. I will get you the knife when it comes to that day, but it’s not yet.” From a box beside her she drew a small bottle and drank from it, then slipped herself painfully up the bed to lie on her furs. Reluctantly, he took the place beside her.

“Now, before I sleep, you have to know that the orders for tonight are to kill you if you move outside this tent. The same applies to Maia; the guards can have her if she breaks the curfew. But I might give her a tiny bit more freedom tomorrow. It seems she and Marcus settle to captivity better than you do.

“My commander tells me he has just witnessed them together. A party for three with Neria, I understand. I hope he can cover her expenses. Does that come as a shock to you?”

Luc stared at the canvas above him, afraid to let her see the anarchy that played across his thoughts. He forced gut wrenching images from his mind, refusing to consider the possibility. “I don’t want to discuss it. Ask them what they’re doing. You’ve made sure I can’t go to ask him.”

“Good answer, darling.” She lifted his hand up to her cheek, let it rest against her throat. “Could you harm me with these hands, Luc?”

“No.” He swallowed the bitterness that rose.

“Even I forced you?” She smiled, rolled to put a thin arm across his chest and settled to sleep.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN.

Pain flayed away the fogs of morphia, grating and chewing its way into consciousness. Grey light had raised the chill and the brazier had been left untended. Cold crept into her bones and settled there like frost. Justicia reached pitifully slowly to the box by her side, sipping the bitter tonic and breathing over the wash of nausea it brought.

Outside, the camp was moving, bustling into action as men talked and ate and

moved the teams. She needed to move, waiting was intolerable, waiting for the pain to cede just enough for today.

When she could she stood, dragging her beloved cape over her bones, gazing at her beautiful boy as he slept. Nothing was as it should be. The small muscles in his brow ticked over terrible visions; sweat beaded on his lip and glued his hair. He was pained, restless.

If by falling to her knees and begging, if by washing his hands with tears of blood she could make him love her again there would be not a heartbeat's pause. But it was not as it should be.

She could force him to stay.

It still remained to be sure he had no reason to leave.

But it would take all she had and more to make him choose her.

When she was ready, she pulled down her cowl, straightened all the dignity and purpose she had, and walked out to the tent that stood across the square. "Commander." She took his arm as she crossed the open space. "I think we should allow them all some small freedom to move. There's nothing to be gained from keeping them strictly confined, as long as my guest does not enjoy the company of this young lady." The commander accepted his new orders and left her at the opening of Neria's tent, holding back the flap for her as she entered.

Maia startled as the door opened, gripping her blanket, struggling to sit as the priestess entered.

"Maia." There was no weakness in the voice. "I want to talk to you. You can sleep today. Bathe and find some decent clothes this evening at camp, and then come to me immediately.

"Marcus. You sleep too. You will be at the disposal of our commander by this evening.

"Neria. I want you searching for my medications today. If we pass any station, you are to accompany a guard and find what we need at any cost. Understood?"

"Yes." Maia's voice was strained through fatigue; her eyes were dry with staring.

"Yes, Tish." Neria had light in her voice, waking as if she had refuelled on golden sunshine overnight and was buoyed by its inarticulate joy.

"The medical officer at the army camp in the township, here." Marc said simply. "He'll have anything you need. All you need is enough front to walk in and ask for it."

"Good. Neria, dress and go now. The commander will assign you a guard." Neria rose quickly to dress, tossing a soft flannel *tunica* to Maia as she did, and Justicia continued. "We will make our best time back to Londinium now. Luc has assured you both our protection. Don't do anything to cause him, or me, to regret that decision."

Alone with Marc, Maia pulled her *tunica* down and started the process of packing the tent for travel. "You'll have to get up and eat now. Once the food is stowed, there'll be nothing hot until this evening."

He stretched back onto the pallet, twisting the cracks out of his spine and yawning. "Neria seemed very happy this morning, don't you think?"

She glanced up from her packing, taking in the self-satisfied grin on his face, and she laughed in spite of the ache in her heart. "Don't flatter yourself. She's always like that. She just bubbles." He looked so much like Luc in the dawn light, sadness chipped away the smile and she bit her lip to halt any tears that might fall.

Marc sat forward. "Don't look at me like that Maia, not unless you're going to give me a really good reason for it. Luc has risked everything for you. You wouldn't want to be playing games with him. Or me."

His movement and sudden vehemence frightened her, sent her heartbeat galloping.

“Sorry, I was thinking how much alike you were, that’s all.” She looked down at her folding. “I didn’t mean anything.”

“And clinging to my hand last night? And hovering behind me like a child and the smile and ‘stay with me’? Was that thinking about Luc, too?”

She stalked to his clothes, felt the damp still in them and then moved to Neria’s trunk and pulled out a cloth he could tie at his hips. Turning sharply she threw it at him and followed it across to the bed. “Yes it was. And there might be more of the same, so let me know if it gets too much to bear.”

Frustration formed into fists and drove her back across the tiny floor space. “I want Justicia happy, and nothing will make her happier than thinking she has him all to herself. So you,” she spun back to him, “stand there, smile sweetly and say nothing.” She dragged her blanket away from him, put it over her shoulders and stormed out to the cooking pot for food.

Luc sensed the empty air beside him and reached instinctively before he woke, sliding his open hand through the deep furs.

“There’s no one there, my darling, but I have some hot food for you.”

He woke with a fright, his head full of dreams and bloodstained fog, and opened his eyes to cold reality. Justicia sat on a stool beside the bed, a small table set for two in front of her. Bowls of porridge steamed in the cold air and he lay back, closed his eyes and tried to rub the image away.

“Eat. You can sleep all day today. What is the best distance we can cover in a day back to Londinium?”

“Ask your commander.”

“I’m asking you. I don’t need speed, you do. How far?”

He rolled to face her, tried to clear his thoughts. “How long did it take to here?”

“Eight days.”

“Okay. With fresh teams, minimal camp at night and no trouble anywhere, five days, seven or eight leagues a day.”

She handed him a bowl and spoon, but he didn’t eat. “I’m glad you came back Luc.” She watched him move the spoon around. “Tell me, what are your plans? I can give you cover for a while, then what?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know.” Desperation coloured the words so profoundly she longed to touch him, but to have him recoil from her hurt more than the distance between them.

“When you first spoke of leaving the army, when Cilo first spoke to me, I had hoped we might be able to come to an arrangement. I had made plans for the future.”

He looked up, refusals already forming in his eyes. Before he could speak, she asked, “Tell me, will your plans eventually include Maia and your brother, as well?”

“It was his idea to come here. I have no plans.” He dropped the spoon into his bowl and put it back onto the table.

“I wish you were not so angry. Life will not be so bad while you’re here.”

“It’s a prison,” he said. “I’m here because if I walk out that door your hired hands will kill me. How is that ‘not so bad’?”

“I relaxed that order this morning. Luc, don’t be so obtuse. You have no other choice; that is just as it is. I can offer you an incentive, though. I would rather there were no threats, no anger between us.”

“I told you, you have nothing to offer me. I don’t want anything from you.”

Her patience was expended, his hard defiance taxing what little energy she had. "Oh grow up. You do need me, and you need promise me no more than the time it takes to return to Londinium. You can't afford not to listen."

He fixed her with an icy stare. "That's right, Tish. I can't afford not to listen. And I can't help thinking that I will resent that a little more every day until I can't stand to look at you."

Tears she had no intention of shedding filled her eyes, and she wiped them savagely, determined to finish what she had started before her will collapsed. "The estates in Hispania, Luc; they are yours if you want them. I had hoped we would live there together in the sun and forget Rome and its colonies and its hypocrisy and its legions. I have whole villages where you could disappear. I have a villa so comfortable you would never have to set foot outside from year to year. The staff take care of everything." She let the words trail into nothingness.

His expression had changed.

For the first time since his return, his eyes gave her some cause to hope.

Maia returned to the tent with a bowl of food for Marcus. "Here. Find something you can wear. The horses haven't been tended. They're still standing in their gear. I need a hand." She walked back out, ready to argue with the guard that shadowed her over whether she could get to their horses. But as she moved back into the misty morning light, she sidestepped the guard. Ignoring his complaints, she crossed quickly to Luc's tent and slapped her hand on the tent flap.

"Justicia. I need your help, please." The flap was unfastened and she lifted it aside. The priestess stood by her bed, removing breakfast plates. Luc was dressing, belting his kilt in place, his chest bare. Exhaustion ringed his eyes and greyed the flesh of his cheeks. He'd shaved, he was clean, she could smell him across the tent and the smell stopped her breath. Her heart stuttered and she froze, staring, searching his face for remorse.

"Maia?" the woman's voice was chilled.

"The horses," she said, turning. "They weren't fed or watered. They're still saddled. Now the guard won't let me go to them."

Voices were raised across the way as Marc encountered the same problem.

"Go back and prepare the tent to pack, Maia. Lucius and Marcus will tend the horses. Go. Now."

She looked down, watching her feet as she moved away, afraid to look up. Silently she entered the tent and resumed the familiar task of packing it up. Her hands were shaking and her sinus was thick with unshed tears. He'd met her eyes and shown no sign of guilt, but he'd brought them their safety somehow, and the pictures that brought to mind ripped her heart.

Luc flexed his right knee every few steps, trying to free the catch of damaged cartilage. Marc had two saddles off and was unlacing the third when Luc walked up beside him. "Marc, tell me about the party last night."

"No party. Maia found my blonde for me, I am very pleased to say. I hope you can cover the cost. I've got no money."

"I heard a different story. You keep clear of Maia, don't touch her. Understand."

Marc laughed. "That? That was her idea."

Luc caught the front of his tunic. "Listen, I know what you're like. I'm not happy with this situation, but it's only to Londinium. You tell her that. And you? Don't. Touch."

Marc drew and pressed a knife hard against his brother's stomach so the tip made his point clear for him.

"Luc," he said, grinning. "The horses need water."

By the time Neria returned, Maia had placed all their day's needs in their *carpentum* and was sitting inside, checking through her saddle bag.

"Hi Sweetie. Tish wants you to wear this." She handed Maia a cape and slipped out of her own. "And I have to find you some nice clothes, and I have to find out if you and Luc are together. Sorry, I have to ask, I'm no good at spying and I won't tell her the answer anyway. She's so ill now, she doesn't need any more upset."

"Is she ill?"

"Yes. She has been for a long time. It started when Luc first left her, and she thinks it will go away if he comes back. I don't. I think there's poison in her blood."

Maia held her face immobile. "Well, she can rest; he's free to go to her. Luc did what he promised he would do. He took me to Cilo and he brought me back. That's all."

Marc stepped up into the wagon and let himself fall back into the cushions. "Ladies, this is my berth for the day I understand. I'm on guard roster from tonight, double watch every night, so it's your last chance. I have two arms, one each. Let's get some sleep."

Maia threw a pillow at him; Neria laughed and lay at his side, saying, "I'll tell her that. I'm glad, because I would have thought you looked heartbroken last night."

"She was. You had all my attention and she needs a hug. But she's not still angry with me, I hope." He sat up, gave her an apologetic smile and pulled off his damp tunic. "Come on, don't stay there alone."

Maia woke in a tight ball, facing away from Marc's thigh. Her breath hiccupped in soft sobs and her throat ached, but nothing was left of the dream except her sense of loss. She wiped her hair back from her face and peered around the deep shadows. The other two were spooned away from her and she crept to the curtain, opening it a little on the remains of the day.

Outside, the wind wailed and slapped at the canvas, rushing the leaves forward as if the trees themselves would follow if they could. But as ever, the drapes covered any views of the countryside around her, all she saw was the road, the harsh, straight, unwavering Roman road. Slipping into the secure warmth of her cape, she fluffed a pillow and lay down again to wait until evening and camp was set.

"Marc." She shook his shoulder. "They're making camp for the night. Get me some water, please."

He groaned, rubbing his eyes. "I want a bath, too." He rolled away, burying his face in golden hair.

Neria whispered, "I'll make you one in the morning. And a shave."

Before they could drift back into their own world, Maia shook him again. "I only need enough for the small basin. Just warmed."

Neria rolled over in his embrace and Maia gave up. Crawling to the curtain, she said, "When you're ready," and climbed out to stretch her legs and walk some of the weight from her shoulders.

Later, in the privacy of their tent, Maia stood in the basin and lathered herself from head to toe. She stood while Neria ladled warm water down over her to wash away the suds. They had chosen an amber linen *tunica*, caught with gold clasps from shoulder to elbow. A long, fringed peplum fell from below the bust where it was tied with a wide black ribbon.

Neria caught her hair up in pins, encouraging tendrils down her temples, then kohled her eyes and dusted shadow on her cheeks. "There. Very nice." It was an understatement. "Maia, remember to stick to your story. I know you shouldn't have to, but she loves him so much. Please don't make it any harder for her. And never underestimate what she will do to you if she thinks you're a threat." She held Maia's hand and smiled. As she passed her the cloak, she said, "Here. Good luck."

Justicia waited like a queen, reclined on her couch, a tray of fruit at her fingertips. "You've outdone yourself, little one. Here, sit." She patted the couch by her curled feet. "Fruit?"

Maia picked a half pomegranate, rolling a pip free with her finger and placing it on her tongue. She looked down, watching her own fingers, unwilling to let her terror show.

"Tell me, what has happened in the days since I saw you? Enough to make you want to come back to Londinium? Tell me all."

Maia looked up in surprise. "Days? It seems like months. Years." A lifetime.

"No, only fourteen days. Not long to judge a new life."

"Long enough to realize what I've lost and how important it is." The truth would be her strongest ally; she had learned that lesson before.

"True." The priestess turned her vision in on a private pain, and asked, "When you ran off with Lucius, tell me what you had planned."

"I had nothing planned but to go to Cilo. Luc brought the message for me to buy a house here and wait. I couldn't. You were planning to leave; I would have been alone again. And he should have come to me. He owed me answers."

"I wanted to take the money and find my own way to him, but Luc wouldn't let me go alone. He loves Cilo too much." That was close to the truth, close enough, she hoped.

"Not as much as Cilo loves him, it seems. Not enough to stop this betrayal. He could have stayed with his men and marched you straight up this way to Viroconium."

For the second time in as many moments Maia flinched at her words. A small sad nod started, as she affirmed the realization she herself had had too late. But there was danger in that direction. She felt her balance shift and she stumbled back into her story. "No, he couldn't. He wanted to go to Glevum so we went west, through Calleva. There were men there, hired killers." She was uncertain how much to say, but Justicia cut her off.

"Lyvia. Did Cilo tell you he has been dodging her inept attacks since he came back? You two really are an inconvenience for her. She doesn't want either of you back."

"That's what Cilo said." She looked at her hands and rubbed at a small callus forming on her index finger. "But I wondered how they found Luc's father's house. How would Lyvia have known that?"

The priestess threw a sharp glare, tempered with surprise or admiration. "How indeed? Well, if it was someone else who sent them, perhaps they weren't intended to

kill you.” The glare turned to a knowing smile. “They were not so good, were they? They did not succeed.”

Then what? To harm or frighten her? To force Luc to kill? And if not Lyvia, then who? “No.” Maia agreed numbly. There was nothing Justicia didn’t already know. She had no reason to ask. Except, as Neria said, she couldn’t stand to hear the truth. It was the lies she wanted and needed to hear.

“When I got to Viroconium, Cilo told me what he’d planned. I was to be the discreet wife in Rome while he lived his lie for the benefit of hypocrites, who all knew the truth anyway. I was just a sacrifice. And then he wanted Luc dead, after all he’d done, all he’d been through.”

“He wanted Luc dead because Luc chose you, because you took him away. After all Cilo had done to keep him there, he ran off anyway. In the end, though, I find it hard to imagine Cilo actually doing such a thing. He would as soon cut his own heart out as harm Luc.” Justicia smiled, as if that would be a better solution, and enjoyed the frowns and confusion that skittered over Maia’s brow. “Cilo was even willing to bring me to Britannia; you cannot imagine how much pride that must have cost him. Do you understand me? He knew I could keep Luc calm, keep him sane, and keep him there.”

She felt the words like a physical blow, felt them jolt her closer to a precipice that sucked at her heart. But Justicia wasn’t finished.

“But you came along and everything your dear brother planned began to unravel. You took away his greatest love. Did he tell you that? Surely he gave you his speech about loves greater than life and death. If you are the only other important person in his life, he must have told you.”

Oh Cilo. She had betrayed him more profoundly than she could have guessed, and even so, he hadn’t told her the whole truth. “He said that was Manius.” Her voice trailed into a whisper.

“Yes, him. We all know him. We call him the Troll, he’s the inferior alternative, the substitute.” She smiled and selected another small piece of fruit. “He looks like a toad, but he does what he’s told. It is his only virtue. Did you meet him?”

Maia nodded and Justicia held up her hands as if she had been given all she would need to know if she’d seen his face. “Then you must have known *that* was a lie. He has finished his conscription. Cilo had no need to come back to Britannia for him. You must have seen that. And you surely can’t imagine it was Manius Cilo dreamed of taking with him to Rome!

“Manius would have been happy to carry out any warrant on Luc. I’m sure he imagines that he would be included in Cilo’s future that way. When he gets a chance, he will try.” She laughed as if at an old joke. As if either idea was foolishness.

Maia shook her head. There was no end to the secrets they had kept. There was no truth anywhere, just bottomless lies and liars. She had only to finish her story, now, and she could go back to the silence of her tent. “He already tried. At Mediolanum. That’s how Marc comes into it; he defended Luc. Now we’re here.”

“Yes, now you’re here. This was Marc’s idea?”

“And mine.” She paused and gathered the words she needed, the lies she had rehearsed. “Everything you said was true. You gave me the freedom of my own life in my homeland. You gave me everything you would have given your own daughter.” Her voice dropped into something like breathless despair. “And in the end,” she looked into the High Priestess’ eyes, held them with the quiet desperation of a child, “I don’t know how people can live like that. I need the comfort and security of this Roman life. I’m so sorry.

“I can’t accept Cilo’s compromises, I won’t. So it seems you were right again, I do

need a brother more than I need a husband, and I have come back here to tell you that.”

“So you have worked all this out yourself, even though I see there is still a lot about our little nest that no one has told you. You’ve come very late to the game.” She paused to drink a sip from a small bottle she held. “Tell me last of all, do you know why Luc followed you on your journey?”

Maia watched the firelight shine in the bottle. Of course she knew, she could quote his reasons word for word, they were written in the deepest part of her heart. “No,” she said softly.

“I thought not. Even if you think you do, you don’t. You just don’t know him well enough. He may not seem it to you, Maia, but Luc is young. His spirit isn’t suited to the fates that he has drawn, and very powerful people have surrounded him all his adult life. People like your brother, and me, who have demanded his allegiance.

“There is in you a child-like helplessness which attracts some men. It is what he thinks he needs, but Maia he is a child himself. He needs a strong partner. He is falling apart, as you can see. You are very wise to let him go.” She handed the fruit platter to Maia and swung her legs down to stand. “You found out the hard way that I was right about everything else. Trust me. I am right about this, too. I will let him sleep and let him regain his strength. You amuse yourself with Marcus. It’s a wise choice you’ve made. Now go.”

That night Maia ate when Neria insisted, accepting a bowl of stew, but she had no interest in the food. She was waiting, chafing through the hours of darkness until Marc finished his watch at sunrise.

When he walked in, she waited while he unslung his sword belts and cached his knives beside the bed. She waited while he swept Neria up, swinging her easily off her feet. When she spoke, her words were soft, but they stopped him short. “Marc, I need to see him.”

“You can’t.” He turned to look at her for the first time. “Gods, Maia. If he sees you looking like that, whatever deal he’s made will be off and we’ll all be in trouble.”

“I don’t care. Even Justicia said he’s sick. He needs me; I have to go to him. I promised.”

“He needs sleep, that’s all. He said to tell you this is only to Londinium. He doesn’t like it but it’s only four days.”

She took his arm, pulled at his attention. “But he isn’t sleeping. I can see that. Remember that he’s been on a horse for the last seven months. That alone is enough. It’s too long. Please Marc, you have to help me.”

“Don’t look at me. Damn it Maia, how do you do that?” He twisted his arm free and turned to flop back onto the bed.

Neria knelt beside him. “Tish does need a lot of medicine. It makes her sleep all day. Maybe while she’s sleeping...?”

“No! Don’t you start. He knows what he’s doing, just leave him to it.”

Neria leaned to peck his cheek. “Come on. I saved you some water that’s only a bit used, and I’ve got another vat heating. Maybe after you’ve had a bath and a shave you’ll feel like talking to him.”

As soon as Tish was settled in her *carpentum*, doped and ready to sleep through

the day's journey, Luc rolled to the sideboard and jumped down over the step. His horse was saddled, his blades slung over the cantle and his job clear in his head. He had no decisions to make, no responsibility, and the chance to ride watch in the cold light of morning helped clear some of the terrors from sleepless eyes.

The veterans who rode with him recognized the wounded contraction of his shoulders and the strict clench in his jaw. Knew it, and gave him space.

As Marc fell in alongside, Luc grinned at him and he felt his gut recoil. There was nothing rational in the eyes that glared from shadows as deep as despair. "When are you planning to sleep?" Marc asked. "I don't care, but Maia wants to know."

Luc's eyes were glazed, unfocused or searching over vast distances, his skin was ash and his lips drew a tight colourless line over his teeth. "In four days." He dipped his head, the slightest hint of affirmation. He held his right knee forward, resting his foot up on the point of the horse's shoulder rather than let the weight hang.

Marc moved to touch his arm, then changed his mind. There was too much tension coiled in the set of his shoulders, in the white knuckled grip on the reins. "Aye, that's what she thinks, too. Except she thinks it's too far away. She might be right."

"Tell her I'm fine." The strain in his voice turned raw. "Tell her I love her. Tell her to wait."

"I'll tell her, but she won't wait. She'll look at me and go all witchy. She wants to talk to you."

"No. There's too much at stake." His frown eased, then set again. "And if I talk to her, I won't be able to do this."

Even as he slipped the reins though a ring on the tailgate and jogged to step up onto the moving wagon, Marc carried Luc's answer like a mouthful of plague. At least the heavy curtains would hide her eyes. He could sleep the day away with his sweet little blonde and forget that Maia was sitting, staring at the curtain, anguish throbbing from her in the shadows.

As camp was called in the evening, Luc moved without conscious effort; the routine of making and breaking camp rested deep in his flesh. The camp was small, anything unnecessary remained stowed. While the hired men set tents, he took care of the teams, running rope lines and hobbling the beasts. Dragging their feed and hauling water took no more than muscle and they asked no questions.

When he knew Tish was ensconced in her tent for the night, he climbed into the cold darkness of her *carpentum* and closed his eyes. Her perfume lingered over every soft inch of the interior, carrying memories of better days.

Even now he didn't hate her. She was ruthlessly narcissistic, a control freak, and she had more money and power than was good for her. But there had been a time when those things had been intoxicating, mesmerizing.

And now she held the key to the only safe place in the Roman world.

But darkness and the past couldn't hide him from the memories of murder. The visions scraped at his mind, his soul was fraying into knots. More and more his dreams turned to Maia: the pale silky perfection of her skin bruised and mottled, stained by bloody hand prints that were not his.

Then, when he could stand no more of it, he climbed out, shambled back to the firelight of Justicia's tent, avoided conversation, avoided her eyes, and waited for the dawn.

Maia watched the sunrise, waiting. Marc would finish his night's watch and come to the tent, no longer joking about fees, no longer making any pretence. He would wait for Neria with tight anticipation, with the same sparkling intensity in his eyes she had known in Luc's. And Neria would come from Justicia's side, concerned and subdued.

Maia would wait. While they went out to eat, or to the bath tent, or rushed to the wagon to steal the hours between dawn and decamping, she would sit by the curtain and watch the quad, and wait.

Luc was still limping on his right knee, the pain echoed in his back and the set of his shoulders. His extremity hurt her to see, it racked her with the guilt of broken promises. He needed her, she knew that, and she had promised him she would always be there for him. She could ignore any danger, defy any threat; she would go to him regardless. But Luc himself said no. She had to wait.

When Maia climbed up into the wagon for the day's journey, Neria sat up. She had no smile; the darkness had stolen the sunlight from her face. "Maia, Tish wants to see you when we make camp tonight." Her voice carried the tears she hid. "She is very ill. Will you go and talk to her?"

"I don't see how I have any choice." More secrets, more lies, more poison darts.

"Did you eat tonight?"

"Yes," Maia lied. "I'm fine."

"Please try to sleep today. Everyone is so tense. It's like the whole camp is dying slowly. It's breaking my heart." In the time Maia had known her, Neria had never been anything but cheerful. She was constantly and consistently happy, and her sorrow was all the more heart wrenching for the change.

"I will." She leaned over Marc, across the cramped space, hugging her friend. "Before I do, tell me, is there anything else I don't know, any more of this story that everyone knows except me? I keep thinking there is nothing else they can take away, and they find a way to rip another piece out of my heart."

"No. I don't think so." Neria straightened her hair, pulled her robe on. "The last four years have revolved around this endless power struggle between Cilo and Tish, with Luc in the middle. I guess Tish just couldn't believe her luck when she met you. You would have been her endgame. Luc never told her about you, not about the wedding, not about how Cilo doted on you. Nothing."

"But I only met Luc at my wedding. Didn't Cilo ever speak to you about me?"

"Cilo never spoke to any of us. He hates women. He despises us all, except you, of course."

Maia frowned, shaking her head. "No he doesn't. Does he?" Cilo's mother had died when he was a little boy. Then her mother had come and gone, and his brother with her. Then Lyvia had come. "I've betrayed him, too," she said aloud. "Every woman he loves leaves him."

"You might not want to hear it, but it's hard to believe he ever loved anyone, any time. Except Luc. And you. He's like ice, Maia."

Maia felt her mouth tighten. "You don't know him. You don't know what we've been through. He's just walled up. I hid, but he lashed out. He's beautiful and loving and funny and brave and if you knew him like I do" She stopped the words. And he'd traded away her future and he'd ordered Luc killed.

If Marc could have added anything, he had decided on silence.

"I don't know; maybe you're right." Neria pulled pillows up around herself. "I know I'm scared of him. When you look at his eyes, it's like there's no one there. He's

one of the few men I've ever been really afraid to be anywhere near."

Neria lay back, and Maia sat at the curtain watching the sliver of bright reality. Waiting. "It'll be all right. It's only three days and we'll be back at the house in Londinium."

Maia watched Luc climb up into Justicia's *carpentum* as the rest of the guard gathered around the evening's new fire, looking for the meal that would come. When Marc left, she washed and dressed and Neria kohled her eyes and pinned her hair. Sleep deprivation and lack of food left her fogged and numb. She had no fear; there was no way to imagine how she could be hurt anymore. There was nothing more Justicia could take away.

In Justicia's tent she sat where she was told, focused on the twists and turns on Cilo's bracelet and tried to make sense of the words around her. Neria and a second girl hovered nearby fixing food, and the High Priestess moved deliberately to the couch beside Maia and took a seat.

"Maia." The sharp sound jolted Maia, made her jump, and she turned her face up, waiting. "I have something to give you. I promised this to Luc, but he can't have his name on property, so I'm giving it to you." Maia squeezed her heavy eyelids closed and made them open again, confused, trying to see clearly from which direction the blow would come. Tish placed a rolled parchment in her hand and she looked at it, uncomprehending.

"I am dying," she explained bluntly. "I had hoped I would improve, but that is not going to happen. I had also hoped, if he would not release me from this curse, that Lucius would end my life for me. It would have been a small thing, a very small thing, to use your life to compel his assistance. But in the end it is harder for me to die than it seemed.

"So, all I have asked of Luc is to stay with me until we get to Londinium. The estates to which you hold the titles are his payment. He will be safe there."

There was no answer she could make, nothing to say.

"I had also hoped that he would remember better times and we could find some of the happiness we used to share. Unfortunately, that hasn't happened, either, because you are in the way."

Maia's shrug was involuntary. She met Justicia's glare and remained silent.

"I want him to know that I will not harm you now, or send you to the men at the fort, or offer you to the highest bidder." The reassurance hissed between them like a threat. "I want you to tell him that. I want you to tell him to relax, to sleep and eat more. I want you to remind him it is a very few days to give up. For this." She touched the rolled parchment. "I want you to convince him he should keep this one small bargain with me. Will you do that?"

Maia felt the spectre of hysterical laughter dance across her chest, felt her mouth twitching to smile. She bit her lip, shaking her head. "No."

Justicia pressed her case. "I don't think you understand the value of the property you're holding."

Maia tried to push the document away. "What makes you believe I'm in any position to make a deal that costs him so dearly, or that I would want to?" Her lip trembled and her hands shook, but her voice was steady.

There were tears in the priestess' dark eyes, her long fingers curled in frustration. "Because I love him, and I would give him this and more, but it's you he calls for in his

sleep.”

“Don’t you try to tell me you love him.” Maia gagged on revulsion at the thought. “You and Cilo are the same; you want to own him, and you’re just going to keep taking until he breaks. Neither of you will ever give him what he needs, only what you can spare. And don’t lie about hating slavery when you think you can buy people with threats and cruelty and,” she threw down the scroll, “bits of parchment.”

“Maia, you must see reason here. People are bought and sold every day for the choices they make. And when you love someone there is no cost too high, you should know that.” With hands that shook uncontrollably, she lifted her bottle of bitter medicine to her lips and swallowed. “You’ve thrown away a life of luxury, Rome, comfort, to come here and beg for a safe hole to hide in. Luc knows that. He made this bargain for your sake. You will make his choices worthless.”

Maia stood. “And that is the only reason I have kept my word to him. Even when it’s killing me, I’ve waited. I have to trust him.” Desperation pummelled her chest to the rhythm of her heart and her voice was rising. “But you are making his life worthless.”

Neria took her arm, bustled a cape over her shoulders and steered her to the opening, whispering, “That’s enough. No more. Come away, come on.”

Luc woke in cold sweats, rolled around a knot of pain. The air was too thick to breathe, too dark, he was drowning in blood. He sat up in the cold emptiness of the *carpentum*, rigor shaking the strength out of his arms and rattling his teeth. He took a breath, two, pulled a blanket up around his shoulders and peered out through the gap in the curtain.

There was no doubt in his mind; even cowed, he knew her. He whistled, a soft sound, barely audible, but she turned. Aching with weakness and loss, he kissed his fingertips and held them out to her.

Maia froze. Every part of her yearned towards him. Sobs stabbed from her throat, fire spread over her skin. Luc. Her chest closed in on itself, crushing her heart and her lungs. Hazy lights staggered across her vision and she stumbled, took a step away, and another.

“Come on Sweetie.” Neria caught her, ushered her to her own fire warmed tent, held her as she crumbled down into the bed, and let her sob until she could cry no more and she slept.

Luc sat back on Justicia’s couch, rubbing absently at the rough suede over his thighs and staring at the fire. Exhaustion weighed heavily on his eyes, but when he closed them fire and smoke, blood and screaming filled his head and forced them open again. A frown throbbed against his skull and he moved his jaw, trying to ease the cramps.

Tish sat beside him, perched awkwardly, painfully. “Darling, you need to eat.” She handed him a mug of warm honeyed wine and winced as he drank it down in one draught. She touched his cheek, tried to smear away the pallor. His eyes were red rimmed and bruised.

“I’m not hungry, I’m tired.” The alcohol weakened his hold on the images in his head. It washed through the fog, swirling down into the vortex in his gut, spinning the blackness there into hot nausea.

“Let me give you some of my medicine. It stops the pain and helps you sleep.”

“I don’t want it. I won’t be able to wake up when I need to breathe.”

She took his hand in hers, watching it, unable to show him her terror. She needed

him whole. She needed to lie in his arms and draw from his strength. She needed him and he was falling to pieces in her hands. Nothing she did could reach him. "What can I do, Luc? I don't know any more how to help you."

He looked at her, his eyes glittering with fever and a pitiful sadness. "I can't do this, Tish. I wish I could, but I can't live your dream." He returned the grip on her fingers; he pulled her hand closer and tried to focus clearly. "If I could do something that would make your pain less, I would, but I have nothing to give you."

"Just remember, Luc. Remember what we had. Do that for me. Love me."

He laughed, choking on the absurdity. "If I did that, I'd have to walk out the door now. I don't know what it is you think you remember, but it had nothing to do with love. Manipulation, obsession maybe, but never love."

Her voice strained, slipped into breathlessness. "You don't mean that. You couldn't." She stood, and moved to distance herself from his assertion. "I spoke to Maia this evening, did I tell you?" She saw her words hit home, saw his eyes flare and darken. There was an urgent sickening need to see her own pain reflected in his face. "It seems there is a lot she doesn't know about our history."

He nodded, his mouth twisting into pale shades of murder. "What did you find to tell her?" He swung his feet to the ground, faced her squarely.

"Not a lot. Enough to convince her she was wise to leave you with me. She has agreed to that." She was shaking. She no longer had the physical strength to do this.

"Come on Tish. This is not like you. Don't draw a knife if you're not going to use it." His face set somewhere between a sneer and a smile. "Twist it. What did she agree to?"

Rigid silence grew between them, leeching its strength from her frail form and he smashed it with a bitter laugh. "This is desperation, now. Is there no answer, or are you just afraid to give it? Will you tell me she's happy to stay with my brother? I won't believe you. Will you tell me she's happy for me to stay here with you?"

"Yes." She mustered what strength she had. "She will wait, as I have asked. She will trust my choice in these things."

He laughed again. "She'd trust you as far as I do. This is not getting any better for you. Try telling me exactly what she said."

"I told her that I loved you, that I would care for you. And she said she would accept the choice you made to stay." She tried to walk away, turned her back on him. "I asked her to tell you I had guaranteed her safety."

When she turned to face him he was smiling. "You picked the wrong blade, Tish. I already know what her answer would have been. And if I was wrong, you would have told me her exact words."

"Do you love her Luc?" She stepped closer, feeling tears rising, knowing the absolute truth of his answer without needing to hear it.

"How am I supposed to answer that?" His face was stone, pain its only colour.

"You should answer 'no'. You promised me."

"I can't. And I didn't. I promised you I would stay because I had no other choice. You know that as well as I do."

She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "I need you Luc. It is such a short time." Tears dropped from her chin. "How can you be so cruel?"

"I learned from the best."

Stepping closer, standing between his knees, she took his face in her hands, closed her eyes and rested her forehead on his. "In all things, my darling. Remember that at least." She was still for a long moment as fat tears squeezed between her closed lids, then she drew a deep breath, kissed his face and stepped back. "I will tell you what she

said, will I? She said she would not make bargains when it was you who would have to pay. She said she would trust your choices if it killed her. And she said if I loved you, I would give you what you need and not only what I can spare.”

He made no answer. The rage had fallen from his face, dark trembling sorrow radiated from him like heat.

Her voice, when she forced the words out, was flat, broken. “If you go to her, will you come back?”

He stood then, shaking, and folded her gently in his arms, breathing over relief and intense physical weakness. “Thank you,” he said, and kissed her brow.

His fist drew back to measure the distance to the chin of the guard who blocked his path, and Justicia moved behind him to nod her silent permission.

From the curtain of the bath tent where she watched, Neria drew a frightened breath as she struggled to pull on a *tunica* and slip into her cape. “Justicia,” she whispered. “Oh no.”

She ran into Justicia’s tent, instinctively reaching to hold and support the priestess. “Oh Tish. What happened? Are you all right?” Carefully she steered her to the couch and helped her to sit.

Justicia’s face was blank, numb with hopelessness and grief. “I need him. I need him. But I can’t help him, Neria he’s sick.”

“Yes. I know.”

“I can’t reach him. He said he never loved me.” Fresh tears rolled down her smooth cheek.

“You know that’s not true. He’s exhausted. He’s tired and angry and frustrated. You know that. And he’s stuck where he always is, torn between people he loves.” She handed Tish the bottle of opium.

“He’s not torn.” She took one swallow, then another. “This is not as it was.” She wiped long fingers across her cheek, careful not to smudge her makeup, and sighed as fresh tears rolled down. “I knew she was special. She would be a match for me if she only realized it, and I would have given her everything. Like my own daughter. Instead she took the only thing I wanted for myself.”

“I know. But you’ve done the right thing, now. You’ll see. He does love you. And now you’ve shown him how much you care, he will remember that, and he will come back to you.” She held the woman who had been her only mother. “Of his own free will, too, not because you, or Cilo, or the gods force him to. I know he will.”

“That remains to be seen, my dear. I wish I had your confidence. You’ve seen how she uses that look she has. He will believe her, and she will tell him whatever best suits her purpose.”

“I’m not sure she does. I’m not sure she even realizes she could.”

“Then she is a fool after all. She trusts too freely. If she cannot learn to lie she will be eaten alive. And he will find someone who can, someone who will tell him what he wants to hear.”

“Give them time. When this is all settled you can teach her, just as you wanted to, and he will still be there with you in the end.”

“Time. Time is what I do not have.” She covered her face again and took a deep breath. “Luc himself has seen to that.” She drank again from the small bottle.

There was no way to make it all sound better than it was, and Neria held her and tried to rub some warmth into frail shoulders. “It’s almost morning, you should settle to sleep in the *carra*. Can I help you?”

As they stood, a scarlet alarm spread across the couch. The blood was bright with death, soaking the cloth of the seat, running to drip down onto the rich carpet below.

Neria's eyes filled with tears. "Tish, it's bleeding again."
"I know. It's his anger, his hatred."
"No. No it isn't. You have to lie down. I have to try to find a way to stop this."
"You can't stop it. He said he didn't love me. This is his proof. Nothing will stop it now he has gone."

Maia sat on the edge of the pallet, drawn up around her knees, her arms locked, holding herself together. Resting on her chin, she stared endlessly at the brazier, watching the branches burn and blacken, bleed into red and gold coals, and fall away.

When the tentflap opened, she made no move to turn. She had nothing to say to anyone. She closed her eyes. Her heartbeat was a dull, despondent thud.

Silence clamoured at her ears and she waited for speech or movement to crack the stillness, but there was only the burn of watching eyes and their heat rising in her blood. She blinked at the fire, feeling her pulse prime, but not daring to look.

Tremors woke in her gut, dared her to breathe, to taste the air. She was afraid to turn, terrified her senses had betrayed her. Her neck was stiff, grating over splintered glass as she moved.

When she looked up, he smiled and held out a hand.

Luc felt life catch in his chest. The world and all it contained was worthless beside the vision before him. If it all stopped then, he had reward enough if she would take his hand.

Carefully she stood, pressed the fabric of her dress down her thighs, willed her quaking knees to take the step, two steps to where he waited. She swallowed tears, made herself breath in and out, searched his face and found only her own reflection in his eyes.

Her arm was heavy, tight and stiff as she reached to take his hand. With the flash of contact came a relief that staggered against her. It washed over her like a wave of blood-warm comfort, clinging to her skin, filling her with joy.

He stepped back, inviting her to follow, silent and breathless.

There was dawn enough to wash away the stars and bite the air, but not enough to light the camp beyond the reach of the fire. Her eyes never left his, her fingers trembled in his grasp as he led her out to where Neria's *carpentum* stood, hidden in the ebb of night.

She burned to run against him, to let her lips rush over his skin, but she held back, intuitively aware of the tension his stance, the pressure building in his bare chest and shoulders. He lifted her easily over the sideboard and she wriggled back inside, making room.

When he climbed painfully in beside her, rigor rose from his knees, shaking his whole frame so she could hear its brutal tension in the darkness. She knelt, desperately unsure what to do, only knowing she shouldn't speak.

With meticulous care, he reached to undo the tie of her *tunica*, then lifted the fabric as she raised her arms, solemnly unwrapping his goddess. He didn't need light to know there were no marks on her body, or fingerprints on her skin. Slowly, gently he leaned forward, rested his forehead on her shoulder, wrapped his arms around her so he could hold her tight, press her flesh into his own, and silently he wept.

Maia folded her arms over his shoulders, rested her cheek on his hair and let his pain run down her skin.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN.

Maia touched his shoulder, kissed his cheek and whispered close against his ear, "Wake up. They've restocked the supplies. I brought you some hot food."

"Hot food?" he mumbled. "How long have I been asleep?"

"I think it's around midnight, so eighteen hours more or less."

He groaned and pushed himself into a sit, rubbing his face, his eyes, and back roughly through his hair. "I need some clothes."

"They're behind you," Maia said, handing him stew and bread to sop. "And there's wine here." She moved to sit beside him. "You don't need to go anywhere. Just stay here and sleep and eat."

"I intend to. Where are the other two?"

"Neria is still with Justicia. Marc will be still on watch, he stays out all night and sleeps all day, but I don't know where she put him today."

As if on cue, a slap on the sideboard answered for them. "Luc?"

"No. Go away."

Marc stepped up and turned, sitting half in, half out, so the distant fire just touched his face. "We've got company."

Luc swore around his food, hunched like his back had broken, and swallowed wine.

"The guard picked up a rider on the high-side flank today, just holding us in sight, tailing at a good distance. I rode out wide tonight. They're at camp back about half a mile."

"Anyone we know?"

The darkness couldn't cover the grin in his answer. "Looks like a family reunion over there."

Maia moaned, appalled at sudden implications; sick with what that meant and what it would mean.

Luc said no more, just ate silently, waiting for the details.

"Tomorrow night we're home safe, and they're not showing any signs of being ready to break camp for a dawn raid, so tonight's out." In the unreliable light, Maia caught glimpses of the edgy strain in Marc's face and she looked away.

Luc handed her his plate and kissed her. He emptied his mug and reached in the darkness for his tunic. As he dressed, Marc continued, "There's only five of them, maybe that's why they're holding back; waiting until we get all the way back to the city."

"Who?"

"Cilo and the Troll, Antony, Edan and Tav." To Maia he said, "Our brothers. It doesn't get any more family than that."

Luc paused in lacing his boots and asked, "Why? Why them? What's he telling me? He might be waiting to get to Londinium. There's an entire garrison there he can call on for support. Or he could ride into Londinium and have us both charged with desertion. He can keep his hands clean." He turned back to his boots. "Or he might be waiting for us to come to him." Under the weight of shadows, he pulled Maia into his embrace, resting his eyes onto her hair.

"He'll get his wish, then," Marc said. "Justicia's commander wants us and he's the boss here. I'm guessing he's going to send us back."

To Maia, Luc said, "Any idea what he wants? You talked to him last."

Every sense in her body warred with the simple knowledge she could not beg him to stay. For a few short hours she had held him again: felt the warmth of his skin, breathed the healing smell of him into her soul, lay in his arms and listened to the sacred beat of his heart. It was too soon for the world to take him again, and to danger when he needed peace.

She wanted to throw herself at his feet, show him her terror and plead for him to hide there with her. Let someone else deal with the threat. She knew she couldn't do it and she knew he wouldn't stay.

Struggling to think clearly, Maia pressed her thumbs against her eyelids, searching her memory for any word Cilo might have given that would answer. "I thought he'd agreed to let us go. He wanted me to stay, and to tell you to go. Then he changed his mind, offered us both protection if you stayed as well.

"In the end, I told him he had the power to change things. He could give you a discharge and I would wait for him. But he walked away. I thought he'd given in. Manius surprised me. Could that have been his idea, not Cilo's?"

Luc laughed. "What do you think Marcus? Does he hate me enough to challenge Cilo's authority? I wonder if he really feels that secure."

Marc shook his head. "Does it matter? They're both here now, and if he did defy Cilo once, you can be damn sure he won't dare do it again. Tavish will do whatever Edan does." He smiled at Maia. "Twins; Ma split one brain between them. Antony will always side with you. At best that gives us five to his two, at worst it's three of us to his four. I'm game."

Maia clutched a pillow in her fist, wanting to hurl it at his bluster. "Whatever else he wants tonight, I can tell you what he always wants: control. Every time you confront him you push the stakes higher. He isn't ever going to back down. Apart from that, he wants me and he wants Luc."

"Or revenge," Luc added.

She winced at the words and turned her face into the darkest corner, but she could not deny it. "Will you both at least consider the possibility that he might not be here to kill you? Luc you asked me how I managed to get him to give me food and money and let us go. I got him to that place by giving him all the power. And I gave him a way to win. If you know him at all, if you love him at all, you have to know I'm right."

"Are you still so sure you know him? How many times have you seen him kill?" There was an edge to Luc's voice, an accusation, and she turned to kneel so her face was close to his.

"Are you? How many times have you seen him unsure of himself? What about you, Marc? When did you last see him back down? It never happens, does it? And it shocked Edan enough to shut him up. It kept his knives out of your backs, didn't it?"

Marc tried to answer. "That's you. I wouldn't want to try to face Cilo down. Or Edan for that matter, not unless I had a handful of something sharp."

"Right, that's me. And that's why I'm coming with you."

"No." Luc didn't raise his voice, but the expectation of obedience was plain.

"I am. And I have to go and get ready." She leaned forward and kissed him quickly, then moved to the open curtain and jumped down past Marc.

"Maia, no." Luc swore, struggling to reach the opening. "Stop."

She waited, holding just enough moonlight in her eyes to catch his breath. As he stood in front of her, she said, "Luc, what choice do I have? If you leave here, and I'm going to guess you'll go now rather than wait until morning, then you will argue with him and one or both of you will end up dead. I love you, but I love him too, and I don't

want either of you hurt.”

“I won’t let you come, Maia.” He put his hands onto her shoulders. “I can’t keep you safe there.”

The small knot of anger that twisted in her gut began to fray and snag. “Now you sound like him. ‘I’ll do your thinking for you, Maia.’ ‘I’ll keep you safe.’ ‘I’ll take away everything you love and leave you with nothing.’ Congratulations Luc, I’m back where I started.”

Marc side-stepped past them, his open palms held up. “I told you. Dad told you. Ma told you.”

“Shut up, you’re not helping,” Luc spat.

He shook his head and kept walking. “The commander is at the fire. He’s waiting.” Then he stopped for a moment looking at his feet and turned back to Maia. “Tell Neria I said goodbye.”

The churning sickness in Maia’s gut began to spread and turn into horror. She forced a smile. “I’ll go get her.” She turned away from Luc and started walking in search of Neria.

Luc held her arm. “What about trusting my judgment? Don’t do this. It’s too dangerous. I haven’t tried to stop you doing anything you wanted to do before, but this time it is just too dangerous. Please. If he’s angry enough to have come all this way, he could do anything. That includes hurting you. And the Troll might do that just for the fun of it.” That at least stopped her.

Turning back to him she lifted his hand from her arm and held it. “He will never hurt me, Luc. Not ever.

“Aren’t you done with killing? Why do you think he chose to bring your brothers as escorts? If you survive this, are you going to come home with my brother’s blood or your own brothers’ blood on your hands?”

She held his hand up in front of his face, then brought it back down so she could kiss his palm. “And if you don’t survive? What am I going to do then? Go off to Rome with Cilo? Join the girls here and fulfil all Justicia’s highest spiritual ideals? What Luc?”

His chest locked around a breath, holding the tight hot air inside where it couldn’t escape on words.

Maia glared at his silence for long moments, then let the tension drop out of her shoulders, stepped over to him and wrapped her arms around him. “If you go alone, there will be a fight. If I come too, maybe he’ll listen. If you can talk to him, maybe you can make him see your side of this. Isn’t it worth a try?”

With his arms over her shoulders, he forced air in and out. “Nothing is worth this risk.” When he could unclench his teeth he conceded. “You promise me you will stay behind me and you will do anything I say, without question.”

“I can’t promise that. I don’t know how he’s going to react. If he thinks I’m standing against him, it might make him worse.” She stood back and looked squarely at him.

Luc was no less tense when he hissed, “Do you think I don’t know that?”

He turned away and Maia swallowed sudden uncertainty. She had never seen him so angry, certainly never with her. “Luc.”

The word stopped him but he didn’t turn back and she stepped quickly up to him. “If I’m wrong, tell me how. I’m listening.”

“No, you’re not listening.” He let the hard air leak out, stretched the cramp out of his neck. “But I said I’d take you where ever you wanted to go, even if it meant dying for you. Looks like you’re going to hold me to that.”

When he started walking again, he crossed from shadow into the sphere of firelight and the men assembled there turned to look. Maia froze. Trembling gripped her legs, fed on her fatigue, turned into desperate fear, and she stumbled back into the darkness. In deep and silent shadows she tripped, sat heavily onto the ground and pulled her knees up tight against her chest.

The fire was too far away for her to hear the conversation, but she watched the men speaking. Whatever they were saying, it was not as cut and dried as sending Luc and Marc out alone to face Cilo's group. More than one of them seemed to be armed and when they finally moved away from the fire to prepare the horses, she stood and followed the commander into Justicia's tent.

The three girls were cowed, arranged around Justicia's bed listening to the report and receiving instructions. She looked like a corpse. Her dark eyes were barely open, sunken and bruised. She was ghostly, her dry lips pulled back in a grimace of pain or indifference.

The commander stood in the bare space, no less formidable than the first time Maia had seen him. "Your guests are riding back to deal with the men who are following. If their intention in following is to capture or kill either or both of them, an attack will be unnecessary and these vehicles will be safe. It may have been your intention to provide safety for your guests; it is mine to deliver you ladies safely back to Londinium. I will not have this caravan left as a sitting target."

Maia stepped back from the tent opening, motioning for Neria to come. The sickness and horror she felt became vermin spreading over her skin, crawling with hooked feet and sharp teeth and gnawing into her chest.

When Neria emerged she took her hand, mastering her fear, forcing her voice to work. "Marc wants to see you, to say goodbye."

"He won't say goodbye, there's no need. He'll come back." She sounded confident in the bare firelight, but Maia felt the tremble in her fingers.

"They're being sacrificed."

"No." There was a small smile in Neria's words. "They've been doing this for ten years. More. And there isn't a mark on them. They're good at it, Sweetie. You and I mightn't like it, or understand it, but it's what they do and they do it well."

In the *carra* as they waited for goodbyes, Neria said, "One of them has to carry Tish to her *carpentum*, she can't walk. Do you think Luc would do that?"

There was no compassion in Maia's voice, just cold dismissal. "Ask him."

"Don't judge her too harshly; think back over what she's given you."

"I don't want to think about her at all." The subject was irritating, crowding in on nerves that strained to hear Luc's return.

"I don't think she will make it back to the house. I think Luc should see her before he goes."

Maia snapped, "I don't care. Why are you asking me? If you think it is so important, just ask him."

Neria took her hand. Even in the darkness, her eyes seemed to shine. "Because it should come from you. He shouldn't feel like he has to choose. Give him your permission to say goodbye."

Maia drew her hand back. "He doesn't have to choose. The choice is made."

"Yes. Good girl." Neria hugged her. "I knew you'd understand."

She didn't understand. She was annoyed. Irritation flushed her cheeks and she pushed back out of the embrace. "I'm going outside to wait."

In the shadows beyond the firelight, Maia paced a small circle, staring at the pale disc of her palm as she rubbed her thumb across it. Icy splinters of sweat prickled like

pins and needles, but there was no stain, nothing to rub away but fear.

When footsteps approached she stepped out of the shadows, pointing Marc to the wagon. Luc lifted her, burying his face in her hair and she wrapped her legs around his hips, her arms around his neck. When they kissed it was with all the tenderness of past pain and unshed tears. There was no urgency and no goodbye, only the promise of forever in the soft caress of his lips, the touch of his tongue on hers.

If there was any way to keep this moment, Maia took it. She refused the fear and the hysterical pleading that rioted inside, concentrating instead on his mouth. She committed to memory the glow of every place their bodies touched, his taste, the unfamiliar smoothness of his chin on hers.

When she finally straightened her legs to stand, her arms were less inclined to let go.

“Have you changed your mind?” he asked.

“No. I still want to come.” He cocked his head to one side and looked away, and she added, “But I do trust your judgment. I’ll stay. If that’s what you want, I’ll wait. You’re not relying on surprising him, are you?”

He shook his head. “I’m not relying on anything. I’m trying to cover every possibility, even those I haven’t thought of yet. Your brother scares me, Maia. I’ve always been on his side before, the side that wins.”

“No more good-byes after this, okay,” she said. “I’ve had enough of them.” She rested her head onto his chest, listened to his heart and closed her eyes. “Justicia is too ill to walk.” The words were small and she tried to make them stronger. “She’s dying. Will you go and take her to her wagon before you go?”

He was silent, but the beat of his heart didn’t change. It didn’t rush, nor did it slow with heavy dread. He stood, arms crossed over her shoulders, his lips pressed onto her hair. When he did move, it was to take her face in his hands and kiss her lightly. He took her hand and turned to limp back across the fire lit quad.

At the opening to Justicia’s tent he stopped suddenly, turned away and walked back to the fire. He stood for long moments, slouched on one leg, hands on hips, staring at the fire. Maia waited by the door, looking at the sight that had stopped him.

Justicia hardly looked like herself. The last few hours had cut the flesh from her face. There was no grace, no fire, no razor wit. It was as if her essential nature had already discarded this form and moved on to distant luxuries. Not wanting to intrude more than necessary, Maia whispered to the girls beside her, “Is she ready to move to the *carpentum*?”

“Luc?” Her voice came from somewhere strong, unfettered by the agonies of death and decay.

“Aye.” He answered from the doorway. His frown clenched over pain and his eyes were dark, but his voice was gentle.

“You came back?” She opened her eyes, finding him through the mists of morphia and held out her hand to him. The girls wrapped the furs close around her to keep the night from her skin, and he knelt beside her. She struggled to sit and he put an arm around her shoulders supporting her against his chest.

When she spoke again, Maia took a few quiet steps backward. Justicia leaned into his shoulder, sobbing, speaking with a sense of desperate urgency, with heartbreaking pleading in her voice. He responded in a whisper. Taking her under the knees he lifted her easily and carried her out into the night. The girls followed, anxious to make her comfortable, and Maia covered her face and drew long hard breaths.

Left alone in the cold darkness of their *carra*, Maia stared blindly at the place where Neria lay, letting the silence hang around her like a shroud. A million fears begged utterance and there were no words for any of them. Madness or hysteria danced around in the possibilities; her only avenue to calm was hope: hope without question.

“We should go over to Justicia’s *carpentum*.”

Even Neria’s hushed words jabbed like shouts. She felt somehow disjointed, separate even from her own weak flesh, and finding the volition to answer took concentration. “Yes,” was all she could manage.

“Will you be all right in with Tish? It’s possible that we won’t be able to get out again until we get to Londinium.”

Maia went rigid with a sudden realization. “What about the boys? When will we find out what happened?”

“When they catch up; when it’s all done.” Neria crawled through the darkness to sit beside her and put an arm around her.

Maia felt the threat of time stretching out before them like torture. The utter darkness left her feeling suspended in uncertainty. She had to challenge the silence, had to find words that would fill the space and time. “Luc said his good-byes, I think. I couldn’t understand the words.”

“Thank you. I’m not sure you can know how precious that gift was. Justicia would thank you too, if she could.” She squeezed tighter on Maia’s shoulders. “I think she’ll be dead in a few hours, she’s bleeding. So much blood.”

“What will you do? What will happen to all her girls?”

There were free tears when Neria tried to answer, her voice clogged and nasal. “I don’t know what her will says. She will have made plans, she always has a plan, and she’s known this was coming for a long time. The Hispanic estates are yours, I think, if you want them. What you do with them is up to you.”

“They’re Luc’s, not mine.” Maia shied away from responsibility. “But what about you?”

This time Neria sobbed hard into her hands, sniffing and heaving over her grief. Her words were garbled and Maia listened intently, trying to understand.

“I want to ask Marc if I can stay with him. I have nowhere else to go. Even if she keeps the temple open, I don’t want to stay. If there’s money for me, it will never be enough, not if I can’t work. And I can’t. I’m pregnant again.”

Maia struggled to keep up with the sudden rush of words and their implications. “Have you told him?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I thanked the Goddess for bringing him to me, I begged her to let him stay. But in the end, I’ve been a whore since I was a girl; I’ve been with most of the men he knows. I can’t expect him to want to stay with me. Or to keep a stranger’s child.” Her voice whined with hopelessness, and she punched weakly at her own thigh in frustration. “And he’ll be running from the Roman army. There’ll never be anywhere safe for him, especially if he has to keep me as well. But I have nowhere else I can go.”

Maia groaned, pulling her friend’s head down onto her shoulder while she sobbed. “Don’t cry yet. Maybe he won’t care. And if I can find a safe place, you can stay there, too. Surely we deserve a little bit of happiness.”

Neria wiped her face on the sheet under them, and blew her nose hard. Her hands were trembling and her tears kept falling as she said, “That’s how the gods keep us on our knees and in their shadows, isn’t it? We all believe we don’t deserve to be happy.”

It was true, whether Luc believed in the gods or not. “Well, if the Goddess brought

him to you, we'd better hope she brings him back again." Let one of the gods, any one of them, keep them all safe.

Patient, still, silent; they waited for the darkness to cede. Almost without transition, the grass around them changed from ink to charcoal and the silhouette of the treetops firmed against the heavens. Luc read the sky, then nodded forward and kicked the horse into slow progress down the hill.

As they neared the fire, a low whistle sounded from the tree line, and Antony walked into the campsite from his watch on the far side, throwing an armload of twigs and branches into the fire.

The forms around the fire moved without any sense of urgency as the light came up in their midst. Luc pulled up just outside the circle of light, silent, waiting. Cilo remained on his back by the fire, his knees bent and his hands folded over his chest like he was hoping to catch another few minutes of sleep before their visit forced him to rouse. He was dressed in black again, dull black that drank the firelight; only the stark white of his tunic gleamed in contrast, between his armour and his olive skin.

The other two men sat up slowly, rubbing the sleep from their faces and the chill from their skin.

"Our tribune looks relaxed for someone who slept in armour, doesn't he?" Luc whispered to Marc. "But where's his monkey?"

Luc moved forward until only Cilo was between him and the fire, his three brothers across the far side and Marc behind him. "Where's your troll, Cilo?"

"Don't be uncharitable." He started to sit up, looked around and paused just long enough to register surprise. He stood easily, his actions and reflexes as sharp as they had always been. "Get down, you don't look comfortable there."

"No." Luc's grin was as cold and sharp as the word. "Not until you tell me where he is."

Cilo turned away with a shade of doubt in his eyes. Something unexpected had made him uneasy, a possibility he hadn't considered. "He's gone to visit your whore."

"He'll get a warm welcome, there." Luc's voice stayed level as he flashed a quick glance at Marc and scanned Cilo's face for any sign of a lie.

"Yes." Cilo looked up. "He should take some friends with him. Where's Maia, Luc?"

"Not too far away. Were you expecting me to bring her?"

He nodded, scanning the darkness outside the firelight as if he might catch a glimpse of her there. "Yes, I was. Look around you. These boys aren't armed. We've been waiting for you." He looked up, his lips tight with concern. "Get down. Come and talk to me. This whole thing is for your benefit."

Luc looked over the fire at his brothers. The twins set water to boil and rolled up bedding. Antony had his back to them as he changed damp clothes for dry. Ink painted jagged triangles over his upper back and out onto his shoulders. He was leaner than Luc and Marc, his hair short but darker. They were all completely relaxed.

Marc stayed mounted, tense and quiet. Luc slipped down and moved to stand in front of Cilo, deliberately turning his back as he reached to hand the reins back to Marc.

"She's safe down here, you know. I made sure of that and you can see it. Go get her."

"No. You want to talk to me. Talk."

Cilo started to laugh quietly, as if he'd called this bluff before and shook his head.

"This is why you always win, my friend. You give nothing away." He walked over to his pack and pulled out a rolled parchment. The red seal of official Imperial Army documents glowed in the firelight. "I brought this for you. I want to discuss Maia's deal."

Luc spoke quietly, recognizing the scroll without needing to examine it. "Why now?"

"Sit down, there's plenty of time. If you're here to talk, let's talk." He was smiling, purring like Justicia.

"Why now?" Luc repeated. "Why here? Why like this?"

Cilo's eyes darkened and his frown deepened, but the smile stayed fixed. "I couldn't make her see sense, not while she was worried about you, but I knew you would listen. I know you won't keep running with her. It's too dangerous for her out there. You know that. You can't expect her to live like this."

"You've got your discharge, let's go." Marc's words flashed across the fire like a thrown blade.

Luc ignored him. "What's the catch, Cilo? This is too easy." Taking the offered document, Luc handed it up to Marc without looking at it.

Cilo stepped forward, crowding him back towards the shadows and Luc stood his ground, so they came together chest to chest, face to face.

"Step back, Cilo." Luc's voice stayed steady, almost polite. "Answer the question. I'm staying right here, step back."

Cilo made no move to retreat. "She's my wife. She belongs here with me, and I know she would have come if she had the chance. She's here somewhere, isn't she?"

The horses stamped nervously and jostled at the agitation beside them, but neither man gave ground. Luc said, "She's made her choice. She's where she wants to be. Find another wife."

"Check with her on that point. She made a promise to me. You've got your discharge." He looked past Luc into the shadows. In the chill of dawn, sweat stood in tiny jewels along his hairline and damped the dark stubble on his lip. "And she comes with me now."

Marc scanned the darkness again. "This doesn't feel right Luc. Time to go."

This time Luc nodded. "You're sweating. And I'm not playing this game with you anymore. She hasn't made any deal with you that means staying here. Now, I've got what I want and I'm going back to the camp."

"You have to play. The stakes are too high. And I won't leave here without her." Cilo took two clear steps backwards with his open hands held out, but the tension in his arms was fear, not anticipation of a fight. "I'll ask you again. Where is she? I don't believe she didn't want to come here, tonight. She would have come to talk to me. She promised."

Marc sat with drawn knives in both hands, scanning the shadows but finding no clear target.

Luc lifted the broad sword over his shoulder instinctively, laying the flat blade on Cilo's shoulder. Its sharp edge drew a line at his throat, mimicking the cold smile above. Turning against the shove of the horses, Luc searched for the threat in the grey dawn and moving shadows of the fire. None of the other men reacted. They truly were unarmed or under strict orders not to interfere.

"It doesn't have to be like this, Luc. You can leave now with your discharge. But Maia is staying with us. She's safe here. You must have let her come. Let her speak; she'll tell you herself that she made me this promise."

Edan ignored Luc, moving to stand like a rock behind Cilo, his arms folded across

his broad chest. He was unarmed, apparently not a threat, but he left his loyalties in no doubt.

Manius emerged suddenly at the edge of the light, smiling. He rubbed his hands together, rolling sweat and leather grease from his palms. Horse sweat was drying down his calves. All eyes went to him.

Marc was right, this was all wrong. Manius had been riding hard, but not for some time. His breath was even, there was no flush of exertion in his cheeks. He'd been waiting, watching or stalling while they considered Cilo's offer. His bait. But despite his grin, something had gone terribly wrong.

The brown skin of Cilo's cheek paled and set like permafrost, his smile instantly gone. Only his eyes escaped the cold.

They burned.

Luc watched the change, looked at Manius' smile and back to Cilo. He pushed the edge of his sword a little closer to blood and spoke with quiet clarity. "Where's he been, Cilo?"

The tribune's throat bulged against the blade, fury rising to cord the muscles of his neck, pushing forward against the razor edge. "What are you doing back here?"

When Manius spoke, he was still grinning. "Luc you'd better move. I planned a party for your whore, and I paid a big guest list. There won't be much left of that camp if you don't get back there soon. And the fun is due to start at dawn. In fact, do I smell smoke already?"

Luc ignored him; looking instead to Cilo he rasped, "Is this how it's supposed to go, Cilo?" Sarcasm curled his lip and cut the air. "Are the stakes high enough now?"

"Where is she, Luc? Tell me you brought her with you." Something that looked like insanity glowed in his eyes: a nightmare of realization that frayed away the last threads of reason.

"Do you see her anywhere?" Luc raised his voice, but his tone changed with the speed of inspiration. "Here." In an instant, he dropped the heavy sword to his side, grabbed the shorter blade from his belt and held it, hilt out, for Cilo to take. "Go explain to your troll why there's a problem."

As Cilo took the knife, testing its weight in his hand, he stepped closer to the edge of the light, smiling like a skull. "No, this is not how it's supposed to go. Manius here should not be indulging his new taste for improvisation. He's just thrown away everything important to me. Again."

"Cilo." Manius' confusion cracked in his voice. "He's just handed you a sword. Take your chance. If you haven't got the stomach to kill him, I will."

Luc closed his eyes and lifted his sword, as if its weight was an anchor that could hold his focus long enough to pass the crisis.

Cilo barely whispered. "Who did you pay," how competent are they, "a mob or militia?" Cilo's advance was focused; his fear and rage had discovered an irresistible force.

"Just a mob from Verulamium. Drunks. Some veterans. They'll be there now. I told them to take her camp apart. Cilo?" Manius watched the blade turning in his hand. "That was your order."

"You were supposed to stay with them. You were supposed to make sure Maia wasn't there." Manius' knees buckled, but he didn't fall. Cilo held him upright on the blade in his stomach, bracing all the weight against his chest as his eyes went wide with disbelief. "She's all that matters, now. All that matters. I thought you understood that."

Edan swore, threw his hands in the air and turned away.

Luc slid the broad blade back over his shoulder and threw himself up into the

saddle. He backed the horse up, watching Cilo push Manius' body away, watching reality battle to regain its hold.

He was staring at his hands, watching blood thicken and drip from his fingertips. He looked up, searching the cold dawn light for hope, then held a gory fist up at Luc and screamed, "Go! Find her."

Luc cut over any further plea he might have made, spitting at Edan, "Don't let him kill himself. You two deserve each other."

Gallop the same line they had ridden in the dark, Marc blinked away cuts from the freezing wind. They were close enough to see the road below, high enough to clear the trees, and they raced toward thick smoke, destruction and pillage where Justicia's campsite burned. "The road," he yelled. "It's faster if they follow us and we won't get caught up in the riot."

Luc nodded, pulled the horses down through the trees to the hard surface and flogged them back up to full stretch.

The driver of Justicia's *carpentum* held the mules at a steady canter with the rest of the guard in tight formation around them. Inside, the girls tried to reduce the jolt and jarring for Justicia, packing cushions around her to minimize her movement and holding her medicine to her lips each time she groaned. All they had been able to keep was packed into the cramped spaces between them. The other vehicles and everything they had carried had been abandoned.

Maia sat at the back of the carriage, feeling the distance growing out of her control as tears of terror ran down her cheeks. She wanted to leap out and run back down the dark road, but she was paralysed by helpless dread. Neria wore the same mask of quiet desperation, of hope being shredded by irrevocable realities. No one spoke.

The sickly smell of illness clung to the fabrics, and the canopy sealed it in, their breaths dragging in and out on the sour exhalations of imminent death. At least the rumble of the wheels drummed over the rattle and groan in the High Priestess' chest, and that was as near to compassion as Maia could find. Lying back, hard up against the rear wall, she pulled a cushion over her head and closed her eyes.

As dawn lightened the sky, the commander called a halt. Without pause, the blown team of mules was unfettered and turned off into the roadside pasture and a second team dragged up into the traces. They were not fresh, but better for having run without a load. They would be able to hold the pace another hour, maybe more.

He looked back down the long straight road. If they had pursued, it would be starting now, from behind the four leagues they'd covered in the last three hours. A little more than an hour for a galloping horse, and in that time they could stretch their lead by another league. Then there was only one more league to the walls of the city. He would send riders ahead to call for cover when they got close enough. His confidence was sharper.

As soon as the new team was in harness, he ordered the driver to run them again. They would be in Londinium by midmorning.

Outside Justicia's temple, Maia stood quietly, clutching a handful of her robe in tense fingers and watching as staff carefully carried Justicia's stretcher in through the wide front portico. When the crowd of girls cleared the patio, she stepped back against the front wall out of the rain and slid down on her haunches, waiting.

"You can't stay out here, Sweetie. They know where we are. They'll get here. And when they do, they'll need food and hot water. We've sent for Justicia's surgeon, just in case, so come in and help me get ready."

Maia rested her head onto her knees and stared down the empty street. It looked the same, exactly the same. In the time she had been away, nothing had changed in the street she had run down to freedom. It was true, waiting out here served no purpose but to bring bad news sooner.

Neria put an arm around her. "Come and choose a suite. Have a hot soak. There's nothing else to do but wait."

But waiting was hard. If the jostling and jarring trip had been insufferable, there had at least been an end point in sight. It had been possible, at least, to calculate how much longer it must last. And the surroundings changed, and the signs were there that their goal was edging closer.

Waiting now was more than her stretched nerves could bear.

Filling the moments with details, even blessings like hot water and good food, grated. There was no comfort in soaking and her stomach refused anything but a bite of bread and honey.

The mood in the house was divided, too, with some of the girls turning bright smiles and welcoming attentions upon the men who had been their security escort. As they did, others wept, or slipped silently along the corridors outside Justicia's suite, answering the calls of the physician.

Neria divided her time between the High Priestess' side and Maia's. In the sickroom she could do no more than whisper reassurances, trusting that her words were heard, and with Maia she could only sit in silence, trusting that time was carrying the brothers safely home.

Maia perched on the edge of a couch, away from the colour and movement in the dining hall, and back from the light of the entrance. She had nothing more to say, just crossed her arms across her stomach and waited. There was no way she could imagine an acceptable outcome. She was worn out with speculation and fear. She waited. And counted the moments away.

Marc walked through the door, grinned like he was stretched between exhaustion and hysteria, and held out a hand to Neria. When she ran into his embrace, Maia was left with no protection from time. Her racing heartbeat made each second seem an age, every breath a feat of endurance.

When Luc finally followed, relief boiled over her skin, left a rash of lit nerves, and dropped like hot rock in her stomach. Luc was alive, he was here and he seemed unhurt. Elation and despair panted through her open lips. She couldn't find enough air to fill the hollow place inside. And Cilo was dead? She bit her lip so it couldn't tremble, and when she tasted blood, tried to lick it away. Ticks pulled and played across her face, shifting smiles into frowns and back as she slowly stood.

Marc seemed whole, neither of them showed any sign of bloodshed, and yet that seemed impossible. Had they killed? Had men died, again? She pressed back against the wall, unable to take the first step.

Luc panted, too, over the harsh exertions of his ride. There was no indecision in his face; his eyes were fierce, burning with passion; he was smiling. He took two steps forward, and without taking his gaze from hers, he slapped Marc's shoulder and put his hand out.

This was no place for his smile, or the impatience that flared in his eyes as he waited for his brother to set Neria on her feet. They'd ridden hard, but it couldn't mean pursuit. Neither of them looked over their shoulder.

Marc reached down into his tunic, pulled out a rolled parchment and slapped it into Luc's waiting hand. He grinned and pushed it at her as all the expressions she had battled dropped into a blank stare. Because he couldn't speak, Luc took the mug of beer from Neria and held his clean, bloodless hand up to show while he drained it. It had to be a discharge, it had to be. Cilo had agreed after all.

Maia took in all she saw and snapped the bonds of her terror. The dining hall was crowded with veteran guards and attentive priestesses, so she seized his hand and a jug of beer and towed him quickly down the hallway to her suite of rooms. She handed him the jug as she barred the door. "How did you get this?"

Luc emptied the jug, threw it down, and laughed. "Cilo traded it for you." He dragged his wet tunic over his head and threw it onto the floor too, then flopped back onto the bed, exhausted and still laughing.

"Are you all right? Are you hurt?" Maia ran to kneel beside him. "Is he?"

The effort to breathe was so fierce, every muscle in his chest and stomach caught and flexed in painful repetition. His hands shook with tremors of fatigue. Still he laughed. "He's not all right, Maia. He's insane. I think I might have pushed him right over the edge."

"But he's alive? You didn't kill anyone?"

"He's alive. Or he was when we left." He grabbed her, pulled her across his chest and rolled so she was lying on her back beside him. "And I will tell you every single thing that was said and done, but now, I want to eat and sleep. I want that door barred and not opened for a week and I want you right here beside me where I can reach you whether I'm awake or asleep." He looked like a boy. The exhilaration of youth had flooded his system, or years had sloughed away with his bondage.

Maia laughed and cried, her body shaking, her eyes streaming. "That sounds reasonable," she whispered. "I think they're the exact words Hercules used when he finished his penance." She slipped her fingertips tenderly through the hair at his temples and smoothed the last tension from over his eyes, and forced her breath to slow.

"Is there anything you need, now? Do you want hot food? There's plenty out there. And good wine. Or beer."

She crossed her hands over his hair as he buried his face on her chest and let his breathing ease. "We've got our own fireplace, our own washroom. We've got clean dry clothes." She started to giggle. "We've got servants. No wind or rain or horses to feed and saddle. No water to draw or heat or carry. Nowhere to get to tomorrow."

He looked up and grinned. "No silver forests? No moonlight and stars overhead? No cold nights wrapped around you on a riverbank?"

"No snow and mud." She pushed up onto her elbows, laughing. "No dry bread and dry fruit and sour wine. No dirty inns and foul innkeepers. No crazy people trying to kill us. No bruises, no chafing and cramps, or frozen ears and dripping noses."

"No old stone villages or willow tips?"

Her smile softened and her eyes grew darker, exquisite with the swell of desire. "Oh, you win. When can we go back?" She looked past the lovely symmetry of his face to the strength and courage, the honesty and kindness of his heart and soul. "We did it.

After all that, we're safe."

He watched her in silence for a moment, touching her lips. "Have I told you how much I love you?" he asked.

The piercing intensity of his gaze drove into her heart, squeezing her chest tight and stopping her breath. "A million times. Every day. In everything you do and say. I have never doubted it for a minute."

"Good." He grinned. "Can we eat now?"

"Yes. You stay there and I'll go and get you some food."

When she carried the tray back into the room and set it down beside him, she crossed through the suite to close the shutters and darken the room. Firelight was his best colour; it was all the light she wanted. Lying beside him, she watched him eat, occasionally kissing sauce from his lips, or his chin or his fingers. And when he set the tray aside, she knew she had all she would ever need.

-END-

About the author:

Letitia Coyne is alive and well and living in Australia. She writes, paints, draws, sews, plays with old wooden furniture, revives jewellery and sings very loudly. She also feeds animals and adolescents. And sleeps.

Discover other titles by Letitia Coyne at obooko.com:

Hispania – Book Two.

Although the siege of Numantia in 133BC marked the end of organized resistance to Rome, the Celtiberian tribes of northern Spain maintained their heritage of warrior elites -- and their hatred of Rome. They accepted the comforts, infrastructure and the benefits of Empire, while remaining independent tribal city-states under the control of noble families.

Marella was the daughter of one such family.

Falsely accused by a vile and corrupt Druidic high priest, she is set to be executed. Her rescuer is Marcus, a Roman deserter from Britannia who has made his home in the Gallego valley above Caesaraugusta.

Finding no purpose in the life he leads, bored and frustrated, he relishes the chance to face the challenges that come with saving the life of this young noblewoman. Her best chance of survival lies in travelling across the province to Numantia, and her only chance of survival is to do that with Marc.

Somehow they must stay ahead of High Priest Leucetius and the priests of a Romanised and corrupted temple; Marella's noble brother Taran and his standing army; and the army of Rome itself.

Away from the capital, the Roman world was a complex, sometimes bloody, blend and clash of cultures. The people were not stereotypical Roman ladies and gents consumed by the politics of Caesar's court. Hispania is a glimpse into the less well known lives of Rome.

Caledonia – Book Three.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Petra – Book Four

Petra, Arabia Provincia, 120AD

Aya grew as a filthy scavenger, trailing the Bedouin caravans that crossed the Nafud wastes and the Rub' al Khali. Bought from the arena as a young man, his new life as Sethos, the adopted son of a wealthy Roman merchant, is stained by the stigma of his past.

Jaida and her sisters were raised in luxurious slavery, destined to be the virgin oracles of Isis at provincial temples throughout the Roman Empire. When the fall of a dice brings the girls' future into question, it is Seth who must define freedom and slavery, life or liberty – for himself and for them.

He has money, strength and cunning. She has no more than her faith.

Touchstone.

“You are the fool, boy. How long have you believed your war would end and you would bring that midden home to me? How long? Really, I want you to tell me. Because I want you to think carefully about how long it is you’ve loved her while she never loved you back.”

From the author of *Britannia* and *Petra* comes a brand new historical tragedy...

War is hell. Then it starts to hurt.

When war is all you’ve ever known, the promise of peace is more terrifying than

any battle.

For Freya, there is no life worth remembering before the army, and none worth imagining after. Born to the lowest caste of a brutally bigoted society, she's found no more horror on the battlefield than she knew on the streets.

And she's earned a lot more respect with a sword in her hand.

As a young man, Dragan was blooded on the rush of adrenaline and sated by the euphoria of victory. With Freya beside him as his partner, he was indestructible. But age and mortality are gaining ground, and cracks have started to appear.

He's had fifteen years of war and he's earned his retirement.

Together they survived the war. But can they survive peace when it means different things to each of them?

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