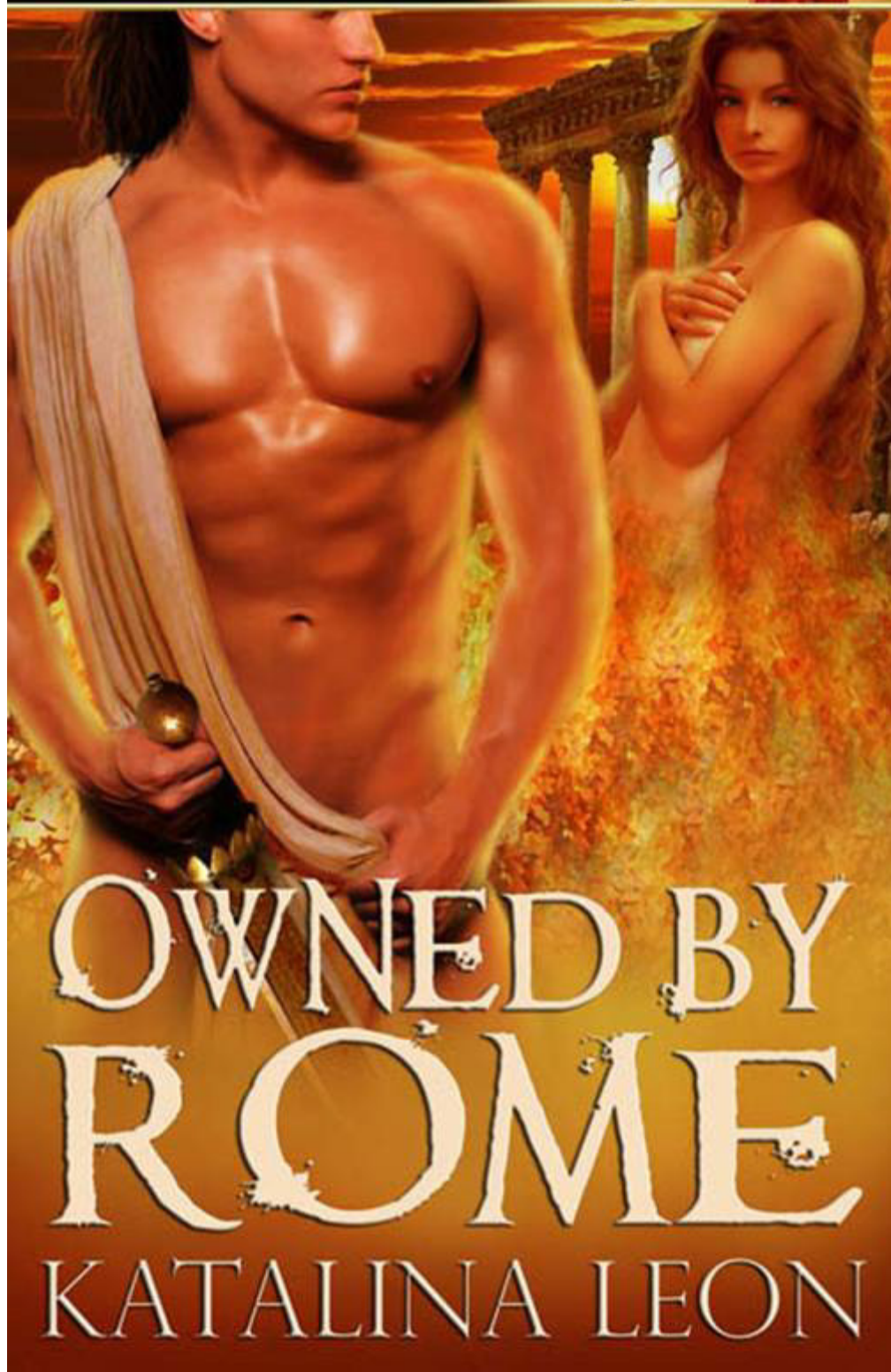


ELLORA'S CAVE *Legend*



## **Owned by Rome**

*Katalina Leon*

On the edge of the Roman Empire, Queen Boudica's rebellion has ended. A time of great tragedy has passed. Atellus, a Roman magistrate living in Gaul, discovers he's no longer sympathetic to Rome and must now question every facet of his life.

A cunning Celtic woman with golden-red hair arrives in the slave markets, defiant and angry – a danger to anyone foolish enough to purchase her. As punishment for her willfulness, she is to be offered as a sexual favor to Roman guests at a lavish feast and put to death for their entertainment.

For Atellus, it's love at first sight. He wants to own her. They embark on an erotically turbulent journey through a lonely Celtic forest. He suspects his beautiful slave is harboring a painful secret and must never again speak her true name. She is Celtic royalty – the last of her kind.

In the heart of the forest, strong-willed lovers clash, fall in love and catch a glimpse of what the future can be if both can learn to trust and forgive.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Owned by Rome

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# ***OWNED BY ROME***

**Katalina Leon**

## Chapter One

Belgica, Western Gaul, late August, 64 AD

Atellus' lashes flickered erratically in his sleep. *She's near and this feels like home.* Tonight, as it did every night, the most beautiful sensation descended from above and washed over his sleeping body. The nocturnal visitation was purely feminine, loving and filled with desire. The sensation floated over him as if it were a spirit haunting the night, yet it felt so real it set his body afire. It called to him from the past, a painful reminder of all that was not present. He tossed fitfully on the *lectus*. His body ached in his sleep, both from longing and exhaustion. He struggled to wake and pursue her. His lips parted. He tried to form words and call to her, but she moved away from him with astonishing speed. His heart raced as his eyes fluttered open to glance around the stark but practical *cubiculum* where he slept alone, sprawled across an empty bed. His calloused fingertips searched the woolen *lodix* that covered his bare skin. She was not there. She was nowhere near. He came to the painful realization she was merely a creature of vapor and had not actually visited his bed. His mind had tricked him once again. The visitation's warmth and softness, even her dark, perfumed ringlets had been nothing more than a compelling illusion of Morpheus, the god of dreams. His tense fingers dug deep into the blanket as his heart sank. A moment of disorientation swept through him to realize years had passed and he was in his compound in Belgica. A moment ago he had been convinced he was once again a young man living in Rome with *her*.

His body stirred uncomfortably on the bed. His hip hurt from riding all day and falling asleep on his side. He plopped onto his back, fully awake with his aching, hard *dolon* thrusting against the *lodix*. The inevitable moment had arrived as it did every night. He found himself alone, hard and needing release. He longed for her but his hand wrapped around the shaft of his *dolon* instead. He took hold of his only intimate companion. His hand stroked its hooded head until the skin pulled tight. His palm slowly squeezed the shaft, making the blood rush. It felt good to ache so strongly for his one true *amare*, but she was more than a loved one. She was his *pietas*, his devotion. No woman compared to her. She was perfection in body, spirit and mind. She was his dove.

He took a deep breath and stroked. He could depend on waking in the darkest hours before dawn, thinking of her lush hips, soft eyes, and find himself desperately needing to do this. His fist grasped tightly as he thickened and grew warm in his hand. His testes rose and pulled tight. His fingers reached lower and gave them a harsh tug downward. He winced. The moment of pain sobered his thoughts. His adult life had been nothing but pain, so what was a little more? His desire for her was so strong he knew he could not stop it; he could only slow it. He wanted to go painfully slow and

think of her. He wanted this act to last at least as long as he might spend with her, though he had never had her.

He forced himself to stroke at a leisurely pace, stopping often to tug down on his testes and grimace. He wanted to prove to himself he had some control over the passion that washed over him whenever it pleased. He had no control over his separation from her, but that would change. His hand took on its own slow, steady rhythm, broken only by the occasional brutal squeeze or the rough slap of his fingertips.

It was a warm night in early autumn, a sliver of moonlight poured through a slatted window. The harvest season had been grueling but productive. His reward was within sight. *All rewards were within sight.* Soon he would be with her. Revenge and his heart's desire would be fulfilled. After years of waiting, longing, plotting and dreaming, she would finally be his.

He thought of her. His hand lazily stroked himself as he drifted into the twilight realm between waking fantasy and dreams. Dark, voluptuous Columba, *regina* of doves. She was the purest, gentlest most beautiful dove to ever flutter to earth and take the shape of a woman. Her eyes were liquid compassion. Her lips were rose petals, opening only to loving words. Her hair was a rippling night sky highlighted with sparkling stars. She was everything lovely about womankind and so much more. The gods had made her solely for him and life had been unjust to steal her away, but that too would change.

For all the betrayals and dishonesty committed against him, surely the god Jupiter would take his side and revenge would be granted. He was owed a lover for his bed, a companion, a wife and a mother for his future children, and he wanted them all in one woman. He had been lonely and patient for far too long. Tomorrow, he was leaving on a journey to fetch her and bring her home. Soon she would share his bed and his future. His fist sped as he thought of her smooth body surrendering beneath him. Once he possessed her, he would take her slowly and with great care. He loved her. He gritted his teeth and groaned softly as he spilled into his palm. "Columba."

\* \* \* \* \*

The morning mist lifted. The rising sun revealed the day would be clear, bright and perfect for travel. The pungent scent and snorting bellows of hundreds of oxen filled the air. The oxen idly stomped in place as they were harnessed to the heavily loaded four-wheeled *carruses* and asked to wait patiently while their brethren were also prepared for the journey. The *bubulcus*, the ox drovers, marched around the carts, shouting and shoving the oxen into place, they seemed as anxious as their animals to be moving. Many of the *bubulcus* were by necessity heavily muscled men with thick arms, broad backs and plodding temperaments. Their daily task had shaped them to resemble the creatures they drove.

The line of waiting ox carts stretched far beyond the compound walls. A busy legion of Gaulish farmers and Roman *milites* loaded the carts with proficient speed.

Today was an important day and everyone knew it. This was a massive consignment of goods and perhaps the largest the province of Belgica had ever sent to Rome.

Atellus sat upon his black Egyptian warhorse Rubus and gazed proudly upon the hundreds of carts loaded with sacks of grain and *amphorae* of wine, traveling to mother Rome in his name. The goods were ultimately headed to Rome but he doubted he would go that far unless Columba insisted on a trip to the mother city. The true destination of this journey, the only one he cared about, was his *patruelis* Plutonium's compound in Massilia on the Mediterranean Coast of Gallia. He knew his cousin Plutonium was the instigator of all his problems. In his mind, Massilia was where the problems started and that was where the problems would end. He was not in a lenient mood. Plutonium must suffer what was long overdue.

The morning air was crisp. He drew his flowing *pallium* around his shoulders. The woolen cloak was practical for travel but beautifully made. Its crimson border marked him as a Roman magistrate of high rank, but his hair clearly indicated he was sympathetic to the tribal people he ruled. His cascading black hair perfectly complemented the color of his horse's mane. He and the tall, black warhorse were a matched set. During the eight years he had lived in Gaul, he had become accustomed to wearing his hair long and braided in a tight queue in the style of the Gauls. He had come to admire the tough ethics of the Gauls of Belgica and was proud to have earned their respect. His long hair was in homage to them.

He looked over the crowded compounded filled with loaded carts, braying animals and busy men. This was his day of glory and the beginning of the beginning. He had made the most of a sour situation in treacherous times. As the *provincia* of Belgica, he rode up and down the line of burgeoning *carruses*, overseeing every detail of the process as if he were a war general. He made absolutely certain every sack of grain and each jar of wine bore a bronze tag with his personal *nota* the *pila*—a javelin—stamped upon it. He wanted there to be no mistaking the fact this wealth originated with him, *Atellus Dolabella, Provincia of Belgica*.

He had greatly enjoyed personally ordering the *ferrarius* to make thousands of bronze *notas* to tag each grain sack and *amphorae* traveling to Rome. He insisted on watching the *ferrarius* heat the first orange-hot, bronze tag over the coals and strike it with his *nota*. The *ferrarius*'s hammer rang loudly against the hot bronze and the iron forge. His heart filled with a sense of real accomplishment and possessive pride when the *ferrarius* tossed the first cooled tag into his waiting palm. It was proof he had succeeded beyond all expectations and mastered a distant land. There were so many bronze *notas* to stamp that several other *fabers*, assistant craftsmen, were hurriedly brought in to help.

He smiled at this vast accomplishment. This year's bounty of Belgica's natural wealth was his contribution toward feeding and gently intoxicating the Empire. This season the fields and vineyards had been lavishly generous. A harvest this size represented a victory of organization, a quelling of elements, timing and strategy every bit as crucial a military plan. At this stage in his life, at the well-matured age of thirty,

he realized there was far more honor in collecting a good harvest than there was in butchering men.

Unfortunately, on its way to Rome, this wealth would first pass through the hands of his unscrupulous cousin Plutonium, who was prone to helping himself. He knew the sacks of grain and the jars of wine would be dutifully accounted for, shipped and stored with Rome's usual bureaucratic precision. Sadly, these same bureaucrats were not as efficient at paying for what they had already consumed. The last two seasons of grain had been ground into bread and long been eaten. The contents of two years' worth of wine *amphorae* had been emptied into Roman *calix*s and drunk. The wine's euphoric haze had long worn away and he had yet to be paid for any of it. Plutonium, who lived a leisurely life on the warm Mediterranean Coast of Gallia, continually put off repayment.

As the *provincia* of Belgica he was tired of waiting to be paid or recognized. He had been patient and polite to his own detriment. He had watched in horror as greed and poor judgment of Roman bureaucrats ran rampant on the far-flung western frontier. Recently a tax collector's greed and stupidity had provoked war with the tribal Britons and caused the utter destruction of Roman towns and the deaths of thousands of innocent Romans. A few panicked survivors of this horrific event managed to escape to Gallia and showed up on his doorstep, hysterically seeking asylum.

Since that tragedy nearly three years ago, Britannia, Gallia and the entire western frontier were low on Emperor Nero's priorities. There were even rumors Rome might abandon disorderly Britannia and the west entirely.

Atellus had made tremendous personal sacrifices to make his piece of Belgica a success. He was unwilling to surrender it. News from the Empire reached him so slowly he was no longer certain who was actually in power and what Rome's true intentions were, and those were facts he desperately needed to know. The one thing he knew with certainty was a confused and shaken Rome had forgotten him on the frontier.

His eyes scanned the massive gathering of fully laden ox carts and pack mules preparing to head east. He wondered why the government of Rome would even consider willingly abandoning such wealth. What kind of *ineptus* would turn his back on the natural riches Belgica provided? He had done his part. He needed Rome's support to govern. He needed *milites* and bronze *nummus* to pay them with. How could he possibly hope to rule without soldiers or coins? His cousin conveniently overlooked the fact he needed to be paid so he could continue to provide for Rome.

His own demands were high. The district he governed was vast. He had *servus* to feed and *milites* to house. The province of Belgica was not a charitable enterprise. It was difficult enough to defend and govern an unruly Roman outpost without the added burden of financial strain to his already heavy load of responsibilities. Coins and armed *milites* were an absolute necessity on the frontier. He could not hope to impose Roman order without them. The tribe's people of Belgica would not respect a *provincia* who tried to rule with crumbs of good intentions. For two years he had been virtually forgotten on the edge of civilization. He was certain his older cousin Plutonium was to



blame for his lack of news and repayment. Atellus pledged this season would be different. He would not be held at sword's length and told to sit at home and wait. He would go to Massilia and personally demand the situation turn in his favor. He was tired of being the neglected one in the west. He vowed this season to get respect, repayment and revenge.

The mere thought of Plutonium left him enraged. It was unlike him to continually feel such anger toward anyone. He was typically a forgiving man. His jaw clenched with tension as he skillfully guided his high-spirited stallion between the rows of loaded carts. Rubus pranced excitedly between the *carruses* with his ears pricked high, eager to be involved with the task at hand.

After thoroughly inspecting the *carruses*, he saw all was in order and it was time to leave. He shouted his *summa imperii* to the men, "Move out!" He had to bellow with all the strength in his lungs and raise his fist high into the air to be heard and seen above the clatter of so many men and beasts.

The heavily armed *milites* marched at the front and flanks of the procession. The first of the fully laden *carruses* lurched forward. The journey had begun. His future was moving closer. Soon he would face his nemesis.

He sat atop Rubus with his face tilted toward the faint morning sun. The mist lifted and the air quickly warmed. He had long dreamed of this day, but at this moment, he rode sullenly at the front of the procession. His thoughts dwelled on his cousin. The steady clomp of Rubus' hooves were hypnotic and drew his attention inward. He knew Plutonium was a notorious opportunist. He suspected Plutonium had taken advantage of him all along and he'd had enough of it. His older, sneakier cousin had been taking advantage of everyone his entire life and it was going to end. His earliest memory was of Plutonium climbing an apple tree and hoarding all the best apples for himself. Atellus had been a toddler at the time and could only stare hopefully into the treetops, waiting for the larger boy to toss him an apple. More often than not Plutonium disappointed him by withholding the apples, teasing him or pelting him with rotten fruit. Such was the tone of their relationship. They were forced by familial bonds to share a courtyard, family honor and tolerate each other.

When they became young men, the conflicts worsened. They competed for all the same things and the family patriarch heartily encouraged the fierce competition, believing it bred a better Dolabella.

To be a Dolabella was to face high expectations. It had always been that way. The Dolabellas were a fiercely competitive family. This passionate trait was especially strong amongst a family of warriors turned politicians. Family power was all-important, but for him, it wasn't entirely about power.

At the age of twenty-two, he fell deeply in love for the first time. The emotion was so intense it shocked him. He became thoroughly devoted to the beautiful young daughter of a wealthy merchant. She was named Columba, the fairest of doves. She was not from a noble family as he was, but she was of respectable stock and heart-

wrenchingly lovely to look at. Her hair fell to her hips in glossy black ringlets. Her graceful figure was softened by high, round breasts and he burned for her like no other.

She was a neighbor. He fell in love with her from afar, watching her from an arched *portico* on his family's villa, uphill from hers. He haunted the *portico* daily, hoping for fair weather and an appearance in the courtyard of his secret love. Every day he knelt on the stones of the *portico*, peering into the neighbor's courtyard until the grit of the stones made his knees ache but never once neglected his vigil. If he caught a glimpse of Columba that day or even smiled at her, his day was complete.

All he received was a few stolen glimpses. The most he ever shared with her were brief moments of heart-stopping eye contact or a fleeting, shy smile. He watched her sitting each afternoon in a fragrant courtyard filled with roses, pomegranates and slender cypress trees that sometimes blocked his view of her when she strolled through the labyrinth of greenery. As he watched her, he imagined what thoughts filled her mind. She sat quietly in his indirect presence, so he assumed she was serene and at peace in her heart.

Sometimes he was bold enough to wave from the *portico*, desperately trying to get her attention. "Columba!" he would shout over the wall that cloistered her. "Come closer." He would enthusiastically wave her toward him as he precariously hung over the edge of the *portico*.

Columba would glance up at him, blush and slowly shake her head no.

Family members and fussing *domesticus* continually surrounded her. Columba's father had given the *domesticus* strict orders never to leave his lovely treasure unattended, and sadly the house slaves never did. When he was sighted, which was often, the *domesticus* frowned at him or bustled Columba safely inside the villa, beyond his adoring gaze.

The summer he fell in love with Columba was one of pure frustration. Though he was a Dolabella, he was never even allowed close to her. For mysterious reasons, her *pater* had deemed her forbidden to him. He never had the chance to speak alone with her but he saw she was shy, doe-eyed and would make an ideal wife. He lived for the brief moments when she would look toward his hiding place in the *portico* and flash a blinding-bright smile. He wanted her with all his heart.

One day he dared discuss his obsession with his mother.

"*Mater*." He formally greeted his elegant mother Corrina. "May I speak to you *sub-rosa* on a matter of importance?"

Corrina coaxed him closer with a smile. "Your secrets are always safe with me." She gently stroked the side of his face when he knelt before her. "Atellus, you know you're my favorite, please speak."

"*Mater*, I wish to marry."

Corrina beamed. "I'm very happy to hear this."

He spoke quickly and breathlessly. "I wish to marry our neighbor's daughter Columba."

Corrina's jaw sagged. The sparkle instantly left her eyes. "Columba? Are you sure about this?"

He became alarmed by his *mater's* look of discomfort. "What is wrong? Is it because Columba's family is not noble?"

"No, that is not the issue." Her brow creased. "Atellus, would you possibly consider another girl?"

"No! I'd rather die. I love her. Would you please speak to *Pater* for me? He will listen to you."

His mother gently placed her hands on his shoulders. A pitying expression crossed her face. "*Pater* is ill. He is not what he used to be. Plutonium is on the rise." Her eyes looked burdened. "Atellus, for your sake, I wish you would give your heart to someone else."

"I can't." He felt deeply offended his *mater* would even suggest Columba was interchangeable with anyone else. Her blandly spoken statement chilled his soul. He should have realized she was worried for him.

Rubus whinnied at a pair of flop-eared *cuniculus* that darted across the path and hopped into the brush.

His attention snapped back to the present.

An armed *milite* rushed forward and speared one of the squealing hares with a steel-tipped *pila* and set it on a *carrus* to be added to the group larder.

Atellus' lips turned downward at he glanced at the limp body of the hare. *That's what happens to those caught off guard.*

He knew what it felt like. He too had been blind to hidden threats and caught off guard. He inwardly cringed as he remembered how unwittingly cooperative he had been with Plutonium's scheme. He never realized Plutonium was also interested in Columba. Plutonium secretly lusted after her family's vast wealth and connections. He saw to it Atellus was appointed at the very young age of twenty-two to the post of *provincia* of Belgica and sent far away from Columba and Rome. He had seen neither since.

He went to Belgica because his *pater* ordered it so. Before he left, he watched Columba one last time from his *portico*. The Dolabella family agreed it was in their best interest he be sent to the western coast of Gallia to perform the duty of Roman magistrate to a group of rebellious, uncooperative farmers. His *pater* promised to arrange a marriage and send Columba to him. He waited patiently.

Nearly a year later, a formal procession arrived in Belgica bearing Columba's elder sister Antonia, along with a stinging *epistle* from Plutonium, sealed in crimson wax. The message bluntly informed him Plutonium's *pater*, the patriarch of the Dolabella family, had died. Plutonium was now in charge. He had taken Columba for himself. They were married and Columba was with child.

Atellus kicked Rubus' haunches. The large horse bolted forward. He wanted to ride to the very front of the procession, even beyond the protection of his personal *custodia*. His *custodia* were career *milites*, loyal men and veterans of tragedy themselves. At that moment, he did not want his guards to see the bitter expression he knew colored his face. He wanted to be alone with his thoughts and speak to no one.

A *custodia* galloped beside him and raised a palm in warning. "Stop! *Dominor* Atellus, we are approaching the forest. Let me ride ahead. It is dangerous. There are all manner of creatures hiding in the woods."

Atellus' lip curled sarcastically. "The *cuniculus* is dead. There is nothing to fear."

The *custodia*'s face was humorless. The joke was lost on him. "The forest looks peaceful but it hides many threats. There are injured boar that may charge. There are *latros* or desperate men who will steal. I've come across ragged bands of *latros* every time we near a disreputable *caupona*. The owners of the *caupona* encourage the *latros*' mischief and drinking. I assure you there are enemies of Rome everywhere."

Atellus grew tired of the drama. "Was the *cuniculus* an enemy of Rome?"

The *custodia* glanced over his shoulder. His eyes fixed suspiciously on a group of Gaulish ox drovers. His voice lowered. "The woods could be full of angry Celts. I served under *Imperator* Petillius in Britannia, or I should say I survived it. I witnessed the raw brutality the Celts are capable of. We should all sleep with one eye open. I would never trust a Celt. They are animals," he snarled.

*Worse than us?* Atellus listened but said nothing.

The *custodia* blurted on. "The Britons are deceptive beyond belief. They will lure an enemy into believing all is well, and when their enemy's guard is down, they shred them to pieces."

Atellus nodded his head. "The Celts sound as if they have the potential to become good Romans. Fortunately we are not in Britannia. We are in Belgica." He waved the *custodia* away. "I appreciate your loyal service and good company but today I wish to ride quietly, alone."

The *custodia*'s eyes dropped sheepishly to the road. He steered his horse away from Atellus and fell back. "Of course, *Dominor*."

Rubus clopped along the Roman road. The massive procession of ox carts followed slowly behind. Sun-drenched vineyards and fields gave way to shaded lanes beneath thickets of trees. Atellus rode beneath the dappled light of the forest. The wooded shadows pulled his thoughts into the past.

Columba was denied him but the Dolabella family made other arrangements. They decided to send Antonia in Columba's place. He was heartbroken over this betrayal but refused to humiliate the thin, sad-faced Antonia any further, so he accepted her. They married. He appreciated Antonia's companionship and perseverance on the Roman frontier, but the passionate spark that should exist between a husband and wife was never there. They were more compatriots in misery than lovers.

For years he continued to secretly long for Columba while Antonia openly longed for Rome. Both were equally unhappy. The one true highlight of their marriage had been the birth of their daughter Rosa. Rosa was his five-year-old beauty. Just thinking of her made him smile. She was daring and mischievous. She resembled his side of the family and was a miniature representation of the elegant, aristocratic females of the Dolabella clan. He personally saw to it she wanted for nothing. When Rosa was of an age to marry, he promised himself, he would find the best of husbands for her. She deserved the best. Aside from his wistful memories of Columba and his love of Belgica, Rosa occupied the center of his heart.

He loved Rosa. She was strong-willed, bright-eyed and quickly figured out any hiding place he devised for a trinket or toy. It was difficult now for him to fathom that Antonia originally feared he would reject the child.

After Antonia gave birth, she cried inconsolably when the midwives informed her the child was a girl. Her grief was immense. Like all good Roman wives, especially second-choice Roman wives, Antonia hoped to boost her status by bearing a son. As soon as she had the strength to walk, she swaddled the baby girl in linen and sought an audience with him.

A Roman father was not expected to hover near a birthing chamber, though Atellus was anxious. His anxiety escalated greatly when he saw Antonia's tear-streaked face as she cautiously laid the swaddled infant at his feet and backed away, sobbing. Her dour expression alarmed him. At first he feared the child was stillborn or monstrously deformed. He sat frozen in place as Antonia choked back tears, awaiting his judgment.

As a Roman man, he had the right to reject the child or turn his back on it and refuse to sponsor the child in any capacity. Exposure was also an option. A Roman *pater* could order the child be left outdoors on a cragged cliff to be taken by predators or the elements. A single winter's night in Belgica would quickly end the child's suffering.

Antonia waited tearfully for the scolding or the tragedy she felt she truly deserved. She should have known him better than she did. She should have given him credit for being kind. He'd never been cruel or unreasonable in the past. She had allowed *garrulus* talk, old fears and unfounded expectations to blind her to his true nature. Poor Antonia had never truly understood him.

The moment after Antonia set the bundle down, he leapt forward and quickly scooped the baby up off the cold floor. He peeled the linen back and was relieved to see the baby was alive and whole. He saw the child was a girl and held the tiny infant to his heart. The light tap of the baby's warm hand against his chest brought tears of relief. He instantly loved the child. If Antonia had known how empty he was or how much he needed to love someone who was completely his own, she would not have worried so. "She's beautiful." He beamed with joy. "Pink as a rose." He helped Antonia to stand and steered her toward a chair. "Thank you, Antonia." It was the greatest gift he had ever been given.

Later, he hung a *bullā* around Rosa's throat, a tiny gold heart that stood as a sign of his esteem and protection until she had a husband of her own to look after her and he could cut the *bullā* free.

Sadly this moment of mutual acceptance was the high point of Antonia's life. She soon became ill. Despite his assurances that he did not wish her to risk her life, Antonia insisted she bear a son. She suffered several miscarriages and died trying to present him with a son. Antonia had been gone for nearly a year. Rosa had been without a real *mater* and he had been left oddly alone in Belgica.

He mourned Antonia's passing and genuinely missed her companionship and loyal presence. Antonia had been a buffer against loneliness more than he had ever realized. He missed her greatly after she was gone. He felt especially sad for Rosa. On several occasions he watched Rosa wander toward women who faintly resembled her mother, expecting to be recognized and held.

He surprised himself by not inviting other women to his bed, not even a casual afternoon with an *ancilla*. Astonishingly, almost a year had passed. He did not want a *servus*. He deliberately denied himself the pleasure of a woman, wanting instead to wait and be reunited with Columba. He was lonely for real love to finally enter his life. He was not above trying to lure Columba away from Plutonium. He was certain Plutonium had used coercion, lies and even physical force upon innocent Columba to convince her to marry him. Now he would travel to Plutonium's compound in Massilia and free them both.

The uniform cobblestone pavement of the Roman-built *viae* gave way to a *viae terrenae* that wound through a hilly forest. The many *carruses'* wheels and animal hooves caused a cloud of dust to hover above the dirt road. Atellus was grateful to be riding at the front and not the flank. It was only the first day of the journey and his flowing *pallium* was already covered in dust. Its Tyrian-purple border now appeared a dull shade of dun.

The day was warm and dry. This was the season to send his share of Belgica's wealth to the Roman Empire, and this year he would not send his grain and wine alone on their journey as he had been forced to do in the past. This year he would personally accompany his goods the entire way to Plutonium's storehouse on the Mediterranean. He would not send it down river in small consignments, which was infinitely more practical. He wanted this consignment to arrive whole and make the maximum visual impact. He wanted drama. He wanted to make an impressive entrance. He was owed one. He didn't care that this plan added many extra days to an already grueling journey. This absolutely needed to be done. His pride demanded it. He wanted to ride at the front of the procession and watch Plutonium quake with awe when Atellus threatened to take it all away.

Atellus coughed and cleared a bit of dust from his lungs. His visit to Plutonium would be a complete surprise. *Everyone would be very surprised.* It had been nearly eight years since he had last seen Plutonium and his lovely wife. He grinned. It was time for

the family to be reunited. It was high time for old debts to be paid. He refused to leave Plutonium's *domus* empty-handed. He would not allow Plutonium to put off reimbursement. He was determined his cousin be a gracious host and reimburse him for all debts. He was ready to tempt Columba away. If she was of a mind to stray from her husband for a night of lust or more, so be it. Plutonium had it coming.

## Chapter Two

Plutonium grunted with pleasure on top of his newest *ancilla*. The girl was so plump and pretty it drove him wild. He looked down at the girl's cheerful face framed in dark curls. For once, it was nice to see a smiling face beneath him as he pumped madly inside her. "You're enjoying this aren't you, Janni?" he huffed. He gritted his teeth as sweat rolled down his cheeks.

Janni giggled and dodged slightly to the side to avoid a falling droplet of sweat.

Plutonium was lost in his own ecstasy. He assumed Janni was equally enthralled in hers. He closed his eyes and pushed deeper inside her.

When she thought Plutonium wasn't looking, Janni's eyes opened wide. She glanced over Plutonium's shoulder and scanned the room as if seeking mental distraction. She seemed anxious to be finished with the deed at hand. When Plutonium looked down at her, she quickly masked her disinterest by smiling at him.

"Plutonium!" A shrill female voice boomed in the corridor.

Plutonium froze and instantly lost his erection.

"Plutonium! Where are you?" The angry voice echoed coldly within the marble hall.

Plutonium leapt to his feet, tugged his toga down and hesitantly peeked into the corridor. "Columba. I'm here, my dove," his voice trembled.

Columba marched toward Plutonium. Rage creased her winged brow. She reached out and drew her tapered fingertip along his sweaty jaw. She glared suspiciously at him and impatiently flicked the sweat from her fingertip. She leaned forward, glanced into the *cubiculum* beyond and saw Janni frantically rewrapping a linen *palla* around her breasts.

The startled girl froze under Columba's condemning glare, as if she were a frightened *cuniculus* awaiting an eagle's wrath.

Columba raised a stormy brow and delivered a curt acknowledgement. "Janni, your chore is finished, leave."

Plutonium groaned in frustration.

Janni sighed with surprised relief. She clutched the rumpled *palla* around her and bumped past Plutonium as she fled the room as quickly as possible.

Plutonium was stupefied. Columba's behavior became more unpredictable each day.

Columba turned her attention to her errant husband. Her eyes blazed with rage. "I must speak with you on a very important matter."

Plutonium quaked in front of Columba, worrying about which of his many transgressions she would choose to focus on. Theirs was a turbulent love. They were



more dueling rivals than partners in marriage. Still, he continued to deeply desire her, though her rejections were blunt and frequent. To desire her was to bargain with her. She never came to him willingly without a bribe. There was simply no way around it, but there was some good to their marriage. She was still very beautiful and quite a charming asset at state functions. Plus, she had presented him with five sons. He was even willing to overlook the fact the youngest son looked exactly like the square-jawed battalion general who had stayed with them three summers ago. The tiny boy was already bullying children twice his size. He sighed. It was true Columba had not been a demure and loyal wife, but she did do many things right. She had enthusiastically thrown her energy into unbridled ambition toward his career. She was relentlessly ambitious for him to succeed, and in his eyes, that trait alone made up for all her other shortcomings. She pushed him to meet influential people. She planned opulent *conviviums* for visiting dignitaries, featuring excellent food and entertainment. When any worthwhile post was mentioned, she made sure his name was spoken highly of in Rome. She planned his career and triumphant return to Rome as if she were a military strategist. She faithfully believed in his ability to prevail in the senate. She encouraged him to believe someday, with the help of his sons, whoever their true *paters* may be; his chances of rising to power were excellent. He forgave her for sometimes being a shrew. He excused her for luring battle-hardened veterans to her *lectus*, though admittedly he felt bitter about those indiscretions, he could not afford to threaten Columba. He could not put his foot down with her and risk losing his greatest ally in power. He knew without her, he would be nothing.

"Rutila must go!" Columba shouted succinctly into his cowed face. "Sell that wretched redhead, strangle her, bake her in a pie. I don't care how you do it but get rid of her."

For once he and Columba were in complete agreement. Rutila, the red-haired *domesticus* from Britannia, had been a thorny problem for far too long. She was practically useless as a *servus* and a complete disruption to the *domus*. He had impulsively purchased her from a disreputable *venalicius* who touted Rutila as a captured treasure from Britannia. The slave dealer lied. Rutila was no treasure. He had wished to be free of her for some time but dared not mention his mistake to anyone, especially Columba.

Rutila was a Celt and lovely to look at. She had fair skin the color of buttermilk, pale green eyes and coppery red hair. She looked like the gentlest *faun* in the forest, but beneath her freckled bosom beat a malicious *daemon's* heart. The young woman was cunning, willful and prone to commit violence. She had stolen, lied and planned numerous insurrections against his authority as *dominor*. She had subtlety and not-so-subtlety humiliated him on many occasions. Her attacks were verbal as well as physical and he was too shamed to complain, outwardly. In his heart of hearts, he suspected she was a tribal *venefica* capable of great malice. In truth, he feared her. He was certain there was no place in an orderly Roman *domus* for such a wild, unruly creature as Rutila.

Rutila had frustrated his every attempt to take pleasure from her. If he was gentle with her, she fought back verbally in the most horrendous fashion. Her verbal skills were withering, her comments harsh. They stung deeply and lingered in his mind. Her uncanny command of the Roman tongue shocked him. Apparently she had learned to speak the Roman tongue with unnatural speed. This fact alone proved to him the redhead was surly a Celtic *venefica*, practicing malicious *magica*. If he tried to force himself on her, she fell limply on the floor, staring vacantly at the ceiling, as if her soul had abandoned her body. She terrified him in doing so. Sometimes she would fall into a trance, roll her eyes upward until only the whites showed and chant repetitively as if she were *insania*, which made the tiny hairs on the back of his neck prickle in alarm. If he took hold of her, she kicked and clawed at him until he feared for his physical safety. Twice she had viciously fought him off and sent him limping from the *cubiculum*, bruised and humbled. Admittedly, he had failed to *dominantio* her in any meaningful way, but his sense of failure and shame forced him to keep it a secret.

Recently, the kitchen *domesticus* discovered all the knives were missing. Rutila had stolen the knives and was preparing to teach the other *domesticus* to fight. Fortunately, Rutila was stopped and he had successfully hidden the startling incident from Columba, still hoping he might successfully *dominantio* the beautiful Celt, but the list of Rutila's wrongdoings lengthened daily. He now knew she was too dangerous to keep under his roof. He braced, prepared to hear the worst.

"Why are you standing there, gawking like an *asinus*?" Columba glared at him. "Are you even listening to me? Did you hear a single word I said? Rutila has spoilt the wine! Our entire *cella* has been destroyed." Columba's eyes bulged with rage. "She has gouged out the sealing wax on every *amphorae* and the wine has turned. We have nothing. What am I to serve the statesmen when they arrive tomorrow?" Her voice rose hysterically. "Vinegar?"

His mind snapped to attention. His feet shifted uneasily. "Are you sure she has ruined all the wine?" His voice had dropped to a whisper. He was now deeply concerned. He could not expect to entertain and impress his betters without quality wine on hand.

"Do not attempt to excuse her, Plutonium!" Columba ranted. "I found her damn Druid scythe lodged in the mouth of a wine *amphorae*. I am certain it was Rutila who committed the crime. It was obvious she had been working stealthily on the wine *cella* for weeks. Oh, if only I had known! Why don't the *domesticus* alert us to such matters? Where are their loyalties?" She threw her hands in the air, genuinely perplexed at the house slaves' seeming duplicity. "Rutila started at the back of the *cella*, scraping the wax seals from the wine jars. She knew exactly how to inflict a festering wound upon the Roman heart by robbing us of our wine before the *convivium*. What is a party without wine?" she blubbered. "After the wax seals were destroyed, most of the wine evaporated, trickled away or turned to vinegar. Come and see the damage for yourself. It's a disaster," she wailed.

Plutonium rushed to console his distraught wife. They would weather this tragedy together. Her pain was his. He wrapped his plump arms around Columba, knowing this was a serious matter indeed. Visiting dignitaries expected wine and entertainment. Anything that came between him and personal advancement could not be tolerated. "Call the *domus-administrator*!" he fumed. "Have Rutila put in iron *catena* and locked away in the *cella* until we can figure out a way to recoup our losses."

"The dignitaries and their attendants will arrive tomorrow," Columba pouted. "Just kill Rutila now. We cannot afford any more of her subversive behavior. Promise me for once you will act with some semblance of *animus virilus*." Her eyes narrowed tauntingly. "Surprise me, Plutonium, be a man about this and act accordingly."

He winced at Columba's harsh accusation, threw his arms into the air and blustered into the corridor, shouting, "*Domus-administrator*, where are you? You are needed now!" He vowed to be the *dominor* of his household. He would show Columba his mettle. He would get the upper hand and take charge of this tragedy. He would prove once and for all he was the absolute ruler of the *domus*. "*Domus-administrator*, come to me!" He huffed down the corridor, swinging his arms vigorously to lend the illusion of speed to his waddling gait.

The *domus-administrator* was quickly located and the hunt for Rutila was on.

The grounds of the compound were thoroughly searched. A few of the *domesticus* were recruited to hunt for Rutila. Their efforts were halfhearted and ploddingly slow. Many of the *domesticus* were reluctant to assist in Rutila's persecution. She had come to symbolize the sole rebellious spirit among them, but even if they pitied or sympathized with her, no one dared to be caught assisting her. They helped her by thoroughly and clumsily searching the places they knew she wasn't. Their calculated actions impeded the search but it didn't work.

Plutonium and the *domus-administrator* found Rutila hiding inside the *lavari* shed beneath a pile of laundry.

Rutila hissed and glared at them, her eyes brimming with hatred. She had knotted a line of linen cloth together, creating a rope ladder to lower over the protective stone *praesidium* that surrounded the compound. Clearly she was plotting to escape after nightfall.

Rutila's defiance only enraged Plutonium further. She was his *ancilla*, his property. He had complete *dominium* over her and it was his responsibility to mete out punishment. How dare a piece of female property flee the scene of her crime? Her actions were *impudentier* and far beyond any shameless behavior that could ever be forgiven.

He and the *domus-administrator* cornered Rutila and blocked her path of escape. They approached her cautiously, assuming she was armed and knowing she was physically strong. She was known to make her own makeshift weapons from wood and scraps of iron, and she was highly proficient in using them.

The *domus-administrator* took a step back and let Plutonium lead the charge.

Plutonium was horrified to suddenly realize he would be facing Rutila's wrath first. His heart pounded with anxiety.

They backed Rutila farther into the shed until she was cornered between two hulking laundry vats. Her eyes narrowed to slits and she spat on the floor. She reached beneath her tunic and pulled out a crudely made *pugio*. She clutched the handmade dagger, which had been improvised from a whittled piece of wood and a discarded spear tip, in her fist and slashed it menacingly through the air while howling a Celtic war cry. Though the weapon looked raw and undependable, it was wielded with convincing fierceness.

Plutonium glanced at the *pugio* in Rutila's hand and came to a halt. "*Domus-administrator*, I won't interfere with your work." He stood frozen as he nervously encouraged the *domus-administrator* to face Rutila first.

The *domus-administrator* lunged at Rutila, trying to gain control of her weapon.

Rutila fought back savagely.

The *domus-administrator* was unable to secure a hold on Rutila, most of his energy was spent parrying her many attempted strikes. "Help me!" he bellowed. "I need my *plaga*."

Plutonium reluctantly flailed at Rutila, but she fought so brutally it took both him and the *domus-administrator* all their strength and a long struggle to subdue her. The *domus-administrator* managed to hold Rutila down just long enough to grab the *plaga* and throw the net over her. Rutila instantly became tangled in the net and it provided the first turning point in the battle.

Rutila struggled beneath the tangled weight of the ropey net, unable to reach Plutonium with the *pugio*. The *domus-administrator* yanked the *pugio* from her exhausted grasp and kicked the crude weapon into a dank corner of the shed beyond her reach.

Once the *domus-administrator* had Rutila under control, Plutonium halfheartedly rejoined the struggle, but he tired immediately and fell to his knees, panting in exhaustion.

Rutila thrashed wildly beneath the *plaga* and cursed in her native Celtic tongue.

The *domus-administrator* ignored her incomprehensible swearing, but Plutonium blanched and backed away as if Rutila were thrusting an enchanted *pila* into his heart.

"She's cursing us," Plutonium blubbered. "I just know it." He covered his ears for fear he would fall prey to her malicious Celtic curses.

The *domus-administrator* seemed unbothered by what Rutila had to say. He ignored her ranting and worked quickly to secure his hold on her. Once Rutila was untangled from the *plaga* and thoroughly pinned to the ground, he stripped off her coarse hempen tunic to discourage any further hope of misadventure. The hemp cloth was shredded to strips that he deftly used to bind Rutila, hand and foot. He left her naked, panting with rage on the laundry shed floor.

Rutila's eyes burned so hot with anger no tears were shed.

Plutonium gasped with relief once Rutila was wrestled to the ground and securely bound. He shouted, "Great Jupiter, the Celts can fight!" He did not acknowledge the *domus-administrator's* part in the quelling. "I feel as if I've done battle with an ill-tempered *meles* with dagger-sharp claws." He panted, desperately gasping for breath, and backed slowly toward the door on shaking legs. "Do me a favor and gag her before she utters another word of malevolent *magica*."

The *domus-administrator* tore a thick strip of hemp cloth from Rutila's tunic and wound it over her mouth, tying it off behind her head.

Rutilla could still breathe and mumble, but her steady stream of stifled words was nonsense.

Plutonium smiled with relief. His nemesis had been vanquished. His heart labored to slow its frantic beat. His face reddened from exertion. Sweat trickled down his back and soaked through his fine woolen toga. The sight of Rutila bound was greatly heartening. It drew him toward her. He cautiously stepped forward on trembling legs. He stood, gloating over Rutila's subdued state, running his eyes longingly over her naked body. She was a tall and exceptionally beautiful woman, built along the graceful lines of a strong mare. It was a treat to see her naked body minus the ugly sack-like tunic Columba forced her to wear. At least in this state he could enjoy looking at her. Bound and gagged, she could not curse or reject him. He realized he should have done this long ago. A harsh hand was a victorious hand. He had been too meek and hopeful when he should have been a true *dominor* and come down hard on her rebelliousness. His confidence soared. He should have shown her in clear terms he was the *dominor*, the master of the *domus*. He had been far too lenient with her willful ways. The sight of her writhing, bound body excited him beyond belief. Rutila the willful brought low. He loved it. His pulse quickened. The hemp bonds gave him courage. He considered rolling her onto her knees and mounting her from the back, but the *domus-administrator's* frowning presence prevented him from enjoying her right then and there.

Rutilla scowled at him. A look of cool, green loathing poured from her eyes. She would not accept defeat. She hissed at him in the most provoking manner.

The hissing startled Plutonium. He leapt back. The nasty girl even sounded like a *meles*. He was enraged by her arrogance. Even in this lowly state she refused to show him the respect he deserved. It was unthinkable. How dare she? He owned her. He would show her who the *dominor* was. He slid a searching finger between her thighs and stroked her pink *gemmare* while she glared at him with her condemning eyes. "I promise you'll pay for your disrespect."

Rutilla tried to kick Plutonium away from her but the bindings would not allow it. She thrashed wildly on the floor, trying to evade his touch.

The *domus-administrator* looked away in discomfort and walked toward the door of the shed.

Plutonium was relieved the man had backed away and left him alone to enjoy his victory. He knelt beside Rutila. His heart pounded with excitement. Conquest was his. "How does it feel to be the loser?" he whispered.

She didn't answer and lay perfectly still on the floor.

He ran his hand across her sleek thighs, but as he fondled her, the look, which he dreaded, came upon her face. Her face went blank. Her jaw went slack. Her eyes looked empty. Her breathing visibly stopped. It was as if her soul vacated her body at will. His breath caught at the thought of malicious enchantment. He pondered the possibility that perhaps she was not a woman at all but a succubus, come to earth to torment and tempt men before shredding them to bloodied pieces with daggered teeth. Even after the struggle her skin felt cool to the touch and her eyes rolled back into her head, leaving only a wraith-like sliver of white showing through the slit lids. Though she was gagged, a low moan poured from deep in her throat that had the sound of a death rattle. His eyes widened in horror. He worried a malicious *daemon* was joining with her and aiding her in revenge. He lifted his hand, too afraid to be near. Touching her became as pleasant as touching a corpse. There was no victory in it. No fiery rival to subdue. She was just a limp body unaffected by his touch. He did not see a pulse nor did he see her chest move. Long moments passed. His heart pounded in terror that she possessed the power to do this. He became flaccid. She made him feel small. He could not conquer her. He could not intimidate her. He could not have her. Perhaps she truly was a *venefica*? He cautiously leaned forward and dared to pinch her to see if she was still present in her body.

Her eyes slowly opened. She glared at him with the wicked eyes of a feral cat.

He became frightened she might curse him with stifled but potent words and quickly backed away. "I'll come back later," he promised. "When you're in a more subdued mood." His voice quaked with terror.

He rose and hurried toward the door of the shed, but before he left, he smugly delivered an order to the *domus-administrator*. "Periodically check and loosen Rutila's bindings. If I decide not to kill her, I will have to sell her and I do not wish to drive down her price by damaging her skin." His eyes watered in terror. "Look after her." The command was given as he raced out the door. He stumbled into the sunlight, relieved someone else was forced to face the malevolence of the Celtic *furie*. He certainly didn't want to be anywhere near her when the gag came off and Rutila's *daemon* spoke. He was happy to allow his loyal *domus-administrator* to take the risk of being cursed.

He left the shed in turmoil, both wishing to avoid Rutila's *daemon* and eager to return with high hopes of further humbling her. He imagined everything he would do to her willful body just as soon as he got his mind right. He snorted with agitation, feeling deeply ashamed that once again Rutila had gained the upper hand. He vowed next time would be different. He would prevail. When he was finished humiliating her, she would beg for death. Plead for it. He marched back to the main villa, eager work up the courage to commit such an act, and ask for Columba's sage advice on this important matter.

\* \* \* \* \*

Columba had very specific and ruthless ideas about which actions should be taken against Rutila. She was thoroughly enraged her entire *cella* of wine had been ruined and she had nothing intoxicating to offer her *hospes* when they arrived. Her thoughts dwelled on the incoming guests and she worried what she would ply them with. The visiting dignitaries and their assemblage would begin arriving tomorrow. There was no time to waste. Innovations would have to be arranged. She had already sent several *domesticus* to a neighboring compound, two days away, to barter for wine. She had no idea when they would return and with what. She could not afford to fail. A lavish *convivium* with rare and delicate treats had been promised to the esteemed *hospes*. Entertainment would have to be provided. Rutila had made monkeys of them by destroying the wine. Rutila's actions had been both clever and cruel. She decided Rutila deserved like treatment. She smirked at Plutonium's agitated expression. "I propose Rutila be given to the guests as a special treat, to be used in any way they feel inspired to use her. I further suggest she be securely chained with *catena* on her wrists and ankles to avoid any unpredictable mishaps. Rutila is quite a vicious girl and the *hospes* must be protected from her skittish and violent behavior."

Plutonium slowly nodded in agreement. He saw merit in Columba's plan. The thought of humiliating Rutila was amusing and practical. They could punish her and entertain guests while furthering his career. There would be many wealthy *hospes* present at the *convivium*. "Who knows, perhaps a dim-witted old *ludificare* might become smitten with Rutila, purchase her and take her away. Wouldn't that be lovely?" He grinned.

Columba tersely shook her head no. She was quick to disillusion Plutonium of his misguided idea. "The entire point of this plan is to generously offer Rutila to the *hospes* as a *donatio*. She must be presented as something spectacular, something memorable. We want this *convivium* to be the talk of Rome. I insist she be lavishly prepared for the *convivium* and consumed like a fabulous meal. I want to make it perfectly clear," her dark eyes flashed, "there will be no day after tomorrow for Rutila, not with us or with anyone else."

Plutonium stopped grinning. His gaze dropped to the floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

After several weeks of plodding, patience shredding and extremely dusty travel, Atellus and his ox carts arrived at Plutonium's compound on the sea cliffs of the Mediterranean. The noon sun burned brightly against the dry, blue sky of Massilia.

Atellus and his assembly from Belgica were met at the front gates of the compound by a group of grim-faced *milites* sent to search every *carrus* in the procession for evidence of violence or subterfuge. None being found, the *carruses* were eventually admitted inside the compound's gates, but by then a significant portion of the day had passed.

For this auspicious occasion, Atellus wore his best magisterial *paludamentum*. The snowy-white woolen cloak had a handsome border of richly hued Tyrian purple, in the most desirable shade of clotted blood. The *paludamentum* fastened at the shoulder with a sharp silver *fibula*. The *fibula* was a replica of the brooch his *pater* had worn and depicted a noble lion holding both a hatchet and a javelin in its raised paws. The hatchet was the *nota* of the Dolabella family and its symbolism of practical but brutish force was lost on no one. To be polite, he had also changed out of his heavy-soled traveling *caligae* into lighter strapped, red-leather and brass-ornamented sandals. He was not as comfortable in the formal wear but he politely made an effort to be properly dressed in front of civilized fellow Romans.

Once inside the compound's gates, his keen eyes scanned the vast courtyard. His lips immediately turned downward and his gaze simmered with resentment. Here was the evidence fully illustrated. He noticed Plutonium's compound had greatly changed. It had more than doubled in size since he had last seen it eight years ago. A second grand hall had been built, along with a massive L-shaped *domicilium* large enough to quarter hundreds of *servitus* and *domesticus*. The compound was the size of a bustling *urbanus*. An impressively ornate, private *donarium* dedicated to the god Jupiter dominated the front courtyard. The *donarium* was a thing of alabaster splendor. Its brightness made him squint against the sunlight that bounced off its white exterior. Both the temple and grand halls featured carved and polished alabaster columns, intricate mosaics and colorfully painted frescoes ornamenting every visible surface. Fragrant walled *hortium* of flowering herbs, citrus trees and elegantly paved pathways filled the spaces in between. Even in early autumn these warm, southern gardens sustained roses in full bloom. The climbing blood-red roses gave off a warmly familiar and redolent perfume reminiscent of home. His lips scowled as he wondered if Plutonium had uprooted and transplanted these rose bushes from his *mater* Corrina's garden. They seemed to be thriving here in Massilia. In fact, the entire compound was richly stunning and rivaled the finest villas in Rome. He bitterly noted how grandly Plutonium had prospered in his absence.

Conspicuously no official member of the household came to greet him. The *domesticus* ignored him and ran in manic circles as if possessed by *insania*. The few *domesticus* who happened to look in his direction, were quick to divert their eyes. No one even spoke to him. There were strange rumblings and much commotion behind what appeared to be a *lavari* shed. It sounded as if the *domesticus* were fighting. Vulgar words and shouting filled the air. He thought it odd Plutonium ran such a very disorganized *domus*. He walked alone through the courtyard, wondering when he was going to be formally greeted by his cousin. If Plutonium was at home, he was certainly being a rude host to show so little *hospitium* to a family member and allow them to remain unattended for so long a time. With every passing moment, his resentment grew. His inner tension and turmoil were already high. He tried to calm himself by concentrating on the primary purpose for being here, Columba's rescue. He also needed to be paid for two years' worth of grain and wine. One glance at the ornately decorated *donarium* of Jupiter assured him this should be a simple task. Plutonium appeared to be



wealthy enough to cover his debts. His thoughts lingered sullenly on the other personal debt owed. He had waited so long. His heart pounded with excitement as he realized Columba was finally within reach. She truly was near and hidden somewhere within these walls. He was owed a lost love and it was time for Plutonium to pay.

His eyes wandered the courtyard, hoping to catch a glimpse of the woman he had obsessed upon all these years. Where was she? His eyes swept across the empty *portico* hoping Columba's graceful figure would peek from a doorway and beckon to him. His throat tightened at the thought of Columba's soft voice whispering in his ear and pleading for his assistance. He was here for her and she had only to ask. Of course he would offer to be her *custos defensor*. He feared nothing from Plutonium. If he died protecting Columba, so be it. He wondered if she lived as an *obses* in Plutonium's *domus*? Did Plutonium hold her silently hostage and abuse her? Would she weep for joy when she finally saw him? He nervously ground his teeth as his agitation grew. Why oh why had he waited so long to reclaim what should always have been his?

He paced nervously across the courtyard, speculating on what might have been, and heard the raucous sounds of children. It was not the usual carefree sounds of playful, happy children. These were the tones of peevish sniveling, tears and monotonous whining. He followed the cries to a private *hortium* near the *domesticus'* quarters and saw a cluster of five expensively dressed *puers* doing what naughty boys do. Two boys were wrestling viciously and smacking each other in a dusty corner of the garden. Two boys were stomping lumps of horse dung to paste. The largest boy stood alone, whimpering for no apparent reason, yet they were all lavishly dressed in toga *praetextata*, fine woolen togas with Tyrian-purple borders trimmed with gold thread. The ceremonial togas struck him as highly inappropriate playwear for children. The eldest boy of about seven years of age was exceedingly plump, even by childish standards. The large boy stood in the courtyard, continually picking his nose and whining in the irritable tones of a colicky infant. The tiniest boy, who appeared barely old enough to stand, actually darted amongst the other boys as if he were a malicious sprite. The tiny boy kicked the older boys in the shins and ran off, squealing with delight over his ill-tempered handiwork.

A frown creased his brow as he concluded these boys must be the spawn of Plutonium.

The tiniest boy ran up to him and growled menacingly as if he were a *ferus* beast. He poised his tiny *caligae* above Atellus' foot, prepared to strike.

Atellus stepped aside a moment before the boy stomped his angry little foot down on his sandaled toes. He narrowed his eyes and glared at the little boy with his most intimidating stare until the boy's bravado withered and the child ran away.

The middle-sized boys, who appeared to be twins, ignored him completely and wandered stupidly about, amusing themselves by squashing their bare toes into piles of horse dung and punching each other in the arm. An odd boy with vacant eyes stared intently at him from the shadows. Plutonium's sons certainly appeared to be an unpromising bunch with which to build a legacy. He decided the boys were *incubi*, all

of them. He did not see evidence of their gentle *mater* Columba in any of their sour little faces.

He turned his back on the boys and wandered through a side garden, lightly touching the glossy leaves on the fruit trees and refreshing his mind with the sharp scent of lemons. He heard a bellowing shout and saw a very plump, elderly man huffing toward him, wildly swinging his arms from side to side at a much faster rate than he was actually walking. He wondered what the man wanted. Perhaps this was the overly tardy *domus-administrator* finally come to do his job? As the man approached he gasped in shock.

Plutonium roared toward him, looking dishabille and distracted. His toga was rumpled and sweat soaked. His chubby, pink face glistened with perspiration. "Atellus, my favorite *patruelis*!"

Atellus stood stunned. Was Plutonium pretending to welcome him with affection? What manner of hypocrisy was this?

Plutonium marched toward him, grinning with outstretched hands that threatened to envelop him in a moist hug. "*Patruelis* Atellus, how long have you been snooping around? Excuse me, I have been reprimanding a very wayward *ancilla* and I'm exhausted from my trials. The nasty girl put up a good fight. You wouldn't believe what I've suffered through. It's not easy running a *domus* this size. *Servitus* can be vicious, let me tell you, especially the Celts," he guffawed. "A horrible situation arose where I was forced to take disciplinary measures into my own hands but I'm used to being in command." His eyes rolled heavenward. "My troubles remain unresolved. I have yet to consult with Columba on the matter—"

Atellus' heart lurched frantically at the mention of Columba's name. "I hope your wife is well and present?" he mumbled.

"Of course she's here. Where else would she be?" Plutonium looked preoccupied. His gaze traveled toward the multitude of parked *carruses* and snorting oxen now stationed inside the compound's walls. He thrust his lips out pettishly. "I must admit, Atellus, your arrival came at a very inopportune time. We have suffered severe personal setbacks. The rebellion in Britannia has caused uncertainty in Rome and widespread problems for everyone. I've learned to lower my expectations and scale back. I have suffered." His gaze darkened. His hand gently tapped his chest. "I cannot bring myself to speak of it. It's heartbreaking. The grand hall is half the size as originally planned." His brown eyes took on the doleful expression of a sad dog though he seemed to will himself to sound cheerful. "Great Jupiter! It's good to see you." The blubbered greeting sounded completely insincere and forced. He flung his arms wide, exposing soggy sweat stains. "Embrace me."

Atellus balked at the idea of being hugged and pretended to misunderstand Plutonium's gesture. He stepped back but Plutonium lunged forward and grasped him in a moist embrace. His spine stiffened as Plutonium's hold tightened.

Plutonium quickly released Atellus and turned to the side. He clucked with pride and rolled his melancholy eyes toward his private temple of Jupiter, calling attention to the looming structure as if anything so colossal could ever be overlooked. "As you can see, I've got my own private *donarium* dedicated to Jupiter. Lucky me, at least that turned out nicely." His hand fluttered upward dramatically. "I practically live among the gods."

"It's very nice." Atellus begrudgingly gave his approval to the *donarium*, knowing how much Plutonium craved status and praise, but he was also struck by how exceedingly soft and aged his cousin had become in only eight years' time. When he had wrapped his arms around Plutonium, it had felt as if he were hugging an elderly matron. Plutonium wore his hair cropped high over his ears with a short fringe of bangs that resembled a small cup set atop a full moon. It was quite unflattering and only made his jowly face look rounder. He was stunned at the change in his older cousin. The man before him hardly resembled the bully of his youth or the villainous *latro* who had stolen his true love and had used her to breed a disappointing litter of boys. The man standing before him more closely resembled a pouting child, desperate for approval. The change was so profound he could not reconcile his memories of the past with the visual truth of the present.

Atellus struggled to think of something complimentary to say. He had to say something to maintain the pretense of cordiality. After all, he had come to Plutonium's compound to be reimbursed for his grain and wine and he did not wish to estrange Plutonium so early in the visit. He smiled inwardly. The real estrangement would come later, after he had been paid for two years' worth of goods, bedded Columba and stole her away... His eyes carefully scanned up and down Plutonium's frame, trying to think of something diplomatic to say. Plutonium's cheeks were baby smooth and pale pink, as if he seldom saw the sun. His body looked too soft to risk mounting and riding a horse. His hips were broader than his shoulders, and for a man who should be in his prime, he had the look of a spoiled, useless thing. Plutonium wouldn't last a week in Belgica. The truth thoughtlessly bubbled out of his mouth. "Plutonium, even after all these years in Massilia, you remain the epitome of an affluent citizen of Rome." He managed to sound sincere as he said it.

Plutonium beamed from the praise. "Thank you."

Atellus stood aghast as he mentally calculated Plutonium was barely thirty-three years of age, though he seemed much older and more dissipated than his scant years could account for.

Plutonium looked Atellus over disapprovingly and pronounced his unflattering verdict. "Atellus, your hair is far too long! It curls past your shoulders. How has this happened? Do they not have *forfex* in Gallia to clip hair? It's shocking. Do you want to be mistaken for a Celt?" He reared back in repulsion, his fingers fluttered nervously in the air. "Good citizens of Rome do not wear their hair this way. You're bearded and sun browned. Except for your noble *praetextata* draped over your shoulders you look like a common *milite* or, worse, one of the Celts. Have you lost your pride?"

Atellus lowered his eyes to hide a smile. It was true he was sun browned. He spent his days outdoors on horseback, riding between fields and vineyards, taking tallies and settling local disputes on the farms and villages. He deliberately let his hair grow long and wore it pulled back in a braid the way the men of Belgica wore their hair. He had also omitted the Roman ritual of daily shaving while traveling on the road. A thick, bushy *barba* now covered his jaw.

"I will send one of my lovely *ancilla* to you later," Plutonium pledged. "To shave those boar bristles from your face and cut that awful hair." He squinted at Atellus as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "*Patruelis*, I must say you've really let yourself go. We have other *hospes* arriving soon, dignitaries from Rome. You look like a *ferus* beast. You'll frighten them all. With that hairy face, you more closely resembled a Gaulish farmer than a Roman nobleman. You're a Dolabella. It's embarrassing. Something must be done."

He knew he was not doing his part to keep up the façade of nobility and he didn't care. Living in Belgica had permanently changed him. He had slowly abandoned one irritating custom after another until finally he no longer adhered to many Roman customs at all. He dressed like a Celt. Lived like a Celt. Ate like a Celt, and now he most certainly looked like a Celt, and he preferred it that way. The one Roman status symbol he refused to give up was his horse Rubus.

Plutonium continued to harangue Atellus. "Without your crimson-trimmed *praetextata* and straight posture you could easily be mistaken for a common man." He shuddered at such a fate. "Your arms are so ropey, what do you do all day, hammer on a forge like a *ferrarius*? You do understand that's what *servus* are for? You must let them do their jobs." He gently poked Atellus' lean abdomen. "Are you starving in Belgica? I almost feel guilty accepting your grain," he laughed. "Operative word being 'almost'." His voice dropped to a harsh whisper. "By the way, when the dignitaries arrive, please do not embarrass us with the retelling of quaint customs and the general boredom of provincial Belgica. Try to be cheerful and present an optimistic outlook." His eyes bulged. "We all live with the threatening blade of Emperor Nero's *pugio* pressed to our throats. Nero is currently unimpressed with the West and withholding of his support. We could all be abandoned any day. Do you understand how serious this is?" He wrung his thick fingers. "I cannot stress this enough, above all, do not mention the troubles with the Britons in front of the dignitaries." He hissed a stern warning, "We are all sick to death of the subject."

"I will try not to embarrass you, *patruelis*." Atellus' eyes gleamed with anticipation at the thought of embarrassing Plutonium and stealing beautiful Columba away from this puffed-up *ineptus*. "Nero is still in power?"

Plutonium scowled at Atellus' stupidity. "Great Jupiter! Are you serious? Of course Nero is emperor. How isolated are you?"

Atellus hid a subtle smile. He was very isolated and he liked it that way. "News reaches me slowly."

"No doubt of that. Belgica is the edge of nowhere," Plutonium sneered.

Atellus raised his chin upward. "Don't forget you're the one who sent me there."

Plutonium realized his blunder and gasped.

Atellus' eyes focused with the intensity of a hawk on the now-quailing Plutonium.

Plutonium's bottom lip trembled. "That decision was made with the good of the Dolabella family and the betterment of Rome in mind."

"Of course it was."

Plutonium pouted. "I'm sorry to hear such selfishness from your lips. One of us had to go to Belgica. Do you never consider a higher good?"

Atellus loomed over Plutonium. Since their teens, though he was younger, he had always been much taller. "So you speak now for all Dolabellas and for Rome?" The comment was meant as a blunt confrontation.

Plutonium's jowly face sagged. He seemed lost in thought. His expression waffled. "I suppose so..."

In that moment, the truth came crashing through. Atellus realized Plutonium was a scared, furry little *cuniculus* at heart. Why had he not seen that before? There was no bully here. There was no cunning plan. There was no intimidation. The battle was Atellus' to win. He would soften Plutonium up, steal his wealth, his wife and then leave. He took hold of Plutonium's plump arm and gently steered him toward the many rows of idle *carruses*. "You are *imperator* here. I can see you have greatly prospered. Let me add to that prosperity. Come and see the wealth of Belgica."

Plutonium's eyes lit with interest. "I must summon my sons." He held up his pink hand and spread his fingers wide. "I have five sons," he shamelessly boasted. "How many do you have?" He didn't wait for Atellus' answer before shouting, "Plonticus!" He waved toward the eldest boy, who was busy picking his nose and sobbing. "Come here, *Pater's* ruling his empire and I want you to watch and learn."

Plonticus wiped his nose on the elegant toga *praetextata* and ambled toward his *pater* with his eyes focused on the ground.

"Look up, Plonticus," Plutonium urged his son. "Hold your head high or you'll never be emperor."

Plonticus sullenly approached his *pater*, eyeing Atellus with suspicion the entire time. He leaned close to his *pater's* ear and whispered, "Who is that man? Did he steal that *praetextata*?"

Plutonium blustered. "This is our *patrueilis* from Belgica, Atellus."

The boy blanched and spoke in a whisper-thin voice. "He's a Dolabella? *Pater*, he doesn't look like one of us." He peeked half hidden from behind his *pater's* toga. "His face is hairy and fierce. The *barba* covering his chin scares me."

Plutonium frowned at his timid son. "Be brave, Plonticus. I know Atellus looks like a cave *ursus*, but after we shave him, all will be well." His eyes narrowed at Atellus. "Are you happy now? You've frightened the children. Please don't do the same to the

visiting dignitaries." He waved the other boys closer. "Come along, help *Pater* count. Let's do a quick *convenire* of the carts."

The twins ignored their *pater's* request for assistance and continued punching each other in a far corner of the *hortium*. The other two boys were reluctantly coaxed from their shadowy hiding places.

Plutonium bumbled toward the *carruses* with three of his five sons following close behind.

As they walked across the compound, Atellus noticed little Plonticus had already adopted Plutonium's effete mannerisms and waddled beside his *pater* as if he were a grouchy little goose. It was a sad sight. The boy's future had already taken shape and it was hopeless.

Plutonium approached the first *carrus* with reserved delight. "Let's see what you've brought me."

Atellus firmly corrected Plutonium. "Let me show you what I've brought for *Rome*."

Plutonium's lip curled downward. "Whatever." He walked from *carrus* to *carrus*, throwing tarps aside and counting sacks of grain. His eyes lit with approval as they swept across the vast panorama of *carruses* yet to be tallied. "It appears as if you've shipped a third more grain than last year. I see you've finally decided to get tough with the Gauls." He smiled with pride as if the achievement were his alone. "That's wonderful. I congratulate you. The savages are lost without a cruel leader. Whatever you've done, don't feel ashamed of yourself. We all must do what we have to do, so be it. There should be no apologizing for good results. Each *carrus* is piled high with grain and that's a good thing for all of us." His eyes rolled toward Atellus. "Emperor Nero will be so pleased."

Atellus' tone was firm. "You are well-connected to the emperor? You've spoken with Nero?"

"No." Plutonium shrugged. "We've never met."

Atellus huffed.

"But someday soon Nero and I shall meet. I'm certain of it." Plutonium continued snooping through the contents of the *carruses*. He lifted a tarp and rummaged through one of the *carruses* and found stacks of terra cotta wine *amphorae*. His eyes lit with delight when he discovered the vast quantities of wine. For a moment he stood frozen in disbelief and held a shuddering hand over his heart. "How much wine did you bring?"

Atellus' eyes narrowed. He motioned toward the largest *carruses* parked in the back of the compound. "A lot."

Plutonium's shoulders relaxed as he heaved a quiet sigh of relief. "Jupiter is being gentle with me. Now I will be able to play the generous host when my *hospes* arrive from Rome."

Atellus' eyes blazed indignantly. "I hope you'll remember to be generous with me. You owe me a large debt, both personal and monetarily, and I won't be put off another day." He allowed the full irony to seep into his voice but he could tell from Plutonium's vacant expression he had missed the pointed hint about Columba.

"But we're family!" Plutonium blubbered. He frantically looked side-to-side as if shocked by his own outburst. His voice dropped to a whisper to avoid being heard by his sons and the multitude of men guarding the *carruses*. "Can't you just let it go for now? Must the debt be mentioned with so many ears listening? I'm on the cusp of getting an auspicious appointment. It's final. I can't afford to repay you at this time and I certainly cannot afford to be portrayed as a debtor in front of the dignitaries. That would be very bad for my career. Bad for our entire family and that includes you." He grew sullen.

"I'm not the one who got us into debt." Atellus stepped closer and whispered in Plutonium's ear. "*Patruelis*, you had better think this through. I've not been repaid for anything in the last two years. Not one bronze *nummus*, with Nero's stark profile stamped upon it, has come my way. I wonder if Rome would be shocked to hear this? I'm here and I'm not going away empty-handed. You must do right by me. If I talk to the dignitaries your career will go nowhere. We both know no one trusts the judgment of an excessive debtor and your debts are excessive."

"It was Columba's doing," Plutonium whined. "She was the visionary who suggested the compound be expanded to palatial proportions. It was she who persuaded me into believing the private *donarium* would lend an air of prestige and importance to our *domus*. I didn't even want it!" he pouted. "It was Columba who insisted the compound have all the sophistication and comforts of a Roman villa so we would become known in elite circles as excellent hosts and the family to check in on when Roman dignitaries visit Massilia. I didn't do it for myself. I did it for the good of the entire Dolabella family and our good reputation is beginning to pay off." He grew defensive. "My name had been nominated for several prestigious and profitable posts in Rome. In the future, this will be advantageous for you as well." He waved an authoritative hand toward the west. "Someday, I can rescue you from Belgica. Once I am in the senate, I promise you'll never have to see that wasteland again. I promise I will repay you for the grain and wine, but not now. Good things are sure to happen for all of us, if we just hang on a little longer." He scowled at the earthenware jars from Belgica. "Before we even discuss anything as premature as repayment, is this wine any good?" He frowned.

Atellus drew a deep breath and struggled to control his rising temper. "You know it's good." Rage simmered in his heart. It pained him to hear Plutonium blame sweet Columba for his poor choices. He crossed his arms defensively over his chest. "If truth be told, the Gauls make excellent, rich wine that far surpasses the quality of the finest Roman wines. You were happy to drink all of last year's wine, were you not?" His lip curled at the edge.

Plutonium sheepishly admitted, "Yes, it was good, but we did have some unforeseen spoilage issues."

Columba gracefully strolled into the courtyard. Her lovely face bore a preoccupied expression. She headed directly toward Plutonium. She did not even look toward Atellus. "Plutonium, I must speak to you on that matter we just spoke of. I have yet another good idea Rutila won't like."

As Columba approached, Atellus' breath caught in his throat. His chest tightened and his heart raced. Time simply stopped as she glided toward him. She was so beautiful. The seductive scent of rose oil and amber floated in her wake. A breeze from the Mediterranean blew against the hem of her *stola*, exposing her delicate ankles laced with the daintiest, featherlight *sandalium*. Her flowing white *stola* fluttered in the breeze. It snugly crossed her lush breasts and pinned at her smooth shoulders, exposing graceful arms and slender wrists. He blinked in disbelief. Surly even Venus was not as beautiful as she. The sunlight shone at her back, proving the *stola* was made of the finest and nearly transparent cloth. Apparently giving birth to five sons had only enhanced her already-curvaceous figure. He could see almost everything through the sheer fabric. His chest tensed and his body stirred involuntarily. He fought to control himself by brutally digging his fingernails into the palms of his clenched fists. He knew if she walked any closer and did not acknowledge him, he would go *insania*. How could he endure a moment more of this? He forced his eyes upward. Her dark curls were piled high on her head. A golden *diadema* glittered in the sunlight and held her glossy ringlets in place. She carried herself with regal bearing. His heart pounded. He felt as if their eight-year absence had never taken place. Any resentment he may have held against her marriage to Plutonium evaporated in that moment. A stinging assault of emotions crushed against his chest. He could hardly breathe. *Columba, regina of doves. I love you. I always have.*

When she came within arm's length, he trembled. For a moment, his eyes flickered shut. His nostrils drew in the warm scent of her perfumed curls. He ached to reach out to her but he dared not greet Columba with an embrace. It was inappropriate to touch another man's wife. He quietly consoled himself. Touching would come later once he had spoken to her in private and shared his plans. He couldn't wait to be alone with her. He certainly planned to touch all of her. For now, he would try his best to control himself. He stood, shaking on the inside. His lips quietly parted. He managed to speak, "Columba, how lovely you look." He spoke reverently. It was all he could think to say to her, though he had so much more to share. He wanted to shout, *Columba! I'm here to claim you as my own and take you home with me.*

Columba squinted at him, as if trying to place his face. A flash of recognition shone in her eyes a moment before her lips turned downward. "Oh, it's you." She curtly acknowledged him. "I didn't recognize you, Atellus. It looks as if Belgica has treated you unforgivingly." Her slender fingertips darted forward to graze across his roughened hand. She delivered a terse inspection. "How sun browned and calloused



you are." She spoke coolly. She turned away from him and faced Plutonium, and gave him her full attention. "As soon as you're finished here, we must talk."

Atellus reeled from the cold tones in Columba's deep, throaty voice. It was not the soft voice he wanted to hear and certainly not the reception he expected to receive. He felt as if he had been struck in the chest. He watched in stunned silence as Columba whispered in Plutonium's ear. He couldn't hear what she was saying but worried because her expression was tense and sour. He noted she was certainly as beautiful as he remembered, but he did not recall her being so haughty. He was incredibly disappointed she had not smiled at him. Not even the slightest hint of a hidden smile flickered in her dark eyes. She seemed completely unmoved by his surprise appearance in Massilia. He worried about her cool reaction toward him. What could it mean? He had never meant to leave Columba behind, vulnerable and unguarded within Plutonium's reach. He wondered if she blamed him for her current situation and Antonia's death. He felt a stab of sharp anxiety. Antonia's tragedy was his fault. His troubled thoughts wandered. Perhaps she was angry with him for not coming to her rescue five babies ago?

He couldn't just stand there, looking *ineptus*. He had to do something. He reached inside his toga *praetextata* and pulled a silk-wrapped package from beneath. He had carried the package for weeks now, always keeping it close to his heart. The package contained an ivory *fibula* that had belonged to Antonia. For months now he had fantasized about handing the lovingly polished *fibula* to Columba. He imagined Columba's large brown eyes filling with tears once she received it. He had hoped they could grieve together. After all, they had each loved Antonia in their own way. He hoped the gesture would provide some healing between them and perhaps open a door to the future. In past months, that fantasy had sustained him during the worst moments of loneliness and grief. He delivered the wrapped *fibula* to Columba's fragile hands. "Antonia wished for you to have this," he spoke softly. He was prepared to enfold Columba in his arms if she collapsed, became hysterical or simply allowed him to comfort her.

Columba cautiously accepted the offering. She unfolded the purple silk surrounding the delicate piece of ivory. She stared down at the carved *fibula*, looking unimpressed with the simple piece of jewelry. "I told Antonia she was *insania* for following you to Belgica." She dismissed her late sister with a frown. "I knew she would die in the west. I told her not to go. She didn't have to. She had other suitors." Her voice sounded critical and cold-hearted. "She volunteered to go because she pitied you. You did know that, didn't you?" Strong implication of blame colored her voice.

"I did know that." He was stricken by Columba's stern response.

"Is my *fratris* still alive?" Columba inquired about Rosa.

Atellus rallied at the mention of his daughter. "Rosa is a beauty and a very clever girl." He spoke with pride.

"You still have just the one girl, no sons?"

His shoulders tensed. Was she deliberately trying to provoke him? He did not like the haughty tone of dismissal he heard in Columba's voice.

Columba's beautiful mouth drooped at the corners. "I have a wonderful idea. Perhaps someday Rosa can marry one of our sons." She offered her boys as if they were great prizes, chucking the eldest boy beneath his chubby chin. "But not my precious little Plonticus." She pulled Plonticus to her side, possessively excluding her favorite son from the betrothal scheme. "I have grander plans for him." Her voice soared majestically, oblivious to the weight of her insult. "I think Rosa should keep the *fibula*. It will mean more to her." She bluntly handed the *fibula* back to Atellus.

He tucked the *fibula* under his cloak, realizing Columba was right. The *fibula* would mean more to Rosa. When she grew up, Rosa would treasure her *mater's fibula*. For whatever reason, the memento meant little to Columba. Her lack of compassion truly surprised him. He wondered if she was hurt or frustrated at seeing him again. Perhaps she did blame him for Antonia's death. He could not guess the exact cause of her coldness but he certainly felt it. This Columba felt as if she was a stranger and in truth she was. A horrible thought washed over him. Had he been mistaken? Had he misread her girlish smiles and glances? He was forced to reflect on the fact that for all these years his image of Columba had existed solely in his mind. He knew little of the actual woman who stood before him. The woman before him was not his dream woman. She was not his dove. The scowling expression on Columba's beautiful face clearly communicated she found him lacking as well. His heart burst. His gut lurched. For a horrible moment, he thought he might be ill.

He and Columba stared at each other. A hard silence hung between them that even the children dared not break.

Plutonium seemed oblivious to the rising tension. He blurted out enthusiastically, "Atellus has brought a large shipment of wine."

"Wine?" Columba snapped to attention. She nearly shrieked the word. Her face lit with real joy for the first time since entering the courtyard. "We have wine? Show me!" She bustled toward the *carruses*, eager to locate the wine. "Where is the wine?"

Atellus watched from a polite distance their desperate joy as Plutonium and Columba counted the *carruses* filled with wine *amphorae*.

Columba shrieked with delight at every tarp that was tossed aside to reveal liquid treasure. A covetous look burned in her eyes.

"I do need to be paid for that," Atellus gently reminded them.

Columba wielded on him to deliver a curt but vague promise of reimbursement. "You will be paid in good time," she assured him. "We don't even know if your wine is any good." She frowned and whispered something in Plutonium's ear.

"Last year's grain was good," Atellus insisted. "You ate all of that. You can pay me now for the grain." He grew suspicious of the couple's greedy antics.

Columba seemed to recalculate her strategy. Her expression softened. "Of course it was good." She pasted a sweet smile on her lips. "But this is a very bad time," she

stalled. "I must have this wine now. Roman dignitaries and their assemblage arrive tomorrow. They expect to be entertained. You'll have to wait."

Atellus' spine straightened. He stood tall and stepped toward them. "I'm a Dolabella," he firmly spoke over Columba. "I'm family. I'm owed for two years' worth of crops and much more." His eyes skimmed over Columba's lush curves. As nasty as her attitude was, her body still enticed him. "When do I get some entertainment and respect? I'm owed both." Living in Belgica had made him blunt. He found it impossible to hold back on his *patruelis* and his greedy wife. Life on the frontier had cost him the skills of Roman diplomacy. He had forgotten how to speak in vacuities. He was reduced to speaking his mind. "If I'm not paid," he threatened, "I'll be forced to take the matter to the visiting dignitaries. If the Empire loses Belgica due to personal *ineptus* or mismanagement," he paused for effect, "I hate to think who will be blamed and it won't be me."

Columba and Plutonium gasped simultaneously.

\* \* \* \* \*

Atellus was pampered that *vesper*. An herbed lamb was roasted in his honor and a pretty *ancilla* named Janni was sent to his *cubiculum* as a companion and *tonstrix* to groom him.

Janni had a gentle voice and pleasant attitude. She massaged his tense muscles with soft, patient hands and sweetly scented almond oil.

He luxuriated in the feeling. He had not enjoyed a woman's pampering touch in a very long time and he was starved for it. It was a welcome distraction from his current tension and disappointment. If his woman-starved senses had not been so attuned to Janni's soft curves and giving attitude, the massage might have lulled him to sleep. That couldn't happen, not yet. As exhausted as he was, he knew sleep must wait. Janni had a task to complete and he had yet to bed her. There was no way he would allow himself to fall asleep before having that pleasure.

Janni cheerfully pursued her task. Her delicate hands expertly stroked a steel *novacula* against a *cos* until the sharp edge of the blade gleamed. She stood behind Atellus and tipped his chin upward. She carefully shaved his whiskery *barba* from his jaw. With every swipe of the razor, she stopped to inspect her handiwork. Her eyes widened at what she discovered. "*Dominor*." She addressed him formally as her master, in a wispy voice. "You're a very *formosus* man beneath this *barba*. I like your face very much. It has a strong *amius virilus*. Why do you cover it with hair?" She ran her hands lovingly across his half-shaved jaw. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Do not tell *Dominor* Plutonium I said this, but I would be pleased to be your *ancilla* and *amatrix* during your stay in Massilia."

He smiled into Janni's beautiful brown eyes. "I would be very pleased to have you as my *amatrix*." His fingertips grazed the side of her soft arms. He had not had a lover in so long his body ached for one. "Are you one of a Plutonium's favorites?"

Janni's gaze dropped to the ground. Obviously she was.

"I'm sorry to hear that." He reached upward and gently stroked the side of her face. "It must be awful."

"It is." Janni giggled but quickly gasped in alarm. "Please tell no one I said so." She hurried to correct her admission.

He smiled and gently patted her shoulder. "Your secret's safe. Tonight you are my favorite. I will enjoy having you as my *amatrix* very much."

She smiled and continued with the task of shaving. She stood behind him as he sat. She provocatively pressed her full breasts against his back and tipped his chin upward to scrape his bushy black beard away. "*Dominor*," she whispered in his ear. "You look *ferocia* but you speak kindly. I like that." She bent down and brushed her lips gently across the top of his head. Her words were the softest whisper. "I was happy to be sent to you. I give myself to you willingly."

A chill ran up his spine as she spoke. His chest tightened. True willingness amongst the *servus* was such a rarity. He knew Janni had no true choice. She had to submit and serve him. That she should offer this privilege meant so much. Willingness was a rare gift between *dominor* and *servus* and one he greatly preferred. Taking an unwilling *ancilla* was a misery for both parties. He knew some men preferred it but he did not. At this stage of his life, he refused to do it. He refused to take what was not offered. His thoughts wandered toward fantasies of thrusting his *dolon* between Janni's willingly parted thighs. His pulse quickened. It was difficult to sit still. Great Jupiter, he couldn't wait to be done with the grooming and move forward to the pleasure. A faint smile crossed his lips. "Janni, I turn myself over to you completely." His head tipped back against the soft cushion of her breasts. He pressed against her bosom and gently rocked his head from side to side, luxuriating in the feeling. Her generous breasts felt wonderfully *mollis* and comforting. "Hurry."

"Stop moving. I might cut you." Janni lifted the steel *novacula* away from his throat. "You must sit still during the *tondeo*. Your *barba* is very thick and *ferus*."

He couldn't wait to see her naked. *I've got something else to show you that's thick and ferus*. He grinned. He wished she would just hurry, but he allowed her to take her time and do a good job, knowing her handiwork would be judged carefully. Janni had been ordered by Columba to make him presentable to the dignitaries, and after spending eight years in Belgica, he knew she had a daunting task to perform. Janni was a well-trained and obedient *ancilla*. She performed her tasks perfectly. He was bathed, manicured and shaved. He did not have to correct her or ask for anything. She offered or acted before words even formed on his lips.

When Janni finished shaving him, she took hold of his long, wavy hair, twisted its length around her wrist and picked up a sharp pair of *forfex*.

"Stop." He bolted forward when he realized what she was about to do. His hair tugged against Janni's hold. "I do not want my hair *tonsilis*."

Janni stood before him, triumphantly pointing the sharp pair of shears upward. "Do not worry, *Dominator* Atellus. I know how to *tonsilis* hair. I know how to clip the bangs very short and even. I am *Dominator* Plutonium's personal *tonstrix*."

His heart dropped as she spoke. He was sickened at the idea of resembling Plutonium in any way, especially his hair. He stalwartly resisted the notion of returning to Belgica looking the part of a shorn Roman. "No."

Janni's bottom lip thrust outward. "Plutonium trusts me to do a good job *tonsilis* his hair and I shall do the same for you." Her voice quaked. She seemed insulted he did not trust her skills.

He saw Janni's feelings were injured and relented. "Plutonium's ways are not mine. We are very different men, living different lives. I live among the people of Belgica. They bring honor to me and I honor them by adopting a few of their customs. You may *tonsilis* my hair to my shoulders but no shorter."

A slight smile crossed Janni's lips. "Yes, *Dominator*." She unwound his hair from her wrist and let it hang down his back. She stroked his wavy, black hair admiringly. "Unbraided, your hair is so glossy and *caesaries*. It is as beautiful as a woman's. I agree it would be a shame to *tonsilis* it all." She started at the bottom and carefully clipped his hair to his shoulders. When she was finished, she held up a polished, copper *speculum* so he could see his newly transformed reflection.

He gazed sideways into the *speculum*. His reflection surprised him. He admitted he looked better shaved and trimmed. He had not seen the strong lines of his jaw in a very long time. He looked much younger than he expected and much less *ferocia* than he felt. "Thank you, Janni."

Janni beamed with pride. "*Dominator*, you look as *formosus* and *virilis* as a god."

He stood. His tall frame loomed above the diminutive Janni. "Are we done?" he asked hopefully.

Janni stared up at him with innocent eyes. "Yes, *Dominator*, we are finished."

"Actually, we are just starting." He reached for Janni's hand and pulled her close. "Come, share my *lectus*." He couldn't wait to feel her soft body beside him in bed. He wrapped his arms around her in an enveloping embrace. He bent down and brushed his cheek against her dark curls. When her warm body pressed against his, he squeezed his eyes shut and thought of Columba, not the cold woman he had met for the first time today but his Columba, the *amare* he had dreamed of for years. His heart ached with emptiness. Tears of grief stung his eyes and he did not want Janni to see them. The scant tears were for him alone. He did not desire pity. He had been so badly mistaken about Columba. He loathed himself for being so blind. The possibility of real love had fled his life. There was no peace in his heart. His willful illusions proved him to be a complete *ludificare*. He knew the truth about Columba and he was sorry he knew it. He almost wished he could forget and have his illusion back. He now knew he had been completely wrong all these years but it was still painful to let go of an image so deeply branded in his soul. His eyes saw the truth, Columba Dolabella was an indifferent

stranger, but a stubborn corner of his heart continued to cling to a cherished ideal *amare*, his perfect love, Columba, *regina* of doves.

Janni was neither of these women. She not an illusion, she was real. She was merely a sweet, young *ancilla*, happy to escape Plutonium's bed for a night. She did not know him. She did not love him. He did not love her. They had no future beyond this *cubiculum*, but at least Janni offered warmth and compassion. For him and Columba there would be no loving rapture, no reunion, no *voluptas exsultatio* to lift their hearts toward the gods. He knew that now and felt absolutely grateful for what Janni offered.

He led Janni toward the *lectus* that had been freshly prepared for his pleasure and slumber. He was starved for a woman and badly needed an *amatrix* for his bed even if he couldn't have an *amare* in his heart. Today had broken his heart. Rage, sorrow and shame at his mistake competed for his full attention. He needed a distraction. Janni was a willing and soft, smooth distraction. He pulled her close to his chest in a crushing embrace. His hands brushed across her smooth shoulders. She felt so fragile, as if she were nothing at all. He admitted Columba had been a wholly self-deluded illusion. She too was nothing of substance. His arms tightened around Janni. Why had he created a false idol in his heart? His body tensed. What was lacking in him that he couldn't love a real woman with flaws? Would real love never enter his life? His jaw clenched. His arms squeezed Janni too tightly. He felt her stiffen and gasp. He immediately loosened his hold on her. He stepped back and looked at the slightly anxious look in her eyes. His fingers tangled in her dark curls. "Are you afraid I will hurt you?" He spoke with soft reassurance. "I promise I won't." He felt badly about startling her. "My thoughts are *anxietas* and I need comfort. Please comfort me."

Janni lifted her chin bravely and slid the coarse linen toga from her shoulder and down her rounded arm. She pushed the rough fabric past her waist. She was delicately boned, small even for a woman. Her heavy breasts looked too large for her slight frame. She was quick to cover her breasts with her hands.

His body leapt to attention at the first sight of her. She was very feminine with beautiful olive skin. He gently pulled her hands away. "Why are you hiding? Let me look at you."

Janni glanced at the floor in obvious discomfort. "Columba says I am *mirus*. She laughs at me."

He was angered sweet Janni had been humiliated and called misshapen, no doubt by a jealous woman. Timidity showed on the poor girl's face. His fingers lightly grazed the tips of her breasts. "Believe me, you're not *mirus*. You're very lovely." The moment his fingers touched her breasts, his *dolon* grew hard. He reached for her hand and guided it toward his rising *dolon*. "Feel this." He firmly gripped her hand and would not allow her to pull away. "Feel what your beautiful body does to mine."

Janni's small hand wrapped around him and gave his *dolon* a light caress. A slight smile flickered across her lips.

His closed his eyes and drew a deep breath as she touched him. He longed to press himself against her palm and beg to be stroked by her soft hand. "I think you're very *venustus*. You're gentle, you have a sweet voice and I want you very much."

Janni gratefully drank his words in. Her eyes lit with courage. "Then take me, *Dominor*." She eased the toga over her round hips and let it drop to the floor. She gracefully stepped out of it and lay across the *lectus* with her arms stretched above her head.

His throat tightened as he walked toward the *lectus*. It had been a long time since a woman had willingly offered herself in this way. She looked so lovely stretched across the bed. His body begged him to take her. He was more than ready to take her—he only wished he loved her. His heart screamed for love but this was all that was offered. For tonight it would have to be enough.

He sat on the edge of the *lectus* and ran his hands across her bare skin. Her skin was so soft. He was grateful to see no signs of abuse. "Plutonium is *beneficus* with you?" he asked softly.

Janni gazed up at him looking slightly anxious. "*Dominor* Plutonium is kind to me but inconsistent." She appeared troubled by the hastily blurted confession. "Often, he cannot finish what he starts." She nervously bit her lip. "Please do not mention I said this."

"I won't say anything," he whispered. "And don't worry, I always finish what I start." He lay down on the *lectus* beside her and rolled onto his side. His long legs nearly hung off the end of the *lectus*. He pulled Janni beneath him. Her body was all lushly rounded curves. She was soft everywhere he touched. He took his weight on his elbows for fear she might feel crushed. He knew his height and breadth could be intimidating and he did not want her to feel overwhelmed. He looked into her large eyes to gauge her mood. She stared back at him, looking sweetly compliant and ready to serve. He wished he saw passion, fire or love in her eyes but he did not. She had been truthful. She was willing, nothing more. "Part your thighs for me." His aching, hard *dolon* refused to be put off a moment longer.

She arched against the *lectus* and parted her thighs.

He rubbed the head of his *dolon* against her warm sheath, growing slick from his motions. He closed his eyes in ecstasy. Janni's body felt wet and welcoming. He couldn't wait to sink between the plush lips of her sheath and feel all of her snug embrace.

Janni shifted her weight beneath him and wrapped her legs tightly around his waist. Her hips tilted upward and pressed against him, inviting him to enter.

He gritted his teeth. The offered position was too provocative to resist. It had been too long. He could feel the heat rolling off her body and smell her musky, aroused scent. He slowly plunged into her as his body tensed and trembled from the sheer effort of holding back. His *dolon* took its first hot squeeze from her sheath and he nearly came. He groaned in what sounded like extreme agony. She felt so wonderful, he knew he'd

never last. He pumped slowly inside her, almost holding his breath until he felt lightheaded. Why had he gone without a woman for so long? He vowed it would never happen again. This was too wonderful to willingly forego.

Janni slightly wiggled beneath him.

"Don't." His breath caught. Her tiniest movements nearly sent him over the edge. He gazed down at her. Her breasts trembled high on her rib cage. The sight was stunning. Her sheath locked him in a tight caress. He thought of Columba's lush breasts gently bouncing beneath her sheer *stola* as she strode across the courtyard. He bit his lip. He didn't want to think of Columba but he did. His testes tightened and rose. He whimpered, knowing he was going to lose it. He threw his head back in abandon. His *dolon* pumped furiously as it emptied into Janni. He came so hard his stomach muscles clenched violently. He poured into Janni, growling softly and making pathetic sounds as if he were dying, and at that moment, he was. His heart was empty. Love was gone. Columba was dead to him. At that moment, he could not bear to look at Janni. He rolled onto his side, gasping, and stared up at the ceiling with his heart pounding. He closed his eyes. This was bad. *Columba, regina of doves, was dead to him.* He lay still, panting for many long minutes. His thoughts dwelled somberly on Columba.

Janni's soft hand reached over to tentatively stroke the side of his face.

It startled him. His troubled thoughts had carried him far away and he almost forgot Janni was there. His face twitched from her unexpected, featherlight touch. "I'm sorry." His attention returned to the present. He took hold of her hand and gently placed it against his heart. "I want to thank you. I badly needed the *solari* you generously gave. I didn't mean to pull away."

"*Dominor Atellus.*" Janni rolled to her side and propped her head on the palm of her hand. Her eyes fixed on him. "I willingly offer you more *solari* if you need more. Why do you look so *anxietas*?" she asked cautiously. "This was meant to bring you pleasure and peace."

His gaze traveled over the rolling landscape of her curves. How lovely she would look with her breasts thrust forward and her wrists tied behind her back. That image played in his mind. "Would you like to see me smile?"

Janni's eyes became wide and serious. She nodded her head slightly. "Yes."

"Then lie down." His eyes hooded. He loved the role of *dominor*. He cherished the experience of having a woman trust him enough to willingly do as he asked. He was sorry to see a slight look of apprehension cross Janni's brow. He knew he could not do all he wanted to without frightening her. He could not blame her. No doubt she had suffered in her role as Plutonium's *ancilla*. That situation was common with so many *ancillas*. Once a woman was forced, she hated submission. It was a pity. A *dominor*'s misuse of an *ancilla* often ruined what could be a loving situation. He would have enjoyed tying Janni to the *lectus* with a loosely knotted hemp *funis* and provoking her passions until she writhed with desire. To his eyes, there was nothing more beautiful than the simmering look of uncontrolled passion on a woman's face as she struggled



against her bonds. His chest tightened. He never wanted to hurt a woman, but he did want to own her, even control her pleasure. He couldn't help himself. It was his nature. He wanted an *amatrix* completely devoted to him and he longed to see fire and strength buried beneath her submission. He craved the power of being in control but he disliked the feeling of taking a timid, reluctant person. He believed deep in his heart that a woman who was *forcitas*, courageous and untamed, could provide the greatest *elatio voluptaria* imaginable. Sadly he had never met such a woman.

Janni patiently lay on her side, waiting with a worried smile on her pretty face.

He clearly saw Janni was lovely but she was far too meek for stronger passions. If he requested she be bound, she would dutifully agree but then quail in her *servitus*. There would be no joy for him or her. He sensed Janni would merely feel frightened or used. She would not appreciate the deeply personal exchange of *animus* and *anima*, a blending of souls. He could not show her the secret part of himself, not tonight. He longed to someday share the feeling of power with another fiery soul who was *validus* enough to submit to a *dominor* without feeling diminished or losing themselves. Perhaps such a woman didn't exist? Perhaps strength in a *submissus* was a self-conjured illusion along the lines of Columba, *regina* of doves? Was it possible that somewhere there was an *amare* to suit him? Was there such a thing as a strong, half-*ferus* woman who needed a loving *dominor*? His thoughts paused. Gods willing there was, but where?

He gently pushed Janni onto her back, slid on top of her and parted her thighs with his knee. She was drenched from his last pleasuring. The rich scent and slickness greatly excited him. His *dolon* eagerly rose, wanting more. She was so lovely, he could take her all night. His fingertips brushed a stray ringlet from her face. He gazed down at her sweet-tempered expression. She was here for his pleasure and eager to please, and he badly needed pleasure. His head dipped toward her round breasts. Janni's nipples were exceptionally large and very dark. He drew a plum tip between his lips and stroked it with his tongue until it stiffened. His palms cupped the warm weight of her breasts and lifted them toward his lips. He tugged the nipple deeper into his mouth and sucked. Janni moaned softly. Her body arched off the *lectus*. He gently pushed her back. The nipple swelled between his lips until it felt as thick as the tip of his thumb. He thought how beautiful she would look with bound breasts and glistening, wet nipples. His *dolon* leapt. He imagined her kneeling before him with her breasts held high and her face tipped upward in ecstasy. He imagined rubbing the head of his *dolon* against her soft lips and gently coaxing her to open. His palm lifted and gently squeezed her breasts. He sucked harder. Janni squirmed uncomfortably beneath him. He lifted his face to see if she was all right. She appeared to be, so he returned to her breasts, vowing to be gentler.

He pressed his knee between her thighs, eager to feel his *dolon* moving inside her. She wrapped her thighs tightly around him. He rubbed the head of his *dolon* against her sheath, enjoying the rising heat. He took hold of her hips and slid easily inside her with a pleased gasp. Her body was incredibly welcoming and warm. He simply held

himself inside her, reveling in the heat of her embrace and growing harder as he gently sucked on her breasts. This was physical *voluptas exsultatio*. Slowly taking a woman in this manner was one of the sweetest *delectatio*s life could offer. Janni's soft moans of pleasure were reassuring enough that he moved more forcefully inside her while gently sucking her breasts.

He took his time with Janni, keeping her in his *lectus* far into the night, though it was clear from Plutonium's worried pacing in the corridor beyond that he was not welcome to do so. He knew Plutonium was eager to have Janni returned, so he possessively kept his *dolon* inside her most of the night. He refused to allow Janni to dress and go to her impatiently waiting *dominor* and there was nothing Plutonium could do about it. Columba had ordered Janni to serve him and a peevish Plutonium had been forced to bow to her demands.

Atellus took even greater pleasure in Janni, knowing she was forbidden to him and Plutonium was standing in the corridor, listening to his ecstatic sounds and suffering. He didn't care. He wanted Plutonium to hurt as much as he did. Janni made a soft, warm companion who couldn't say no and he took advantage of it. At Plutonium's expense, he enjoyed a night of easy, undemanding coupling, an activity his body badly needed.

The night had almost become morning. Janni cuddled beside him beneath the linen *lodix*, asleep in the crook of his arm.

He could not sleep. His thoughts were troubled. He stared at the ceiling, feeling his arm slowly go numb beneath Janni's slight weight. He turned and tenderly brushed his lips against the top of her head. She did not stir so he carefully freed his tingling arm from beneath her. He gently moved her aside without waking her. He was grateful for her company and did not want her to wake up and leave him. She had been as pleasant and accommodating as any *ancilla* could possibly be, but in the middle of the night, he continued to lie awake, thinking of what he could never have—Columba.

All night he had half expected and half hoped Columba would visit him in his *cubiculum*. He prayed she would throw herself at his feet and tell him her coldness was meant to distract Plutonium. He longed to hear he had been right in loving her all these years. He longed to know he had not been *ludificare* in throwing his heart blindly in the wrong direction. He waited to hear her light footsteps in the corridor but she never came. She sent Janni in her stead. He fantasized Columba would appear, whisper from a dark corner and tell him it was all an *actus*, a pretense designed to trick Plutonium, but he knew no woman could be such an excellent *mima* as the sour performance he had witnessed from Columba that night.

What was wrong with him? He knew the truth and he still couldn't let her go. He felt empty and depressed, as if hope had died. Love had died. For years he had conjured Columba's face in his mind. He had assumed unfortunate circumstances had been forced upon her. He had excused her for marrying Plutonium. He had kept her memory vivid in his heart and compared all women, including poor Antonia, to her. He had miscast Columba as an innocent, shy victim of fate. He now painfully realized it

had all been a farce. She was a complete stranger. The real woman was nothing like his idealized image. This evening in the dining hall had vividly proven that point.

Earlier that evening he, Plutonium, Columba and all five of his battling *filiuses* gathered on silk-cushioned *tricliniums* to partake of an herb-and-olive-oil-roasted lamb. The food was delicious but the meal was tense. He watched in shocked silence as Columba bossed the *domesticus* about in the rudest tones. She shrieked orders at them in a coarse, throaty voice as if she were an enraged harpy. The *domesticus*' tiniest errors drew her overblown wrath and she treated her husband no better.

When Atellus' eyes inadvertently roamed toward a pretty *ancilla* who was pouring wine at the table, Columba clapped her hands loudly and haughtily offered to send the woman to his *cubiculum* in the guest quarters to be his *servus*.

Plutonium became alarmed at his wife's blunt proposal. His jaw dropped and his bottom lip quivered. He quickly suggested another *ancilla*.

"No." Columba shoved a dainty finger in Plutonium's protesting face. "It shall be Janni!" Her firm insistence made it obvious she was eager to cause her husband pain by forcing him to share his new favorite. She seemed to inherently know Janni's value would fade after Atellus had used her.

He watched the strife of the domestic drama unfold. Apparently forcing Plutonium to share Janni was an easy way to defeat a rival. He wondered if Columba did this to Plutonium often. Plutonium's defeated and blubbing attitude confirmed in his mind it was so.

Columba demanded Janni immediately leave the dining hall and wait for Atellus in his *cubiculum*. The order was given to Janni to be prepared to thoroughly serve.

Plutonium grumbled irritably but sat helplessly beside his angry wife.

Janni looked flustered and hurried from the hall with her head bowed.

During the rest of the meal, there was much ugly squabbling between Columba and Plutonium over the imminent arrival of the dignitaries and the upcoming *convivium*. He didn't hear all of what looked to be an unpleasant conversation because most of the discussion was conducted in tense whispers. For the greater part of the meal, Columba and Plutonium ignored him, which he preferred. He observed when Columba laughed she laughed too loudly and always with a hint of cruelty in her eyes. When she smiled, her smile was lovely but her lips quickly drooped to a frown the moment the amusement faded.

Throughout the evening, Columba was exacting and demanding. Plutonium was loath to disappoint her high expectations. It was clear she was the *domitrix* of the *domus*. Like a well-trained animal, Plutonium jumped through hoops for her. The meal was very unpleasant and he was glad to have it finished so he could return to the quiet sanctuary of his *cubiculum* and enjoy Janni's company.

Now, in the early morning hours, he lay awake with Janni asleep beside him. He heard Plutonium nervously pacing the corridor beyond. Plutonium had been lurking for at least an hour, muttering softly to himself, obviously anxious to have his favorite back.

"Wake up," Atellus softly whispered in Janni's ear. "Plutonium is waiting for you." His hand stroked her naked body as she shifted on the *lectus*.

Janni's eyes half opened. She drowsily reached for her linen tunic to dress.

Atellus stopped her hand. He gently tossed Janni's tunic beyond her reach. "Plutonium can wait. You're staying with me a little longer."

Janni's expression looked sleepy and confused.

He rolled on top of her, sank between her rounded thighs and gently pinned her beneath him.

Janni opened her eyes with a slight smile. Her hand offered a plump breast to his lips. She parted her thighs and encouraged him to enter.

He slowly slid his *dolon* inside her, wanting to savor the feeling. His fingertips gently brushed against the side of her face. He spoke softly so Plutonium could not hear. "Janni, you're a very lovely woman, so obedient." He missed the company of women. He would no longer deny himself their comfort, especially for sentimental illusions. His head bowed to stroke his tongue across her broad nipples until they stood in hard peaks. He loved it. Janni was lusciously feminine, smooth-skinned and *delectatio* to touch. Every inch of her was generously padded and wonderfully *mollis*. He would have preferred a strong spirit in a soft body, but he knew he couldn't have everything. His muscular body moved slowly on top of hers. The entire coupling was pleasant and undemanding. He moaned with pleasure as loudly as possible, hoping Plutonium would hear him and suffer. His only wish was that he had feelings for Janni beyond those of attraction and gratitude. The *solari* and pleasure she offered was welcome but it was a poor substitute for the emotional reconciliation he had hoped would take place between him and Columba. For years he had longed to hear Columba say she secretly loved him, preferred him, dreamed of him and had suffered all these years without him, but that would never be.

Janni's warm sheath clutched him in a tight embrace. She lifted her hips and stroked gently against him.

His testes tightened. He wanted this bliss to last a few moments longer. He was owed pleasure. He was owed love. He blocked the memory of Columba's cruel smile from his thoughts. His *dolon* stroked faster inside Janni. He felt he should be grateful and just enjoy the sweet woman beneath him. He brushed a dark curl from Janni's cheek and whispered breathlessly, "Janni, you're so *venustus*. Please believe that." He knew he was ready to lose it.

"Janni, are you awake?" Plutonium whispered from the corridor when soft sounds echoed inside the *cubiculum*. He hovered anxiously outside the doorway, ready to reclaim his personal property.

Atellus decided to be as loud as possible when he came. He deliberately roared as he flooded himself inside Janni.

## Chapter Three

Rutila awoke, cramped and in pain. She tugged against the linen *funis* that held her tied to the wooden handle of a massive laundry trough. The bindings held tight and had little give. She had only enough slack to kick futilely and wiggle on the makeshift *lectus* beneath her.

Dawn arrived while she dozed. Sunlight now streamed into the *lavari* shed through an open transom. Miraculously, she survived the night. Yesterday, she was unconvinced she would live to see the morning sun, but here it was, flowing toward her like beams of golden victory. Thankfully, Plutonium had not shown up during the night to rape and humiliate her as he had promised. She lay bound on the floor the entire night, waiting for the worst to happen, but Plutonium never showed up. Finally, she had grown so bored and uncomfortable she ceased to care. She wondered if she was forgotten? Perhaps left to die? Her hands and feet tingled from the bindings.

Fortunately, late last night the *domus-administrator* had appeared to loosen her bonds, bring her a blanket and something soft to lie on. The *domus-administrator* had looked at her with compassion and brought her a piece of bread and a small chunk of cheese.

"Rutila." He shook his head in despair. "Why can't you behave and be silent? Can't you see what you've done? You've doomed yourself."

"I don't care!" she snapped at him.

His eyes looked burdened. "I wish you did care. I don't want to watch what will happen to you." He loosened her bonds so she could feed herself and move a bit more freely. "Why are you so provoking? Why do you want to die?"

"I don't care if I die. This isn't my real life and I don't care if I lose it." She shoved the piece of cheese in her mouth and quickly chewed it up before someone took it away or interrupted her.

The *domus-administrator* handed her a jar of water. "Will you tell me one thing I have wondered about?"

She took a long drink of water from the jar and glanced sideways at him with suspicion. "What?"

His dark eyes focused keenly on her. "What is your true name?"

Rutila huffed with disgust and looked away. "No."

"Why won't you tell me?" He held the piece of bread in front of her as if it were a bribe. "I know you're a Celt, that's no secret. I've watched you very closely. You are a *mysteria* in this *domus* and I love solving a *mysteria*. You're educated. I know that. I caught you reading my *codex* of household goods. You denied you could read but you

knew exactly how much wine we had in storage. Don't try to deny it. I heard you speaking with Corvina. You've lived a privileged life among Romans. I'm certain of it." He leaned toward her face.

She flinched and pulled back.

His thumb gently pushed her lip upward as he stared into her mouth. "Those perfect teeth give you away. Romans do not pamper or educate those sold into *servitus*. Who are you?"

She turned her back on the *domus-administrator*. "I'm no one."

He waved the bread in front of her face. "I've heard you talking to that scheming *obstetrix* Corvina. You and that crafty black crow of a midwife seem to know everything that goes on in this *domus*. The two of you are suspiciously well-informed. No wonder Columba fears you both. Plutonium believes you are a *venefica*. I'm not so *ludificare*. I'm practical. I add up the facts. You came to this *domus* educated and clever as a *daemon*. I won't credit *magica* as your source of power. Admit you can read and I'll give you this bread." His expression soured. "Let me rephrase my question. If you won't tell me who you are, will you tell me who you were?"

Her eyes narrowed to slits. "It doesn't matter." Her body curled forward in a ball. Her stomach growled with hunger but she refused to beg for the taunting piece of bread or speak another word.

The *domus-administrator* saw Rutila was not going to talk truthfully. He handed her the piece of bread and rose in defeat. "You're right, after tomorrow it won't matter at all. The *mysteria* will go unsolved."

He walked away, leaving her alone, bound hand and foot in a dark laundry shed.

The night dragged tediously on. An unexpected morning had somehow arrived. She wanted water and she badly needed to straighten her tensed back. If they left her like this a moment longer she would surely go mad.

The door to the shed burst open. She flinched in surprise from the sudden intrusion. Sunlight flooded the shed. She squinted into the bright light.

Columba stormed into the shed, clapping her hands loudly in the air. "Wake up, girl!" she shouted in a booming voice. "Wake up, spoiler of wine!" Her eyes sought out Rutila and sneered at her once she saw her tied to a laundry vat in a dark corner. Her lip curled in a humorless smile. "Don't look so dour. Cheer up. You have a *convivium* to prepare for. Lucky girl, you're going to receive stunning new attire guaranteed to turn heads. Please make an effort to enjoy this beautiful day—it's your last."

Rutila blinked into the light pouring through the open door. Columba appeared to be a black silhouette against the morning sun.

Columba called the *ferrarius* into the shed. "*Ferrarius*, come forward," she demanded.

The *ferrarius* stepped forward. He was a large, heavily muscled man who blocked most of the light when he stepped through the doorway.

Columba ushered the *ferrarius* into the shed. She pointed Rutila out to him as if he would not have noticed a naked, bound woman lying at his feet. "Take her away." She scowled. "Have her prepared as we discussed and delivered to the *triclinium* by *vesper*." She sternly warned him. "Be timely. Rutila is our entertainment at tonight's *convivium* for the dignitaries." Columba winked at Rutila. "This *convivium* will be the feast to die for – and I mean that."

Rutila closed her eyes in horror. Her heart sank at Columba's cruel words. She knew she was being offered as a sacrifice at a debauched party. She wished she could will herself to die on the spot and deny Columba the satisfaction of her service.

The *ferrarius* knelt before her and ripped away her bindings.

Rutila sighed. For a single sweet moment she was free. She drew a deep breath and shook the blood back into her fingertips. Her hands tingled from a sweeping pins and needles sensation as she lowered her arms for the first time in hours.

The *ferrarius* clamped his big hand over her shoulder to prevent her from running away. "Don't make me chase you," he grumbled.

Rutila stared up at the swarthy giant. His limbs were so thick and solid he looked incapable of running. For a moment, she considered the possibility of bolting past him and throwing herself over the stone *praesidium* that surrounded the compound.

The *ferrarius* leaned forward and scooped Rutila off the floor. His strong arms lifted her as easily as an adult hoisted a child. He carried her out of the shed and into the sunlight clasped tightly in his arms.

Rutila tried to struggle free of his firm grasp.

His heavy-soled *caligae* thumped against the ground as he marched determinedly toward his forge.

Columba stayed behind, glaring at them as they walked away. "Work quickly," she admonished the *ferrarius* in a bellowing voice that carried across the courtyard. "But work well. Remember visual presentation is everything."

The *ferrarius* bodily carried Rutila across the compound toward a corner of the *praesidium* where the *fabers'* workshops were located. The other *domesticus* who were going about their morning tasks looked down at the ground as she passed. No one wanted to make eye contact with her. She worried that everyone but she knew Columba's plan. She wriggled wildly in the *ferrarius's* grasp, feeling crushed by his ropey arms.

"Stop writhing." The *ferrarius* frowned. "I don't want to do this."

"Then don't!" She pinched his arm in the hope he would drop her and she could run away, but the tough *ferrarius* hardly registered her vicious pinch. His flexed arms were so solid there was little to pinch. If she did hurt him, not the slightest expression of pain showed on his severe face.

He glowered at her. "Stop that."

She gave up when she saw a group of *fabers* walk out of their work sheds and stare somberly at them as they approached. At that moment hope died. She knew there was nowhere to run.

The *ferrarius* leaned forward, pressed his nose against her hair and inhaled her scent. His deep voice rumbled against her ear. "You smell wild to me, grassy as a fresh field. I like your scent. They've not yet drenched you in the cloying oils and perfumes the Roman women wear. I feel pity for you, girl." His doleful dark-eyes stared ahead.

Once he spoke, she heard the *ferrarius* was a man of the south. He spoke with a strange accent. She had heard this same accent spoken by Roman soldiers who passed through the slave markets of Iberia.

"The Romans are a rough bunch with a cruel sense of fun." He openly denounced the Romans.

She already knew about Roman atrocities and she did not wish to hear about Roman ideas of fun.

The *ferrarius* said no more. He carried her in silence toward his workshop. A heavy expression creased his dark brow.

She broke the silence. "What does Columba have planned for me?"

The *ferrarius* looked burdened for having the matter brought up. Apparently he did not wish to talk with a doomed girl. "This is not Rome," he warned her. "Guests can safely indulge in all manner of sports here and still avoid discovery back home. A decent man in Rome can become a monster in the provinces. I've seen it." He shook his head in disgust. "I was once a Roman *milite*."

She was terrified. Her heart pounded. "What can I expect?" she asked cautiously.

"You'll be raped, shared by the group." The *ferrarius* spoke in a bland, matter-of-fact tone. "Then Columba or Plutonium will auction you off to the most enthusiastic bidder. That man will be allowed to kill you."

She cringed.

"A seasoned legionnaire might toss you a *pugio* and invite you to fight against him while he demonstrates his superior fighting skills by striking you in ways that prolong your death. Or a senator may choose to strangle you while impaling you on the head of his *dolon* in front of the dinner guests. It's the Roman idea of fun." The *ferrarius* spoke with loathing. "As I already said, I feel pity for you."

She was silent. There was absolutely no comfort in being carried in this man's arms. She struggled against his grasp. "Kill me," she pleaded. "Be merciful and kill me now." She tried to squirm free of his grip.

The *ferrarius*'s hold on her tightened.

"Please kill me. I cannot bear it and I have not the will to kill myself." She was certain of that. She had tried to kill herself many times, but each time the wish to live had overruled her actions. Her hand faltered. She stepped back from the brink. She failed herself. Her shame grew as she went on living.



"I can't," the *ferrarius* brusquely refused.

"Make it look like an accident," she begged. "Tell Columba it was my fault."

"I won't do it. They would put me in *catena* or crucify me." The *ferrarius* stubbornly denied her request. "Knowing *Domitrix* Columba, she would have me forge my own *catena* or iron nails."

The full horror of her situation dawned. A hysterical sob wrenched from Rutila's throat. "Why tell me these things if you have no intention of helping me?"

"To give you time to make peace with yourself and your gods." The *ferrarius's* tone was dour. "It's not fair to send a soul to the next world unprepared."

\* \* \* \* \*

That *vesper*, Atellus watched as the decadent *convivium* raged around him. Platter upon platter of extravagantly prepared dishes were carried into the *triclinium* by ornately costumed and painted *domesticus*. The most attractive of the *domesticus* had been dressed as wild beasts, their faces covered in masks and their naked bodies elaborately painted. Silk cushions in shades of crimson, green and saffron were laid upon the low couches of the *triclinium* and greatly added to the atmosphere of *celebratio*. Though the feast had just started and it was still early in the *vesper*, much wine had been consumed. The *hospes* were already quite *ebrius* and behaving obnoxiously. They thoughtlessly grabbed food off the platters as they passed. This level of culinary artistry seemed to be wasted on them. They gobbled anything set before them, licked their greasy fingers and washed it down with bucketfuls of wine.

Atellus' wine from Belgica had been a grand success. Its quality was highly praised by the dignitaries. Columba had even seen to it he receive partial payment for what he was owed. She had somehow scraped the money together for fear he would take his complaints to the dignitaries. He had spent a portion of the afternoon intensely bargaining with Columba on several important matters. Columba agreed to several of his repayment strategies. He was now satisfied Columba and his *patrui* took his threats seriously enough to reimburse him for the rest of what he was owed, and he was still owed a lot.

He sat on the cushioned *triclinium* with his spine straight and his head high. Everyone around him lounged lazily on their sides. The *hospes* around him were too drunk to take note of his odd posture. In Belgica, he seldom lounged on his side on a *triclinium* when he ate. He had grown accustomed to sitting upright as the Gauls did. He had eaten his fill an hour ago. A modest portion of roasted lamb, bread and fruit would have been enough to satisfy. He did not share his fellow Romans' enthusiasm for bizarre delicacies in copious amounts. From the look of the platters, it appeared every creature within a fifty-mile radius that had wings, claws, fins or hooves had been dipped into a rich sauce and set upon the grill. Each animal's head, eyes, paws, feathers or tail were set back on the platters as part of each dish's unique identification.

He frowned at the spectacle surrounding him. There was so much waste at this *convivium*. The excess revolted him. In Belgica, he lived among farmers, *milites* and people who were used to doing without. The people of Belgica could certainly appreciate the work and effort demanded to produce a crop or hunt in the forest. His eyes scanned the hall condemningly—with the exception of several gristled battalion generals, the other flabby dignitaries looked completely incapable of providing for themselves.

The *hospes* wolfed food from the platters until they were full to bursting. Then they excused themselves and politely vomited into wooden *situlas* strategically placed in the back of the hall. An *ebrius* wave of bleary-eyed senators and dignitaries staggered back and forth between the lounging tables and the *situlas* at the back of the hall. The decadence and the acrid aroma of vomit made Atellus feel ill. He had been away from Roman ways for too long. It all looked shockingly wasteful and ugly to his eyes.

A dish arrived at the table that seemed especially sad. A large tinned bowl was set upon the table filled with hundreds of poached oriole eggs. The *mater* orioles had also been poached. Their frail bodies decorated the edges of the bowl. The sight made him sick to know the orchards would be silent next spring of the sounds and golden plumage of orioles. He turned his back on the melancholy treat.

A senator lounging beside him dug a fistful of oriole eggs from the bowl. The senator shoved the tiny eggs into his mouth, thoughtlessly gorging on them. Suddenly the man looked stricken. His face went purple from drunkenness and gorging. The senator hurriedly rose from the *triclinium* to dash toward the *situlas* at the back of the hall. He did not make it. He vomited over the floor. The tiny eggs poured from his mouth and splattered across the tiles. Many of the eggs had been swallowed whole, untasted and unappreciated.

Columba saw the entire scene transpire and cheered approvingly. She was visibly pleased her *hospes* were involved in the feast. "Very good, Senator!" she shouted across the rows of crowded *triclinium*. "I'm so pleased you're enjoying the *convivium*!" Her smile faded as she immediately turned toward a sleek male *domesticus* who was dressed as a lion. She barked a terse command in the *domesticus*'s face. "Don't just stand there looking *stupidus*. Clean him up! Must I think for everyone?" She smacked the *domesticus*'s bare leg with her palm. "Go!"

The costumed lion rushed to lift the drunken senator off the floor and mop the slick vomit from the tile.

Once the senator was securely set on his feet, he staggered toward a platter of lamb's livers and immediately started gorging again.

The sight sickened Atellus beyond endurance. He stood and walked toward the front portico, carefully avoiding the many messes and drunken people sprawling across the floor. The lavishly decorated grand dining hall now reeked of vomit. Its colorful silk cushions ruined. He wanted to be away from it.

He walked quickly past a row of shadowy columns.

A soft voice called to him from the shadows. "*Dominor Atellus...*"

He stopped when Janni stepped out of the shadows dressed as a *cuniculus* with long floppy ears. The girl looked mortified to be wearing only a transparent piece of silk wrapped around her lush body. Her hands nervously roamed over her curves, trying to cover as much as possible. Rage leapt inside him. "Janni, what are doing here?"

Janni bowed her head. "Columba ordered me to surprise Plutonium and the *hospes* with a dance. I don't want to do it."

He firmly took hold of Janni's shoulders and looked into the girl's painted face. "You don't have to. You don't belong to Plutonium or Columba any longer. I bargained with Columba today for your freedom. I'll see to it she honors the bargain. You're a freedwoman now. Do you understand? You are no longer Plutonium's *ancilla* and you do not take orders from Columba."

Janni closed her eyes as a rush of tears poured forward. "Is this true, *Dominor Atellus*? Is this a trick?" She yanked the *cuniculus* ears from her head. "I can walk away?"

"You're free." He dug into his leather pouch to retrieve a few bronze *nummus* to give to Janni as traveling money. "I wouldn't trust Columba to honor this bargain after I leave. She already tried to take advantage of you tonight. She didn't even tell you you were free, did she? You should go now." He looked at her pretty face, thinking he would happily take her to Belgica if she had nowhere else to go. "Where will you go?"

Janni eyes lit with gratitude. "I must go to Rome. I have family there and I can help them now." She dropped her to her knees and grabbed hold of his hands. She touched his fingertips to her lips. "Thank you, *Dominor Atellus*. I bless you for this. May you live a long, happy life and be granted to deepest desire of your heart."

He pulled Janni to her feet. "I'd feel a lot better if you left the compound tonight. Everyone is distracted. You will not be missed. Go to the docks and wait. I will arrange for you to travel in the company of one the dignitaries when he returns to Rome."

Janni heaved a deep sigh and looked overwhelmed. Her meekness was greatly accentuated by the *cuniculus* nose and whiskers painted on her face.

"Janni," he spoke her name softly. What this diminutive girl would be confronted with on her journey was beyond his comprehension. "Freedom isn't perfect or easy. You'll have to find your courage and become a lion."

"I understand." Janni pulled her shoulders back and stood with dignity. The first ember of true resolve lit within her eyes.

"Go." He shooed her from the hall.

Janni turned and ran. She didn't speak another word and she didn't look back. Within moments the shadows swallowed her.

A sad smile tugged at Atellus' lips. For two people who did not love each other, the actions between him and Janni had been very loving. He was glad he had bargained for her freedom but he worried what her freedom might bring. The world could be

unnecessarily cruel. Men could be selfish. Life was short. What had he done to her? He hurried from the hall toward the fresh evening air.

He walked in the night and gratefully drew the scent of ocean air into his lungs. This day had taught him a great deal. During his eight years in Belgica he had longed to be reunited with Columba and wished to be included in the company of his fellow Romans. Now he was certain of one thing, he no longer belonged with either of them.

In a single day, he lost all ambition to return to Rome. He came to the conclusion he was not driven enough, jaded enough or perverse enough to be a good Roman citizen. He wished to return to Belgica as soon as possible to see its golden fields, sparkling vineyards and his daughter Rosa.

He sat on the marble steps of the great hall. The evening was cool. A light breeze carried the faint but pleasing fragrance of the gardens. He resolved tomorrow he would leave. He would ride home by himself if he had to, but he would go home. His *custodia*, *milites* and ox drovers could rest and follow later, but tomorrow he knew he must leave or face *insania*. There was nothing for him here. His true home was Belgica. He sat on the steps of the hall and watched the moon rise.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rutila huddled in the *ferrarius'* shed, watching her final moonrise. This was it. She watched the moon slowly climb the sky, knowing she would never see this glowing, silvery spectacle again. Sadly, the moon was not full enough to see the rabbit on the moon or catch a glimpse of the goddess' face. She saw only a pale crescent.

The *ferrarius* polished the last of Rutila's copper *catena* to a brilliant hue. He had worked all day at his forge, creating a fabulous network of copper manacles and chains suited to highlight the curves of a woman's body while simultaneously providing restraint. He studiously bent his head to the task at hand. He did not speak to her and worked in silence. He seemed to be deliberately avoiding eye contact with her.

Everyone had stopped speaking to her hours ago. She knew she was a painful and doomed sight to behold.

Earlier in the day she had been offered food. The *ferrarius* kept a close eye on her but allowed her to move about. Another *domesticus* had offered her a tunic to cover her nakedness. Several *ancilla* and a pair of armed *milites* had brought her to the main villa to be bathed, brushed, oiled and painted before being returned to the *ferrarius* for her final fitting.

A somber mood hung in the air. All of the *domesticus* who had kept her company during the day had been called away to serve at the feast. She knew she was running out of time. This last hour seemed especially lonely. Armed *milites* patrolled in front of the *ferrarius'* shed, squelching any hope of escape.

Corvina, the compound's midwife and herbalist, poked her head into the shed. The long, slender tip of Corvina's nose parted a sweep of black hair as she sought out Rutila. She convincingly resembled the black crows she had been named for. A cunning

intelligence lit her dark eyes. "Rutila?" she whispered as she cautiously entered the shed.

She liked Corvina. Corvina provided a bit of intelligent, patient company in an otherwise lonely life. Columba saw rivals in both women so she and Corvina were seldom allowed to speak to each other. Brief moments of conversation had to be stolen behind Columba's back. If they were spotted in each other's company the other *domesticus* were under strict orders to break them apart. Both she and Corvina had dubious reputations as instigators. Columba had thought it prudent to separate them.

Corvina politely acknowledged the *ferrarius* with a slight bow as she cautiously approached Rutila and held a cup of herbed wine under her nose.

The *ferrarius* glanced up at the incident and chose to ignore it.

"Drink it," Corvina whispered. "It will make this night easier for you."

She looked into Corvina's glittering eyes and trustingly took a sip of the offered wine. At first taste the wine flooded her tongue with the sweetness of honey but a moment later a bitter aftertaste followed. Her lips recoiled from the cup. Her heart raced with elation. She looked Corvina in the eye and whispered hopefully, "Is it poisoned?"

Corvina slowly shook her head and whispered reassuringly, "No, but it will help you not to care." She lifted the cup to Rutila's lips and encouraged her to drink.

Rutila drained the cup. The wine warmed her throat on the way down. A gentle numbness flooded through her. A bitter taste clung to her tongue but she didn't care. Her eyes flickered shut as her heart pounded. She wanted this night over. She was ready to be back in the soft lap of the goddess. She was prepared to have an ugly Roman dispatch her to her true home and return her to the arms of her lost loved ones.

Her gut clenched as if on fire. She gasped and rocked forward. Her eyes flew open to study Corvina's face. "What have you given me?"

Corvina's face wore the saddest expression. "I'm sorry, my friend, I wish I could do more for you." She backed away from Rutila and allowed the *ferrarius* to work.

Rutila clutched her side in a moment of agony but the burning sensation soon passed. The herbed wine slowly seeped into her being and soothed her senses. Soon, just as Corvina had promised, she discovered she no longer cared. She was not worried about her impending fate. Nothing bothered her, not even the *ferrarius's* persistent polishing of her *catena*. The world fell out of focus. Time blurred. The moon inexplicably leapt higher in the sky. One moment the moon hovered at the edge of the *praesidium*, but the next time she looked it had raised a hand's width higher in the sky. She had only looked away for a moment. How was that possible? She swayed on her feet, feeling hardly aware of the *ferrarius's* strong hands upon her as he fitted her into her ornately wrought *catena*.

The *ferrarius* gently tapped her shoulder in an attempt to get her attention.

It took a moment for her to realize the hand tapping her shoulder was not her own. She became startled and flinched.

"Look." The *ferrarius* tried to show her he had hidden a weapon within the cuff of her *catena*. "There is a tiny *pugio* hidden in the hinge." He showed her, he had fashioned a short, sharp-edged dagger disguised as the hinge pin on her ankle shackle. "Once you are inside the hall, you can use this to open an artery and speed things along."

She was hardly cognizant of his words. She could not concentrate. Her mind floated in several pleasant directions. She remembered being a child and laughing hysterically as she watched her baby sister riding her first fast-trotting pony. Her little sister had squeezed her eyes shut and turned white with terror but then triumphantly took hold of the reins and shouted a war cry in the tiniest voice. The sight was hilarious. Her mind wanted to stay in that distant summer day.

The *ferrarius* loomed over her. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

She glanced up at the *ferrarius*, feeling completely disoriented to be yanked away from her loved ones and a summer day. She struggled to follow what the *ferrarius* was saying and realized he was trying to be kind. He was trying to provide her with a tool with which she could slit her wrists, but she simply could not concentrate on what he was saying or else she simply no longer cared. Slitting her wrists didn't seem important anymore. She longed to return to pleasant thoughts.

The *ferrarius* seemed to give up. His broad mouth turned downward. He slid the *pugio* into its hiding place in the hinge and slipped the *catena* onto her ankle.

Her skin warmed. She felt hot, which was odd because she was once again standing naked in the evening air while the *ferrarius* fitted her with dozens of tiny copper chains that shimmered beautifully in the moonlight. A breeze blew from the Mediterranean. She should have felt chilled but she did not. Her skin actually grew warmer. She noticed everywhere the *ferrarius* touched an almost unbearably sensual sensation sprang up. His slightest touch engaged all her senses. Thrilling sensations built on her wrists, ankles and along the undersides of her breasts where the *ferrarius* hung several delicate tiers of looped copper chains. Every place the chains or the *ferrarius* touched caught fire as if a lover had stroked her skin with adoring hands. She ached to be touched. She leaned forward and rubbed her body against the *ferrarius* as if she were a cat, luxuriating in an act of affection. The friction felt ecstatic. Her reaction surprised her. She had not felt any attraction toward the *ferrarius* all day, but now she couldn't stay away from him. She wanted to fondle him, tease him, taste him. She brushed her body against him and moaned softly. Her skin shimmied in ecstasy from the slightest contact.

The *ferrarius* stepped away from her. A troubled look of concern filled his black eyes. "What is going on? What is this about?" he muttered.

What was going on? What was she doing? An uncontrollable blush flooded her cheeks. She glanced around the workshop, searching for Corvina, but did not see the schemer anywhere. "Corvina!" she called loudly, but her voice sounded hollow. "What did you give me?" She looked frantically for Corvina, but Corvina had fled. The forge was empty except for her and the *ferrarius*. "What's happening to me?" She brushed her shackled hands across the *ferrarius*'s broad chest. Just touching his rippling muscles set

her ablaze. His scent was tangy and masculine. His body was strong. She was surprised by how much she wanted him. "Oh, you feel so good." She sighed, heated desire washed over her. Her breasts felt heavy and warm. Her skin craved the touch of another. At that moment the *ferrarius* was the most *virilis* and enticing man in the world and she wanted to feel all of him. She leaned provocatively against a worktable, hoping the *ferrarius* would be disobedient and take her. The hope of stolen pleasure thrilled her. Her hands pulled him closer. "Please."

The *ferrarius* backed away with a suspicious look in his eyes. "You're going to get us into trouble."

She caught herself. What was she doing? Was this a cruel trick? What had Corvina given her? She was certain Corvina had done her no favor. She had not wished for this. It would have been far better to face the Romans, fighting and defiant, rather than drugged and compliant. She struggled futilely to tamp down the amplified waves of sensations that overtook her. Corvina's potion made it impossible to resist lustful feelings. She gritted her teeth while the *ferrarius* finished preparing her for the *convivium*. Corvina's potion grew stronger and pulsed wildly in her blood. Soon she was lost on a sea of erotic sensation that burned beyond control.

\* \* \* \* \*

Columba and Plutonium, who had also escaped for a breath of fresh air, joined Atellus on the front steps of the hall.

"Things are going quite well, are they not?" Plutonium grinned, hovering as close as an annoying insect to Atellus' face. He smelled of wine, slurred his words and was obviously quite *ebrius*.

Columba glowered beside Plutonium, looking regal in a flowing *stola* dyed a brilliant shade of *crocota*. The saffron-yellow *crocota* dye was reserved exclusively for *vestal* virgins in Rome and it was an absolute blasphemy that Columba should wear it, but she did look stunning. The saffron-hued *stola* was trimmed with glittering garnets. A halo of tiny golden leaves shimmered in her hair. "Where is Rutila?" She glanced about pettishly. "The *hospes* have been promised their fun. They've waited long enough. That *ineptus* Janni was supposed to entertain us with a dance. She didn't show up either. I wonder where that *stupidus* girl is?" She scowled.

Atellus' gaze dropped to the ground. He smiled inwardly. "I thought we had an agreement? Janni is free."

Columba waved him off. "Yes, of course. I gave Janni the good news and she pleaded with me to stay. She doesn't need her freedom, she wants to be part of our *domus*. That's the end of it. Janni didn't want your gift so don't ask again." The wholly concocted lie rolled seamlessly off her tongue.

Plutonium nodded his head knowingly. "Janni loves it here, why would she go?"

Atellus silently prayed Janni was already at the docks, ready to leave on a ship with the morning tide.

Columba marched back and forth in agitation. "The entertainment must start! The *ferrarius* has stalled long enough. Send someone to fetch Rutila now."

An armed *milite* was dispatched to fetch Rutila. He returned soon after bodily carrying an almost naked, writhing woman in his arms.

Atellus sat straight in awe when saw a stunningly beautiful cascade of golden-red hair and an elaborately shackled woman groaning and wriggling in the *milite's* arms as if she were an eel.

"Stop touching me!" Rutila pleaded with her captor. "I can't bear it. Let me walk on my own."

The *milite* set Rutila down near the front steps of the hall.

Rutila took a deep breath, straightened her spine and tried to walk, but she instantly staggered and fell to the side.

The *milite* caught her before she hit the ground. It was clear she could not stand on her own without swaying or crumpling over.

Columba stared at the spectacle in dismay. "Rutila is *ebrius*! This is terrible. How has this happened?" She frowned accusingly at the *milite* and Plutonium as if either man were to blame. "Who is responsible for this?" She rushed forward to slap Rutila's face in rage but Plutonium stopped her hand. She glared at Plutonium until he sheepishly released her wrist. "I wanted Rutila sober for tonight." She pouted. "She is supposed to fight for her life not stagger about *ebrius*. The *hospes* expect emotion and entertainment from a *donatio*. Obviously she's beyond feeling any real pain or humiliation. The fun has been ruined! This is not what I planned. She's no good to us this way. It's not the same thing at all. We will be laughed at." She threw her hands into the air. "Let us see what can be done. Torch!" she shouted. "Someone bring me a torch."

A *milite* stepped forward, holding a blazing torch. The torch was held over Rutila so Columba could better inspect her condition.

Columba sniffed Rutila's breath and lifted her eyelids, looking perplexed. "I don't smell wine on her. Perhaps only a trace. What is wrong with this girl?"

Rutila's skin shimmied ecstatically with each touch. Her stomach muscles rolled with pleasure.

Columba poked Rutila and watched her ecstatic reaction to touch. "Look at that. She moves like a snake. I've never seen anything like it. She must love my touch. You'd think we were lovers." She gasped in shock.

Rutila snarled in Columba's face.

Columba leapt back in alarm.

Atellus drew a tense breath, feeling appalled by the way Columba and Plutonium were treating this extremely beautiful woman. The *ancilla* was so lovely. Her coppery hair hung in glossy waves to the middle of her back. She stood naked with polished copper *catena* on her ankles and her wrists. A weblike mesh of chains connected her throat to each shackle. A series of delicate copper chains looped around each full breast,



encircled her waist and dropped downward in a vee to frame her shaved mons. Her skin had been embellished with gold dust. Her eyebrows and eyelashes had been gilded as well as her lips, nipples and shaved mons. The girl glowed metallic in the torchlight. She was a coppery vision of Venus. Her pale skin was the perfect canvas for such a spectacle. She was both tragic and fascinating, and he could not stop looking at her. "Who is this woman?" He was finally able to form words.

"She is a troublemaker," Columba denounced Rutila. "And she will soon be gone from this world."

"Rutila is tonight's entertainment." Plutonium spoke timidly, as if expecting to be interrupted by Columba. He cautiously approached Rutila and fussed with a few of her copper chains. "The *ferrarius* has done an exceptional job, don't you think? Quite stunning." He turned his back to Columba while sneakily fondling Rutila's breasts. His face blushed red. Clearly he loved the sight of the defiant Rutila in bondage. He toyed with her golden nipple. "I'm generously giving her to my *hospes*. I'll just have to take vicarious pleasure in their fun."

Rutila shuddered violently as Plutonium fondled her. She mumbled, "What perverse brew could make the touch of the repulsive Plutonium pleasurable? What poison drowns judgment?" She spoke aloud to no one in particular. Conflict raced in her eyes. She raised her shackled arms and pulled Plutonium toward her.

Atellus strained to hear what Rutila was saying but much was garbled.

Rutila's arms gently embraced Plutonium.

For a moment it appeared Plutonium thought Rutila was pulling him to her bosom. He smirked that she was reaching out to him in her desperate state. His round face gloated. A moment later his eyes bulged in horror.

Rutila deftly wrapped her wrist chains around Plutonium's throat, twisted them and squeezed his throat tightly.

Plutonium's face turned purple. He silently gasped. His hands flailed in the air as he struggled ineffectively in Rutila's strong grip, quietly wheezing.

Rutila was very fit and she caught Plutonium off guard. She twisted the chains tighter against his windpipe until his lips purpled.

The *milite* standing beside Rutila immediately pushed her aside and untangled Plutonium from her grasp.

Plutonium choked and gulped air. He bleated as if he were an injured lamb once he was freed.

Columba hovered nearby, showing no concern for Plutonium's plight. She actually berated her husband for his injuries. "You brought that on yourself," she sneered unsympathetically. "You know how dangerous Rutila is. She can turn anything into a weapon and you walked right up to her with the wit of a sow."

Rutila lay panting on the steps, thrilled she had choked a little of Plutonium's miserable life away. The *milite* had shoved her hard, but she loved the rough contact. His toughened hands on her skin made her hum with desire. She wished she could feel his weight on her. She wanted him to mount her and nip her throat with his white teeth just for the thrill of it. She wanted to force Plutonium to watch a real man. Her eyes honed in on the startled-looking *milite* as if she were a hungry leopard.

The *milite* blanched and stepped back.

A wicked smile crossed her lips. Her skin tingled. She had no regrets. She was ready to provoke and fight. Her heart pounded with excitement, calculating which man would strike next. She vowed to surprise them and take them to the ground. She wished she still had her scythe. Her breathing labored. Her chest felt tight. Corvina's potion surged stronger in her blood. Her pulse pounded in her ears. She threw her head back and howled in the piteous tones of a wounded she-wolf. The howl floated upward from somewhere deep in her soul. She didn't care how she died just as long as it happened soon. She was ready to walk the road of stars and willing to take others with her. She pretended to collapse on the steps but internally she was coiled tight and ready to strike the first man who came near. Her eyes stealthily scanned the ground for anything that could be recruited as a weapon.

It got harder to think. Lusty thoughts drowned her reasoning. She lay on the steps, struggling to compose herself, as the chains gently swept against her breasts and between her thighs. She closed her eyes, rolled forward and desperately pressed her thighs together, feeling an intense rush of heat. The lightest brush of the chains against her skin ignited her desires to a furious degree. She longed to be touched again. She didn't care how. She would gladly welcome the softest caress or the fiercest struggle. It didn't matter just as long as someone was touching her skin. All was welcome. She would go down fighting. Her fingertips gently brushed across her arms, sending a shivering thrill racing through her. She waited for someone to touch, shove or drag her to her feet but surprisingly no one came near.

She opened her eyes a tiny slit and for the first time noticed the man with wavy, dark hair sitting at the top of the steps. The handsome man was Roman. He wore fine clothes but he was not like the others. He had a strange look on his face. She could not accurately interpret his expression. He appeared to be both deeply worried and enthralled. His dark brows sloped downward over compassionate eyes. Except for his purple-trimmed cloak, the man did not resemble the typical Roman. He looked more like the men of home, virile and whole with his soul still intact. She felt strongly drawn to him and stared into his dark eyes. He stared back at her as if he were confronting one of the gods' newest creations. The man had intelligent dark eyes and beautifully arched lips. She fought the urge to crawl toward him on her hands and knees and rub the side of her cheek against his leg. She wanted to kiss his fingertips and beg him to make love to her just for the pleasure of seeing the enraged expression on Plutonium's face, but she fought the impulse and snarled at the man instead.

The man leapt back. Obviously her feral reaction to him and her liquid green eyes were too startling. She wondered who the man was.

Atellus blurted out, "She does not appear to be *ebrius*. She appears to be *ferus*."

Columba ordered Rutila hauled to her feet. "Come along," she hectored. "Time to make the dignitaries happy before they are too *ebrius* to appreciate all my hard work and effort." She mumbled a few bitter-sounding comments to Plutonium.

The *milite* wrenched Rutila's arms behind her back and pushed her up the steps of the hall. The decadent party raged loudly inside.

Rutila locked eyes on the longhaired man as she was marched up the steps. His eyes had a sparkling excitement within that engaged her. She liked his handsome face and wondered if he might be the last wholesome thing she would see in this world. He did not embody the bizarre blend of brutality and effiteness of other Roman men. He reminded her of her kinsmen. She took one last look at him as the *milite* pushed her toward the entrance of the great hall.

The man's lips parted as she passed. For a moment, she hoped he might speak to her or even reach out and touch her, but he did neither. He stepped back as if stunned and allowed the *milite* to march her toward her fate.

"Stop!" the man finally called out. "I'm interested in that woman."

Columba's lips drooped in a frown. She huffed an exasperated breath, openly balking at the man's suggestion, but Plutonium focused his attention with interest.

"I will not allow you to spoil my *convivium* on a whim," Columba dismissed Atellus' request. She urged the *milite* to move on. "Take Rutila into the hall without further delay. Everyone is waiting."

Plutonium stopped Columba with a sideways glance. His gaze focused hopefully on his starry-eyed *patruelis*. "So, you are interested in Rutila?" He lisped the words. "She came to us at great price. Rutila is a very rare and valuable thing. An absolute treasure from Britannia," he assured.

Rutila smirked. It was a greatly exaggerated lie. She had come cheap. She had arrived at the Mediterranean slave markets dirty, angry and a danger to anyone foolish enough to purchase her. Plutonium had been enamored with her red hair. He blabbered inanely he had never owned a redhead before. He quickly discovered how undomesticated she was. She made it her mission he fear for both his sanity and life. His excitement for redheads was quickly squashed. She had easily cowed him with a few simple tricks.

Columba glared at Plutonium. "We have *hospes* waiting," she tersely reminded him. "Important dignitaries who will speak flatteringly of you in Rome," she stressed. "If they enjoy themselves in Massilia."

"You still owe me a great deal of money." Atellus felt inspired to bargain. "I'll accept Rutila as partial payment."

Columba looked perturbed. "No."

"Yes." Atellus stood on the top step. He loomed above everyone. "You will agree or else I report my debt and your shocking behavior to the dignitaries." He stepped forward, threatening to walk into the hall. "Even *ebrius* the dignitaries will understand no *nummus*, no *milites* equals no Western Frontier." His tone was flat. His toga *praetextata* fluttered behind him as he turned and strode in the hall.

Both Columba and Plutonium darted up the steps and desperately clutched at Atellus' arms to stop him.

Plutonium gave Atellus a sickly smile. "*Patruelis*, you will be very happy with Rutila." He congratulated Atellus on his impulsive acquisition. "Is there a key to these *catena*?" He glanced about stupidly. "Can anyone fetch the key? Give the key to Atellus. I hope to instill a pride of ownership." He transparently attempted to enhance Rutila's value and erase yet more of his debt. "Rutila is but a maid of sixteen..."

Rutila's eyes flew open in outrage. She loudly interrupted Plutonium's lie. "I am twenty summers!" she bellowed.

Plutonium cringed as if Rutila had struck him with a stick.

"I am no virgin maid!" She reared her head in anger. "Roman lice slaughtered my family and raped me! I'll have none of you." She became wild-eyed and lashed out at the *milite* standing beside her. Her fingers clawed his throat. "Roman lice!" she shrieked. "They live to rape and lie!"

Columba looked mortified that her *hospes* might overhear the fracas. A swift attempt to silence Rutila was made. "Shut that girl up."

The *milite* clamped his hand around Rutila's mouth but she bit his fingers. He howled in pain and instantly let go.

Atellus had heard horrific tales of the tribal uprising in Britannia. The rebellious Britons had sent a chill through the entire Roman Empire and struck fear in the once-invincible heart of Rome. The uprising had ruined careers and taken lives. Tens of thousands of innocent Romans had been slaughtered. Roman towns and outposts were obliterated to ash. A few beleaguered Roman refugees fled to Gallia, eager to tell their horror stories. Rome had badly underestimated the organizational skills of the Britons. The Britons caught them off guard and unleashed their full wrath upon unsuspecting Roman colonies. Rome had taken a severe beating.

Atellus knew from the refugees' tales the wrath of the Britons was not unprovoked. Rome had greatly mistreated the tribes. Britannia was Rome's farthest flung outpost and it attracted only the most ruthless men. Roman generals and bureaucrats had been too harsh with the Britons. Boudica, the queen of Iceni, had been publicly stripped and flogged, and her daughters raped by Roman *milites* to make them unmarriageable to tribal noblemen. The bureaucrats had imposed starvation and cruelty upon the Britons. Laws were imposed, forcing the Britons to sell their women and children into *servitus* to pay unjust taxes.

Not surprisingly, the Britons rebelled. They burned, slaughtered and destroyed anything Roman that crossed their path. Even Roman pottery was crushed to dust. Nothing Roman was spared. The enraged Britons swept down on surprised Roman settlements by the tens of thousands.

Rome retaliated with slaughter and punishment deemed excessive even by Roman standards. Rome had made no friends among the Celts. It was rumored the queen who had led the uprising had taken her own life with poison, but in truth, no one knew what had happened to her or her daughters. No one knew or else no one was telling.

The Celtic women had been the heart of the uprising and the Romans had been especially brutal with queens, warrioresses and the daughters of tribal chiefs. Whole bloodlines were destroyed...

He looked at the bound woman standing before him and saw the will for revenge burning brightly in her eyes. Her cool green gaze looked deadly, as if eager to strike again. He realized if the Celts ever mastered the secret of steel, surely all Romans would die. Rutila was, without doubt, the most dangerous and exciting woman he had ever seen in his life. "I want Rutila." He spoke firmly. He was certain he could tame this *ferus* and ill-treated creature. Even though she appeared to be menacing, seeing her gilded and bound only added to her enticement. Rutila's daring stranglehold on Plutonium had convinced him of her great value. She had successfully done to Plutonium what he had only dreamed of doing for years. He saw in her a sympathetic soul. He held his outstretched hand toward Rutila. "Give her to me. She's mine now."

Columba sneered at Atellus' decision and whispered softly to Plutonium, "I'm so grateful I did not marry him. What a tragedy it would have been to be bound in fortune and in blood to that *rusticus ineptus*."

Plutonium visibly suffered his conflicts. His face collapsed as he blubbered, "If you thought so little of him and believed him to be a clown, why did I have to share Janni? It was traumatizing and so unfair."

Columba raised a threatening palm. Her eyes lit with vicious fire.

Plutonium cringed in fear of being struck.

Columba poked Plutonium in the belly instead. "Stop your blubbering in public."

The couple continued to bicker on the steps of the hall.

Atellus unfastened the *fibula* on his cloak. He swung his *praetextata* free from his shoulders and approached Rutila. He glared at the *milite* who guarded her until the man mustered the wit to step aside. He stood in front of Rutila and wrapped the *praetextata* around her. Rutila trembled. He proudly drew her to his side, claiming her as his. His heart swelled with excitement. Now he would fully enjoy what Plutonium would only have wasted.

Columba glared at Atellus. "I'll never forgive you for ruining my *convivium*. I think you're very selfish." She frowned in disapproval as Atellus held Rutila steady at his side. "She'll slit your throat. Mark my words. You'll know soon enough I was right about Rutila."

“Goodbye.” Atellus firmly held the trembling woman to his side and walked away with his newest possession. He was eager to be alone with Rutila and out of Columba’s and Plutonium’s sights. He left them bickering on the steps of the grand hall without any entertainment for their *hospes*. He felt no pity for them. His lips curled in a cruel smile as he tried to imagine how they would improvise entertainment to the demanding and *ebrius* mob waiting inside the hall.

## Chapter Four

Atellus lovingly wrapped his arm around Rutila and supported her unsteady stance as they climbed down the steps of the hall. He led her across the courtyard into the shadows. Soon Columba, Plutonium and the decadent *convivium* were out of sight and beyond his care. He guided Rutila toward the main villa where he was staying. He glanced down at her as they walked, holding her tight to prevent her from swaying or falling. He wanted to study her beautiful face but she kept looking away. All he saw were tantalizing glimpses. Her hair and the gold gliding on her brow shimmered dramatically in the moonlight. His blood raced as he pulled her close to his body and led her across the dark *porticus*. He couldn't wait to lay her on his *lectus* and run his hands over her beautiful body. When he returned to his *cubiculum*, he would light many oil lamps and gaze at her. He wanted to admire and become familiar with what he now owned. He led her toward the main villa. His heart pounded. The villa was dark and deserted. He was grateful to have the building to themselves. Everyone else was attending the *convivium*, and every *domesticus* was busy attending to the details of Columba's grand vision.

Rutila was barefoot. He walked slightly ahead of her, carefully leading the way through the dark. His fingertips lightly skimmed across her back as he guided her along the shadowy *porticus*. When he touched her, he noticed she moaned as if she were enthralled in ecstatic agony. Her back muscles rippled as if he had tossed snow against her bare skin. She leaned closer to him and rubbed her body against him as sweet, tiny sounds escaped her lips. She reacted so strongly to his touch he felt heartily encouraged. He stroked her back again with his fingertips and watched her sigh and shiver with pleasure. He leaned over her. "My name is Atellus. I am your new *dominus*." He spoke softly. "I'll be very gentle with you." His hands stroked her hair. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Of course." She seemed insulted he thought her slow-witted. "Plutonium was never my *dominus*. He was too weak." Her tongue slightly slurred the words but the thought was crystal clear.

He was cheered to hear it, feeling even more grateful to have taken this lovely woman away from his greedy *patruelis* and his hard-driven wife. He stopped walking and gently maneuvered Rutila against a column where he could study her face in the moonlight. He brushed her hair aside and ran a reverent thumb along one of her golden brows. He thought she looked like a temple goddess gilt in gold, though he noticed she had licked most of the gold dust from her lips. She looked so beautiful to his lonely eyes. His heart soared. He hoped to win her favor. He did not wish to add to her resistance to Romans or to the misery she already carried. He wanted her willing heart.

He stared into her pale eyes, willing her to contact his soul. Her languid eyes looked to be under a spell. Perhaps *magica* had been practiced on her? Her eyes were filled with the wantonness and fury of a tumbling mountain river. He drew a deep breath. His chest tightened. His heart pounded. In a single breath his idealized image of Columba was purged. A new idol took her rightful place. The Copper Celt.

A fresh hope to truly know love filled his heart. This was fate. His eyes skimmed over Rutila's lovely face and realized she seemed to be struggling to control her own chaotic emotions. His heart ached for her struggles. He was ready to make up for lost years and show all his kindness to her – all his heart. She would get everything. He was ready to drink in her gratitude for saving her from fiends. He was ready to fill the void in his life with Rutila. His fingertips gently stroked the sides of her gold-gilt cheekbones. The soft sensation appeared to be staggering to her. Her eyes closed in ecstasy. Her lips parted with a soft sigh and her hips thrust forward, nearly touching him. His breath caught.

He ached for contact with her but was both pleased and puzzled by the strength of her reaction. He had merely touched her face and she had melted in ecstasy. He was not so vain or so *ludificare* as to believe this was a sane female reaction from a woman who had just been bartered for. He studied her eyes, which seemed to flicker equally between expressions of mortification and wantonness. He reached under the heavy *praetextata* draped around her shoulders and exposed her pale skin to the moonlight. He pushed the copper chains aside and gently squeezed one of her full breasts, running his thumb along its gilded tip. The nipple bloomed and stood hard in a golden peak.

Rutilla pressed her body against his warm palm. She gritted her teeth and moaned as if she were fighting her reaction to him. Her body seemed to involuntarily writhe under his slightest touch. Her lips parted and tiny ecstatic sounds escaped. She leaned toward him wantonly, rubbing herself against his hand and filling his palm with warm flesh. A pleased sigh escaped her lips immediately followed by a fleeting look of defiance in her eyes. She seemed to both love and hate his touch. Her extreme conflict confirmed his suspicions. He knew of aphrodisiacs and he was disappointed he had not elicited these heated reactions from her entirely on his own. His fingertips gently stroked her face as he asked, "I know you're not *ebrius*. What have they given you?"

She looked ashamed and tried to look away from him, but his fingertips wouldn't allow her to turn away. "Some herbs in honeyed wine."

He gazed sadly into her eyes.

She glared at him as if she were busy plotting to strangle him. "You're Roman. I shouldn't tell you anything." She paused. "My friend Corvina wished for me to leave this world neither in fear nor in pain." More unbidden words spilled out of her mouth. "Instead she set me on fire and I wish she had not."

His hand lightly stroked the side of Rutila's breast. She closed her eyes and shuddered in ecstasy. He smiled. He didn't know Corvina and he didn't know what this concoction was, but he was grateful she brewed it. Taking a bound woman in this state would be the closest thing to *voluptas elatio* on earth. He was greatly tempted to



take advantage but also willing to think ahead. He looked into Rutila's conflicted eyes. "I do not wish to harm or force you," he assured her. "I will be fair and caring with you. I want a willing *amatrix*. I will give you a little time to adjust to the idea that I am your new *dominor*—"

Before he could finish his pious speech, she flung herself against him. Her arms draped around his neck. Her *catena* tangled in his hair. She made a beeline for his full lips, pressing down hard upon his bottom lip and flicking it with her tongue. "Open for me." She moaned in quiet desperation until he parted his lips and allowed her to enter. Her invasion was complete and not gentle. For a moment, the intimacy of her kiss and the warmth of a shared single breath startled him. No *ancilla* had done this before. His body stiffened. For a second, he didn't know how to respond. Rutila was not a limp, complaint *ancilla*. She took him. She was aggressive and he loved it. Her arms crushed him against her. He felt her firm curves and the scratch of the copper chains pressing against his body. He was stunned by her strength. She took control of him. It was something he was not accustomed to.

Her lips glided against his. Her soft sounds and wet heat were intoxicating. Her kiss deepened. Her tongue gently slid across his teeth, thrilling him. He opened and accepted the deeper kiss. Her searching tongue sent a shot of electricity straight to his groin. His *dolon* leapt. All his senses engaged to take in the myriad sensations, sounds, tastes and textures. She lightened her hold on him and let her lips slide gently against his in a single soft sweep. She nipped his bottom lip and set his nerves on fire. She was pursuing him and he loved it. Her delicate tongue penetrated his lips and teased the tip of his tongue. He opened to the sensations, instantly recognizing this was a small-scale reenactment of a larger event, but in this case, she was piercing him. He groaned softly. A wild creature was claiming his soul. His arms wrapped tightly around her. He held on to her as his knees shook.

He felt lightheaded. The kiss was an exquisite and novel sensation. Traditionally Roman men did not kiss. Kissing was for the nursery. In his experience, only *maters* and babies kissed. Dignified Roman men did not kiss. He now seriously questioned the wisdom of that protocol.

Rutila arched against him. Her copper chains rubbed against his chest and thighs. He could have her now. His heart pounded. She was more than willing. He couldn't wait to see her stretched across his *lectus*, offering herself. He wondered if there was a way to secure her wrist *catena* to the wall of the *cubiculum*. She would be lovely to watch by flickering lamplight in her delicate chains. He wanted to savor this. He wanted to see his coppery Venus in complete submission before he sank his *dolon* in her and rubbed the gold gilt from her body. His pulse raced. "Come with me." He gathered her against him and motioned for her to follow him inside the villa.

Rutila halted and dug her heels in as if she were an obstinate mule. "I won't go in there," she firmly insisted. "Those quarters are for Roman *servitus* and whores."

The judgmental look on her face clearly communicated she did not exclude him from either category.

"For months I've slept in the kitchen, the stables, anywhere but there. I refuse to go inside." Her eyes roved toward the temple of Jupiter. "Take me in there." She looked at him with languorous eyes. "I will go there."

He briefly hesitated. It seemed like such a blasphemous idea to use a sacred *donarium* as if it were a cubiculum, but it was a private *donarium* after all. Perhaps the gods would be pleased? There was no way to be sure...

Her fingertips stroked his thigh. Her eyes begged him to take her.

His desire to please her won. He quickly concluded of all the gods, Jupiter would be the most approving of this act. Jupiter would enjoy watching a gold-gilt woman ravished at his feet. He thought of how insulted Plutonium would be if he found out he had used the *donarium* in this way. His heart lifted at the thought. He would be *ludificare* to say no to this. He took hold of her hand and swiftly led her toward the alabaster *donarium* before the herbed potion wore off or she changed her mind.

The elegant *donarium* was deserted. Everyone was busy enjoying the *convivium*. No one else had come to honor Jupiter. His breath caught as they entered the beautiful formal hall. The sight was so stunning he felt humbled and almost turned back. His eye was led down a seemingly endless vaulted hallway of massive alabaster columns. A towering statue of Jupiter, five times the height of a mortal man, was seated upon his throne in the back of the *donarium*. The domineering statue of Jupiter sat alone in the amber glow of dozens of flickering oil lamps.

They crept quietly across the polished floor even though they knew they had the splendor of the *donarium* completely to themselves. Atellus knew no Roman would come to worship Jupiter so long as food, wine and perversity were being offered in the great hall.

Rutila gazed at the interior of the temple shrine in awe. "I've always wished to see the inside of the *donarium* but I dared not enter uninvited. This is the perfect opportunity to meet my nemesis." She frowned. "Jupiter, the *pater* of Rome."

He froze, distracted for a moment by her firm command of the Roman tongue. Surprisingly for a Celtic *servitus*, she spoke with the same power and precision as any noblewoman in the Dolabella clan. He wondered how that could be. She stared ahead with a defiant expression on her face. He looked where she was looking. Jupiter's lamp-lit face loomed above the darkness. He stared upward at the colossal statue. Jupiter's commanding face emanated power, masculinity and robust physical strength, all wonderful qualities if not abused.

Rutila shivered as she clung to his side. "Jupiter is not my god but I recognize I am in a place of power." Her gaze turned away from the statue and focused keenly on him. She looked Atellus over with sweeping glances that neglected no part of him. A look of frustration crossed her face as if she wished she could find something repulsive about him but could not. In a moment of willfulness she grabbed hold of his wrist and dragged him to the foot of the massive statue.

The face of Jupiter glowered down on them. Its stone nostrils flared sternly in the lamplight.

Jupiter's omnificent presence seemed to fuel Rutila's sense of defiance. She stood straight. Her eyes lit with fire. She seemed inspired to show Jupiter feminine power and strength. She turned toward him with gleaming eyes. "Unchain me." She held her wrists out, waiting for Atellus to release her from the *catena*.

He wasn't at all certain he wanted to do that. He knew Rutila was dangerous and he liked the *catena*. The chains swept across her body in the most provocative way. He thought the sparkling copper chains were quite flattering and erotic. He loved the way they shimmied atop her smooth curves. He also thought they might provide some margin of safety for him, but then he remembered how she had used the *catena* to strangle Plutonium. He immediately started to remove her *catena* one at a time, deciding he could fare better in a simple hand-to-hand fight if she chose to become violent.

He slid the first *catena* from her wrist with sad resolve. He had wanted to take her bound.

Once she was free of the *catena*, she closed her eyes in ecstatic gratitude. She looked as if she might swoon. She lightly touched the spot the *catena* had rested on with her fingertip, moaning softly.

Her enraptured reaction encouraged him. He quickly removed another *catena*.

She brought the freed wrist to her lips and reverently kissed it, becoming lost in pleasure. Her eyes looked dreamy. She bent forward and ran the tip of her tongue along the underside of her wrist, seemingly lost in the sensation of having the copper chains removed.

He became mesmerized by her ecstatic reaction and worked faster to remove the *catena* that encircled her graceful ankles.

Her fingertips lightly stroked every spot where a *catena* or copper chain had lain. Her gaze fell to half-mast. She moaned softly through parted lips, acting wanton.

He was fascinated by her intense reaction to touch. The blood rushed to his groin. He could not wait to see her reaction when he sank his *dolon* deep inside her. He knew he would bellow so loudly from pleasure, Jupiter would have to cover his ears. He finished unshackling her and tossed the *catena* aside. The *catena* clattered across the stone floor and slid to a stop between Jupiter's feet.

He waited breathlessly as she parted her lips to speak. For a moment, he thought she was going to thank him for saving her from rape at the hands of an *ebrius* mob and sparing her from cruel bloodsport. He waited anxiously to hear he was her savior and she was ready to willingly pledge her loyalty and heart to him.

She did not thank him in words. She removed the cloak from her shoulders, twirled it around her with a flourish and tossed it to Jupiter's feet. The woolen *praetextata* spun across the polished floor and spread outward like a wine stain. Her hands gracefully motioned toward the cloak. "Lie down," she whispered.

He eyed her warily, alert for the possibility of tricks. His body ached to pin her to the floor and thrust inside her.

She paced a slow circle around him, as if she were a stalking lioness. Her eyes locked onto his.

He pivoted to face her, not daring to turn his back for even a moment.

"Your god is watching." Her lips curled with a slight hint of confrontation. "Make him proud." She reached for the *fibula* on his shoulder that held his toga closed and swiftly plucked it free.

His toga fell open, exposing his lean torso.

Her fingertip hovered in the air between them. It traveled in a straight trajectory from his broad chest, down his abdomen toward his hard *dolon*. Her eyes lit with desire. "You're a very well-made man, as beautiful as any statue. I like what I see." A faint smile crossed her lips.

He was both flattered and mortified by her pronouncement. She gazed at him as she would any desirable man, not with the respect she should show to her *dominor*. He remembered too late the *fibula* had a finger-length spike at its tip to thread through clothing. It was designed to pierce tightly woven fabric, even supple leather. His flesh would provide no challenge.

She waved the *fibula* menacingly in front of his face, smiling.

He eyed the steel tip with regret. For a moment he feared she would use it to gouge at him. He didn't wish to fight with her. He wanted to be her lover. "Set it down, Rutila, let's not harm each other." He sighed with relief when she impulsively threw the *fibula* aside. It clattered against a carved column and landed heavily on the floor in a dark corner of the *donarium*.

He was thankful she had voluntarily relinquished a potential weapon until she stepped forward and slowly peeled the toga from his hips. As she unwound the fabric, she gently ran her fingernails across every inch of skin her crafty hands exposed. The fallen toga puddled at his feet. His *dolon* jutted in the air. She bent down and kissed the flat center of his abdomen, carefully avoiding his *dolon*. The teasingly light touch of her lips was barely perceptible. The brush of her fallen hair against his skin was more noticeable than the touch of her lips. He found himself holding his breath, waiting for more. Her fingernails lightly scratched the back of his bare legs. His thighs and buttocks instantly pebbled with excited gooseflesh. It was a thrilling and new sensation for him to be the pursued one, the passive partner being undressed. His *dolon* filled and rose higher.

Her hands lovingly stroked the silky trail of dark hair that ran down his abdomen, and for a harsh moment, he feared he might spill then and there. He desperately wanted to wait and come inside her. He clenched his jaw and willed himself to stay in control. He felt vulnerable in a way that he had not felt since he was an inexperienced young man and just beginning to explore the sexual world with the household *ancilla*. This too was a new sexual world one he had only dreamed of. "Rutila." He quietly

uttered her name just to hear himself say it. He tipped his head back in ecstasy as she ran her cool fingertips over his hipbones. His body shuddered with longing. His desire for her was stronger than anything in memory. He wanted her so badly. He was ready to take her now, but he was afraid to do anything overt and risk shattering the dynamic of the moment. He panted for control as she took control of him.

She sank to her knees and slowly rubbed her cheek against his thighs. Her face tipped upward to gaze at him.

He gazed down at her. Her motions made her look as if she were an exotic cat playing at his feet. Faint traces of gold dust rubbed off on his skin. She ran her sweeping tongue along his thigh and traveled upward toward his testes. The anticipation was so great, he thought his knees might buckle. Her warm mouth made contact with his testes and gently sucked the sensitive skin against her lips. He gasped and steadied his hands on her shoulders. She toyed with him, humming deep in her throat and drawing his testes lower. He felt heavy and full. His *dolon* flushed a deep shade of plum, a glossy bead of fluid bloomed at its tip. His hips rocked involuntarily. He was in real danger of losing it. Her flicking tongue teased his testes until he lost patience. He cupped the back of her head and gently fed himself into her mouth. "Take it," he whispered.

She did not resist. Her lips softly parted, welcoming him. The feeling was one of hot, gripping compression and complete acceptance. He closed his eyes in bliss, feeling grateful she had willingly accepted his first attempt to dominate her.

She adoringly kissed and sucked the crown of his *dolon*, teasing the ridge, which ran beneath. Her upturned face rocked gently from side to side as she teased him with the tip of her tongue.

He cradled her face gently between his hands while he took a few slow, tentative strokes in and out of her mouth. His fingertips tangled in her coppery curls. He gazed down at her intently. This was the most beautiful sight in the world. This lovely woman was completely his. She would be his grateful *amatrix* and companion forever. With her, anything was possible. The breath hissed out of him. His hips rocked gently against her lips. What a loser Plutonium was.

She caressed him with such focus, as if her next heartbeat relied on it.

He watched her with fascination as her lips caressed him. She seemed absorbed in the thrill of what she was doing. Perhaps it was only Corvina's herbed wine inspiring her, but she seemed fully appreciative of the beauty and intimacy of this act. No lover had ever taken him with such devotion. His knees trembled and his blood pulsed. His testes tightened and he knew he was about to finish. He pulled away from her, gasping. "Wait," he huffed, desperate to regain some control over himself.

She sat back on her heels, looking up at him. She reached up and took hold of his hand. "Lie down." Her eyes motioned toward the *praetextata* spread upon the floor.

She gave the order so softly and with such authority he gave no thought to her request. He did as he was told. He lay upon the cloak at the foot of Jupiter and stretched across the floor.

She swung her leg over his hips and hovered above him, mounting him as if he were a horse. She pinned him beneath her with her strong limbs. She leaned over, bent her head to his ear and whispered, "Close your eyes and be silent."

He refused to do any such thing. He needed to watch. He wanted to see everything that was happening and commit each precious moment to memory. Especially the moment she slowly impaled herself on his aching *dolon*. He looked up at her in awe. The light was at her back. The flickering light of the oil lamps made her hair glow like a halo. Her breasts were lost in the shadows. His hands reached for them in the darkness.

She straddled his hips with her back arched and slowly let herself sink downward. She was wet, tight and he slid easily inside her with a single rough stroke.

He bit his lip and groaned. His back arched off the floor. *Rutila, take me. Ride me.* He thought the words but dared not utter them. As she slid down his *dolon*, his hips arched off the floor to meet her. He stared upward at the curved undersides of her breasts and Jupiter's looming face. Complete pleasure flooded his heart. He realized this was a perfect moment and one that deserved a place in eternity. He knew this moment of power and passion would ring with life even toward a day long after the *donarium* had crumbled to dust.

She took control and set the pace. Her hips sank down on him. She aggressively ground her hips against him, sighing with pleasure. Her fingers gripped his shoulders or brushed maddeningly across his nipples. His entire body ached and arched upward. She closed her eyes and tipped her head back in bliss. No stroke was too harsh. She seemed to crave a rougher touch, which brought him to the edge of release. He thrust deeper, convinced this was it. At the last second, she surprised him by rising and allowing him to slide free of her. He gasped in disappointment until she firmly took hold of his *dolon* and briskly rubbed the head against her *gemmare*. A look of complete abandonment crossed her face as she rubbed their most sensitive spots together. His eyes opened wide. He'd never had a woman take hold of him and do this.

He watched, enthralled, as she used him to achieve her own pleasure. She seemed to float away to her own private world. She gently swayed on top of him with her eyes closed, every emotion, every sensation clearly displayed on her face. He saw it all. The rapture on her beautiful face thrilled him. At that moment, she was Venus. He realized she seemed to be racing toward her own climax without any real thought to him. She was doing this solely for her own pleasure. She was demanding, even rough with him, and he loved it. He was used to dutiful Roman wives and accommodating *ancilla*. Rutila was neither. She was *ferus* and aggressive. She was boiling water poured over hot coals. She was a stalking wolf half glimpsed in the woods. She was not of his world. She was dangerous. It would be a pity to domesticate her, but he was willing to try.

She opened her eyes and confronted him.

He held his breath as her gaze pinned him to the spot.

Her hand slowly slid his *dolon* inside her sheath. She sighed deeply and closed her eyes.

He slid easily inside her with a hissing groan. The muscles of her sheath gripped him on contact. He pressed deeper inside, amazed by the rippling internal dance. Her hips thrust down on him and pumped faster. She ground her body against him. Her head lolled slowly from side to side. Her flipping hair covered him as if it were a waterfall of copper. Her climax came as if she were possessed. She growled softly, panted for breath and stroked her thighs. Her breasts bounced as her hips landed hard on him. Her sighs echoed through the *donarium*. His eyes opened wide. He had never seen anything to rival it.

His testes grew tight. His entire body tensed. He was afraid she might bolt away from him once she was satisfied. He gripped her hips fiercely to prevent her from leaving him. He thrust her hips down on him and came explosively at Jupiter's feet. His shuddering body curled off the floor. He gulped short bursts of air, wondering if he'd ever again draw a deep breath, and struggled to hold his trembling body still. He held himself off the floor so tensely he shook. He finally groaned in exhaustion and fell back.

She slowly opened her eyes and gazed down at him with a look that was an odd mix of adoration and surprise. The edge of her lip ticked upward in the slightest smile.

His heart lurched.

Her body rocked against him for some minutes, apparently not wanting to part from him. He tried to stay inside her as long as possible but he eventually softened and slid free.

Now that he was sated, at least for the moment, he wondered what he would do with his wild *faun*. She no longer belonged to this tragic place. He must take her home. He pulled her beside him and wrapped the *praetextata* around them both. "I'm so happy you're mine," he whispered. "I shall make plans for us."

She surprised him by returning his embrace. Her hands slid across his back to gently caress him. Her face nuzzled against his warm chest.

They both lay on the floor, staring upward at the flickering image of Jupiter, until they recovered enough to make another *donatio* to his spirit.

Atellus quickly became hard again and dragged Rutila on top of him. He delighted in having full view of her. He looked up at her gently swaying breasts and slowly drove himself deep inside her. This time he barely moved, allowing her to take the lead. Her movements were slow and sinuous. She moved with the grace of a cat. Her fingertips gently grazed her flesh as she slowly rocked on top of him. She looked enraptured, as if taken by the gods. He was so grateful for her and wanted this union to last as long as possible.

She surprised him by leaning forward to deliver frequent kisses and constant eye contact. He was not used to that, though he now loved it. He wondered how had he not noticed what was missing from past lovers.

They made love until the oil lamps burned low. All his life he had wished for a *ferocitas* woman to truly love and she had finally arrived. His heart swelled. He loved a

Celt. This was his new truth and Rutila was his *faun*. It was miraculous. His broken soul had been reborn at the foot of Jupiter.



## Chapter Five

Rutila opened her sleepy eyes. A golden morning had arrived with its own harsh facts. Last night was not a dream. It had all been shamefully real. The polished stone floor beneath her was cool and uncomfortably hard. She shifted uneasily onto her side. The oil lamps had long flickered out and the interior of the *donarium* was now dim. Except for the first golden beams of sunlight pouring through the *portico*, the rest of the *donarium* lay in shadow. They lay in shadow.

Her body tensed in horror as she realized she was willingly allowing a sleeping Roman to hold her in his arms. She awoke wrapped inside a Roman cloak with her face nuzzled against a solid Roman chest. Her fingertips caressed the side of a lean Roman hip. Without question, she had voluntarily, even enthusiastically given in to the enemy.

The effects of Corvina's herbed wine had long worn off and she no longer possessed a respectable excuse for such wayward behavior. She chastened herself for allowing a tragedy of this magnitude to occur, yet she didn't pull away in disgust. She remained draped at the Roman's side. Her nose lingered near his warm skin, inhaling his pleasant scent. One compliment she could begrudgingly bestow upon the Romans was they were scrupulously clean creatures who made good use of aromatic resins and oils. This man had the rich scent of a forest in autumn. A scent she could only describe as crisp leaves and fresh rut. His exciting scent made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. She frowned, wishing she did not like his scent, but she did. She watched his chest slowly rise and fall in his sleep, feeling extremely guilty for watching him so intently. He was a very handsome man by any standard. The thought worried her. His dark lashes flickered in his sleep. She wondered what he was dreaming of and hoped he was having a nightmare, but his blissful expression looked far too peaceful for that.

She remembered the night before she had been a wanton. She had brought great pleasure to them both. Her gut lurched. She was ashamed of herself for doing so. The Roman slept trustingly beside her. He did not fear her as Plutonium would. She had not fought the effects of herbed wine hard enough. She could have fought it and she wondered why she had not.

She rose on her elbow and squinted at the Roman's sleeping face. He had a broad, square face and black chevron-shaped brows, which made him appear to be clever. He looked innocent in his sleep, almost boyish with a thick lock of wavy black hair falling across his brow, though she could plainly see he was a weathered and worldly man, perhaps thirty.

She remembered the *ferrarius* had hidden a small *pugio* inside the hinge of her ankle *catena*. She realized she could extract that blade now and use it to tear a hole in the

Roman's throat. Her eyes cast about for the discarded *catena*. She saw them draped across Jupiter's alabaster feet and made a cautious motion toward them.

As she crept away from Atellus, his eyes slowly opened. His brown eyes sparkled with a touch of amber lit from the sunbeams slanting into the *donarium*. She was surprised to see his eyes were a light shade of brown, almost hazel. Last night, in the flickering lamplight, she had thought them a penetrating shade of black. He looked different this morning, much warmer and more approachable than last night's imposing *dominor* in a purple-trimmed cloak. Unfortunately, she noticed nothing tyrannical or repulsive about him either. The thought disturbed her—that could be a problem. She studied him again carefully, searching for faults. Her eyes were hyperalert for signs of physical or character defects but found none. He smiled. She hesitantly came to the conclusion he was a very attractive man. That fact alone was a terrible problem.

He smiled at her and drew her against him. His fingers idly twisted through her wavy hair. "Rutila is an apt name." His morning voice was husky. "You truly are golden red." He held a lock of her hair to the light. "Your hair is a brilliant color in daylight." A pleased expression crossed his lips. He shifted the *praetextata* that covered them. "I want to leave Plutonium's compound. I wish to begin the return trip home, today." He cradled her against his chest and kissed the top of her head. "Are you ready to come home with me, *amare*?"

Her breath caught. She froze. His gentle gesture disarmed her. She realized she had not been treated gently in a very long time. It felt strange and completely unexpected. She had craved touch and gentleness for so long, but she didn't trust it, especially not from a Roman. No one had loved her in years. She forgot what it felt like to be spoken to gently. Even Corvina could be terse. Atellus' loving gesture made her throat ache and tears brim at the corners of her eyes, but she fought it and quickly regained control. She had not allowed herself to cry for years, she saw no sense in starting now, so she held it in.

He rocked her in his arms. "Do you have a child or anyone dear to you who must come with you? I will buy them. I'm eager to go home. Let's dress and leave." He lay sprawled across the floor with his arms around her but made no actual move to get up or dress.

She lay still, feeling shocked. Why did she feel so strange? What had happened to her? By now she should be cold dead and beyond shame. Instead, she was alive with her arms wrapped around a handsome Roman. This was horrible. She was listening to his kind words as if they meant something. She reminded herself, *Romans lie*. Lying and scheming was what they did best. They had no true honor. She knew that firsthand. Roman hearts were as fickle as their gods. They were not to be trusted. Romans were rapists and liars all.

She had to be strong and resist the lies. Something would have to be done about this unfortunate occurrence. The man beside her would have to be silenced before his lying tongue seduced her deeper into shame. That was the solution. She must end this

mistake. The illusion of gentleness was the ultimate Roman deception and she would have none of it. The man was being kind and loving now, but she knew that could change in a flash. She knew the Romans were capable of the most heartless cruelty. They called it order. They took what they wanted and crushed the innocent. She was now sober and on her guard. His tricks would not deceive her. She could turn this situation to her advantage. The rebellion against Rome would begin in earnest now.

To avoid rousing Atellus' suspicions, she willed herself to relax in his arms. She allowed him to hold her close to his chest. She would pretend she trusted him. He would never suspect she was plotting. Her naked body pressed against him, drawing in the warmth of his skin and the steady beat of his heart. She hated to admit it, but even without Corvina's herbed wine, he felt good to be near. Her fingertips lovingly brushed across his skin. This wasn't going to be as easy as she hoped. She tried to cope with the fact she had willingly bedded a Roman and loved it. Potions or not, how could that possibly be? All Romans should be despised. Her gut wrenched with guilt. She thought about her current situation, wondering what action she could take against the shocking turn of events. He had mentioned returning home. Where was his home? Perhaps her answer was to wait. She would wait until she was far from this horrid compound and the oppressive grasp of Roman authority. She realized she could allow him to lead her from bondage and later kill him on a lonely road. Her heart lit with joy. That's what she would do. She did not have to act at this moment. She had only to win his trust and wait. She consoled her guilty conscience with that vengeful thought as her fingers stroked his broad back.

"What are you thinking? You look so troubled." Atellus gazed at her. "There's nothing to worry about." A faint smile crossed his lips as he pulled her beneath him. "Our life together has just started."

He lovingly kissed the sides of her throat and breasts, setting her body on fire. She sighed. She didn't welcome the excitement his touch ignited but she couldn't resist it either. His clever mouth grazed her lips and slowly kissed her with a soft, easy touch. She noted he made a quick study of kissing and was now an expert. His warm kisses softened her sour mood. His hands glided over her hips and held her firmly against him. She was confronted with the head of his *dolon* pressing longingly against her thigh. He was thick, hard and ready for her. The hopeful glint in his eyes silently asked for entrance.

She was surprised to feel how excited she was at the thought of parting her thighs and allowing him inside. She actually felt something close to desire for him. It was both disturbing and unwelcome. Desire did not belong beneath a Roman cloak. She felt a stab of shame for wanting him and encouraging him.

His hands gently stroked her skin as if she were a precious thing to be treated with care. No other Roman had treated her this way. He was being very gentle with her. Gentleness was in short supply and impossible to resist. She knew she should not want it, but she willingly parted her thighs and guided him inside, knowing fully she shouldn't be doing this.

He moaned softly and slowly pressed deeper. He held himself still, as if savoring the intense sensation. His fingers intertwined with hers. The weight of his arms pinned her to the floor. His lips brushed against hers. His eyes were full of affection. He seemed so grateful. She bit her lip to keep quiet as her body pulsed against him. She closed her eyes to block out the shame of lying beneath a Roman at the foot of Jupiter and desiring it.

His strong body moved on top of her. His breath felt hot near her ear. Her feet tangled in the cloak. She brushed her bare foot down the length of his muscular leg and pressed her body against him as he slowly moved on top of her. Against her will her body completely accepted him with a warm caress.

Her blood rushed. He felt so good. Her hips rose slightly to meet his. She simply gave in and did not fight it. There was no other choice. She could fight later. A beautiful feeling of surrender washed through her. He moved slowly, taking his time, though she worried someone might walk into the *donarium* and interrupt them. She would kill them if they did. A few moments more of the right pressure and the right stroke would push her over the edge. She arched off the floor and gently rocked her hips beneath him, encouraging him to move without restraint. His short, plunging strokes rubbed against her wet *gemmare* but were merely teasing. Her desire soared. She almost begged for more but stopped before her libelous tongue betrayed her desires. She couldn't bring herself to beg a Roman to take her. This was madness. He was driving her mad. She couldn't get close enough. She pressed her *gemmare* against him as he took a particularly slow, deep stroke. Her breath caught as much from shock as from pleasure when her climax grabbed her and carried her over the edge. She tried to remain quiet, but her muscles rippled until she gasped out loud.

His face took on an expression of exquisite agony. For a moment, time seemed to stop for him. He growled softly and plunged deeper. He groaned as his body trembled. His movements sped up as he flooded her. "Rutila." His fingers clutched hers, refusing to let go. He stayed buried inside her, moving very slowly for as long as he possibly could. He finally slid from her body and relaxed his grip. His fingertips tenderly stroked the sides of her face. His lips brushed her mouth. He gazed at her with adoration. "This is perfect."

She was horrified to have so easily given in to him yet again and taken such pleasure from a Roman. Once again she had allowed desire to cloud her judgment. Her heart and mind were both lost in a confounding labyrinth of confusion. She wanted him but she certainly didn't want a Roman. What in the name of the holy goddess Nemetona was wrong with her? Even Nemetona, the goddess of the most twisted labyrinths and densest groves, would be lost in this situation. She could not live with such conflict. What would she do?

She focused keenly on Atellus. He looked happy, languid. Her mind churned. Clearly he assumed he owned her and could use her anytime he pleased, with her full consent. She worried this may actually be true. She couldn't allow this to be her truth. The ancestors would revile such behavior. She wasn't beaten completely, not yet. This

tragedy was his fault, not hers. He was a Roman and master of deception, as all Romans were. She drew a deep breath. She would allow no conflict. Fleeting pleasures wouldn't deceive her. Her thoughts cleared. Her heart must never belong to a Roman. It was that simple. The right attitude and correct actions were all that were needed. She had to be strong and resist her desires. Soon, internal conflicts would be resolved and vengeance taken. She promised herself she would kill him later, once she was safely away from Plutonium's compound. Surely that would be the most sensible solution. She would begrudgingly accept pleasure now and serve her vengeance later. She would not allow her confused heart to get in the way.

\* \* \* \* \*

Atellus lay on the *donarium* floor with his *dolon* buried between Rutilla's thighs. He gazed into her conflicted eyes. He couldn't wait until she trusted him enough to speak to him openly. He was lonely and looked forward to her fiery companionship. This was the single best morning of his life. He felt reborn. He wanted to stay just the way they were forever, but he also wanted to go home. Eventually his hip grew stiff from lying on a stone floor and his *dolon* softened. He finally made motions to leave. He took her hand and helped her to her feet. He handed her the *praetextata* to cover herself. She had no other clothing. She had only delicate strands of chain to wear and that would not do. She was his now. He owned her and her beautiful body belonged to his eyes only, not the gaze of common *domesticus* and *ludificare*. She was not entitled to wear the flowing Dolabella, Tyrian-trimmed *praetextata* but he insisted she cover herself with it before they stepped outside. He cared nothing for what Plutonium or others might think.

He wrapped his toga around himself. He seldom wore it. The snowy white, woolen toga was intended for formal functions only. This was not his usual attire. He longed to be back in his woolen *braccae* and long tunic. They were more humble garments but infinitely more practical for work and travel on horseback. He also made a note to get practical traveling clothes for Rutilla. He refused to allow anyone in this compound even a tiniest glimpse of her naked body ever again. "Hurry, Rutilla." He took hold of her hand and rushed out of the *donarium* into the bright sunlight of an autumn day. He urged her to follow him across the courtyard. "Gather anything you wish to bring with you and say goodbye."

Rutilla squinted into the light as he pulled her across the courtyard. "I have nothing to gather and no one to say goodbye to." She hurried to keep up with his long strides. She looked around, as if wondering if indeed this was the last time she would see the interior of these dreaded walls.

"We can leave now and be happy." He tugged her forward, making a long mental list in his mind of all that must be accomplished before they departed. "You never have to look back. We're finished here." He marched straight across the courtyard toward the main villa but suddenly swerved. He turned on his heel and steered her toward the *faber's* workshops.

He felt Rutila cringe. She strongly resisted walking in that direction. He found himself forcibly pulling her along. "Don't struggle. Come along. I want to retrieve the *servitus torques* they removed from your throat for the *convivium* and have it restamped with my *nota*. I want everyone to know you're mine now."

Rutila frowned at his words.

He studied her sour expression. "Why the frown? You're no longer Plutonium's property. I assume your old *torques* was removed to make way for last night's coppery regalia. Was it not?" He raised a dark brow. "If you should become lost or separated from me for any reason, I want some basic insurance of getting you back. I won't allow another to claim you." He pulled her beside him and gazed into her eyes. His fingers interlaced with hers. "This is very important to me." He lovingly stroked her hand, hoping to calm her resistance. Part of him realized he was making a spectacle of himself by holding hands in public with an *ancilla*. Anyone watching would laugh. He should have let her walk a few paces behind him, which would have been proper. He was treating her as if this were their *nuptiae* day, rather than the legal claiming of a newly acquired possession. He didn't really care what his fellow Romans thought of him. Not anymore. Most of them were still unconscious from last night's *convivium*. A few bleary-eyed dignitaries flopped back and forth in agony on the *porticos* as if they were land-stranded fish. He frowned at their excess. He didn't expect them to understand. None of them had experienced the heart-wrenching pleasure of taking Rutila at the foot of Jupiter, but if they had, they too would be holding her hand and rushing to the *ferrarius* to put their *nota* on her.

He rushed Rutila toward the *ferrarius'* shed. A dour-looking woman with straight black hair and a long nose suddenly stepped in front of them and stopped.

The woman dropped the foul *situla* she was carrying and gazed at them in shock, refusing to move.

He had to swerve to avoid bumping into the woman or kicking over the *situla*. The poor woman looked witless. "Mind yourself, *mater*," he gently warned the distracted woman.

Rutila hissed at the woman. "Corvina, you are a traitor."

He looked at Rutila in surprise. "Why do you say this? Has this woman crossed you?"

Rutila nodded her head.

Corvina stared at Rutila until she finally found the will to speak. "I can't believe you're still alive." She held up a worn linen *palla* and shook it in her trembling hand. "I woke before dawn and walked to the great hall, fully expecting to find your battered, slain body lying behind the hall, along with the rest of the garbage waiting to be burned. I brought this to toss over you to lend you some dignity until the pyre consumed you and sent you home on the sacred journey."

Rutila's lips tightened. "I'm not going on a sacred journey. I'm going home with this man," her eyes blazed with anger, "and it's your fault."

He felt Corvina's assessing gaze sweep over him. The woman's dark eyes narrowed as she took in every detail.

Corvina laughed, "Rutila, you're so ungrateful."

Rutila glared at Corvina. "I'll never trust you again."

Corvina shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I've done my good deed and you're leaving."

He stopped the squabble. "Why are you women fighting?"

"I thought she was my friend." Rutila aimed an accusing look filled with wrath at Corvina. "She tricked me." She frowned.

He loomed over the women, casting them both in shadow. "Is Corvina the one who prepared the *coquere* you drank last night?"

Rutila's expression appeared stricken. "Yes, she is the one who tricked me into drinking the herbed wine."

Atellus smiled at Corvina. "Thank you."

Rutila scoffed.

Corvina giggled and backed away.

He guided Rutila through the doorway of the *ferrarius'* shed.

At the last moment before entering the *ferrarius'* shed, Rutila turned her head to sneer at Corvina. "I don't appreciate the effects of your horrid potion! Not one bit."

He grinned. He certainly appreciated it. The herbed wine had been a gift from the gods. As he entered the *ferrarius'* shed a wall of preshaped *torques* immediately drew his attention. He walked toward the *torques* and carefully inspected each one with a critical eye. He held on to Rutila's hand and pulled her beside him.

Rutila glared at the *torques*. "I won't wear one."

He lovingly stroked the side of her cheek. "*Amare*, you must do this for me."

Corvina darted into the *ferrarius'* shed and whispered to the *ferrarius*, "Look who's still alive."

The *ferrarius* was preoccupied with pounding a glowing orange blade of iron flat. He looked up from the forge and glanced at Rutila. He seemed astonished to see her and jumped back in horror as if he were visited by a disembodied *daemon*. It took a second careful inspection to assure him she was real. "I thought we saw the last of her," he gulped. His eyes darted toward Corvina as if seeking an explanation.

Atellus watched Corvina and the *ferrarius* from the corner of his eye. He picked up a bronze *torques* and pretended to examine it, but his ears strained to hear what Corvina and the *ferrarius* were saying.

Corvina moved closer to the *ferrarius* and whispered, "Rutila is ungrateful and will soon spoil her good fortune. How could she not with her overriding thirst for anger and vengeance?"

A tiny shiver passed over Atellus' skin to hear such scandalous talk. He sidled beside Corvina and interrupted her. "That's enough *garrulus* chatter." He turned toward the *ferrarius* and spoke firmly. "Refit Rutila with her *servitus* *torques*. I wish for her to wear my *nota*."

The *ferrarius* walked to a far corner of his workshop and pulled a heavy bronze *torques* designed for a muscular, male *servitus* from an iron nail and handed it to Atellus for his inspection. "This was her *torques*, *Dominor*."

He scowled at the unwieldy *torques*. "Rutila wore this?" His brow creased with disapproval. "This will not do. She's not an ox." His eyes glinted at Rutila. "I will have a finer one made for you when we reach Belgica. Yours will be golden." He pointed at a row of delicate, preshaped *torques* hanging from an iron nail. "What about that one?" He pointed to the slenderest, lightest-weight *torques*.

The *ferrarius* fetched the *torques* from the nail and handed it to Atellus.

He nodded approvingly and swung it gently from his fingertip, assuring himself the new *torques* was exceeding lightweight. "What about this one, Rutila?" He smiled.

The *ferrarius* became alarmed. "As you can see, *Dominor*, this *torques* is better-suited for a fragile child than it is to a grown woman." He motioned toward Rutila. "She is so strong and the *torques* is so slender there is the chance she might snap the metal over time and escape the collar."

He scoffed. "Why would Rutila try to remove my *torques*? This is *ludificare* and impractical to even worry about such a thing. Please stamp the Dolabella family *nota* onto her tag. I want everyone to see her wearing my *nota*. I am Atellus Dolabella, my *nota* is the *pila*."

The *ferrarius* knew Atellus' *nota* was the javelin though he had not stamped a javelin in a very long time. He heated the bronze *torques* over his forge until the metal glowed orange. Then he widened the mouth of the *torques* with a pair of calipers to better fit an adult throat. He took one of the bronze chips that were used to tag grain sacks and *servitus* collars and heated it over the coals until it was soft enough to strike with the stylized *nota*. He attached the bronze tag to the *torques* with a copper ring and dipped the sizzling-hot *torques* into a jar of cold water. The *torques* hissed on contact, releasing a cloud of acrid steam into the air.

Rutila flinched in horror and backed away from the *torques*.

Atellus grabbed her and held her still on his lap while the *ferrarius* fitted the *torques* to her throat. "It won't burn you." He held Rutila firmly against his chest. "The metal has cooled." He lovingly stroked her hair. "I wouldn't let anyone harm you, *amare*," he assured her.

The *ferrarius* seemed moved by Atellus' soft words. He leaned forward and whispered in Atellus' ear. "*Dominor*," he spoke cautiously as if uncertain about who he was protecting or exposing. "Rutila is no fragile lamb. She is a skilled fighter. I once watched her fashion a sharp-tipped *pugio* out of wood and scraps of stolen iron. She used the improvised blade to practice lunging against a tree trunk. She fought with



conviction. Her strikes were fast and brutal. She struck the tree until her hands bled. She savaged the tree's bark." He paused. "I waited last night, fully expecting to hear Rutila had killed or injured many *hospes* at the *convivium* before being dispatched to the next world. If you show kindness to her you must know this and protect yourself." His eyes swept toward Rutila.

Rutila squirmed on his lap and glared at the *ferrarius*. "I heard every bit of that. You're as traitorous as Corvina. I'm glad I'm leaving."

The *ferrarius* smiled warmly at Rutila. "Try to be good."

Rutila closed her eyes in shock. Atellus' arms locked around her in an inescapable grip. She didn't even struggle. Her will had fled her body. It felt as if her last friends in the world had turned against her. Sadly, Corvina and the *ferrarius* had shown their true colors at last. They were siding with Atellus and mocking her. She should have known. They had been in the corrupt presence of Romans for too long and could not be trusted. A feeling of utter abandonment at their betrayal washed over her.

As the *ferrarius* approached her with the calipers to crimp the new *torques* securely in place, she felt a moment of complete panic. A claustrophobic wall closed around her heart. She was not afraid of being burned by the *torques*. She knew the *ferrarius* was not a cruel man. The problem was the *torques* itself. The *torques* was oppressive, lamentable and something she knew she should not meekly submit to but she had to. She sat still as the *torques* was fitted to her throat. She hated the feel of it. It blackened her heart. The *torques* was uniquely Roman. It was a sad reminder of what she and her people had become—human commodities to be traded and sold like bags of grain or bales of wool, to be well used or laid to waste at Roman discretion. It was an object to despise.

If she had been more honest with herself, she would have admitted her people were imperfect as well. The Celts made constant war on their neighbors. Men, women and children were slaughtered or starved because of it. She had been reared as a privileged member of a noble household who owned many slaves, but in this moment, she was blind to how the tables had turned. Irony in a *ferrarius*'s forge went unrecognized.

Atellus held her firmly on his lap as the *ferrarius* worked.

She did not want Atellus to hold her so tightly. It felt suffocating. She ignored his softly spoken words as his hands lovingly caressed her new *torques* the *ferrarius* fitted to her throat.

The *ferrarius* finally completed his task and walked away from them.

Atellus softly whispered in her ear, "I hope you appreciate the fact I care enough for you to formally claim you as my property and responsibility. I do not take my responsibilities lightly. I expect to provide you with the best comforts of life. I will share whatever luxuries I acquire. I will happily claim and sponsor any children you might bear. My house needs more children." His fingers stroked the side of her face. "My poor daughter Rosa often plays alone. You are *felicitas* from the gods. I can't believe my good *fortuna*." His hand dropped to her belly and gently stroked it.

She tensed in his hold. Atellus' soft words shocked her. How dare he claim her love and future so freely? His tenderness and the irritating presence of the *torques* had magically combined to enslave her soul. She was sitting still, actually listening to Atellus. Some of what he said sounded good. This was bad. He was the enemy. Now she truly was Roman chattel and she was thoroughly ashamed of it. She silently admitted willingly bedding him hadn't helped matters. His skills as a lover had only confused her cause. She turned to face him and studied his face. She did not like the possessive look flickering in his eyes. She reminded herself even if he was not as bad as many Romans, he was still Roman. Lover or not, revenge must be taken against Rome. He would not be spared. She promised herself she would slit his throat at the earliest opportunity. Killing him on the road was her favored plan. She would leave his drained body in the woods for the ravens to fight over. Then she would flee to the isles of home to see if anyone was still alive who remembered or cared who she was.

## Chapter Six

Atellus sighed with relief as he rode away from Plutonium's compound. There had been hours of minor setbacks and frustrations, but now they were free. He and Rutila were finally on the road by midafternoon. It had taken most of the day to pack for the journey, find appropriate traveling clothes for Rutila and make arrangements for his returning *milites*, ox carts and the drovers. It had been decided the oxen would be allowed to rest and feed for a few days before returning to Belgica, but he could not wait that long.

He was eager to take leave of Plutonium and bitter Columba. He was desperate to return home to Rosa. He longed to see his little girl and he was very much looking forward to the adventure of traveling with Rutila. She seemed to be a hearty soul. She did not appear to be a spoiled or slow-paced traveler. He imagined Rutila would be a pleasant companion. He couldn't wait for the oxen to rest and petty bits of business to be completed. He left detailed orders with his personal *custodia* and the senators. He was confident they would act in his favor.

Despite his *custodia's* fervent objections Atellus insisted he and Rutila leave immediately and travel alone. He hoped it would give them precious time to become better acquainted with one another and bond. He thought the notion romantic. It had been his long-cherished fantasy to enjoy the beauty of the forest with a *ferus* and unspoiled woman as his companion. This was his treat, his secret joy. He was truly looking forward to being alone with Rutila and fervently hoped she had more novelties to teach him, such as kissing. He had also given the *custodia* a leather pouch filled with bronze *nummus* and detailed instructions to assist Janni with finding safe passage to Rome. He knew by now the tide would have carried Janni away.

As he and Rutila rode through the gates of the compound, a sense of lightness and adventure filled his heart. He was glad to be returning home with his beautiful new *ancilla*. Plutonium and Columba barely acknowledged his leaving. The couple were too overwhelmed by the excessive drinking and revelries of the previous night to feign interest in his departure. In fact, they seemed greatly relieved to open the compound gates and watch him ride away. He doubted he would see either of them ever again in this life and he didn't care.

He and Rutila rode double upon the back of his black stallion Rubus. Rubus was a beloved and trusted *camera* and often his only *camera* on lonely days. Rubus was a solidly built warhorse of Egyptian stock, bred in the harsh terrain of Gallia. The horse's coloring was exceptionally lovely. Its coat was so rich a black in bright sunlight the horse had a purplish sheen reminiscent of blackberries. The horse's strong personality had a few thorns as well. Rubus the blackberry accompanied him on his travels as well

as his daily rounds. Rubus lent an air of stability and nobility to an otherwise mundane frontier life.

Atellus firmly held Rutila in front of him astride Rubus. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close to his heart. He wanted to be in constant contact and touch her as they rode. At first, Rutila had heartily protested this arrangement and asked to ride separately on one of the pack mules, but he instantly dismissed her outrageous request. He would not even consider it. He didn't wish to be physically separated from her for even a moment. He certainly didn't want to chase after her if she decided to break from him and ride back to Plutonium's compound, though he couldn't possibly imagine why she would want to do something as *ludificare* as that.

They rode west over the hilly countryside and soon Plutonium's compound and the deep-blue Mediterranean disappeared from view. The *viae publicae* that led them away from the sea was smoothly paved in stone and easy to travel on. Beautifully carved white stone *milliarium* marked the crossroads and the miles. Every time they passed the stout column of a *milliarium*, Atellus smiled. He wanted to travel as far from civilization before nightfall as possible. They rode through orchards of gnarled olive trees. A few forgotten and crushed fruits stained the ground beneath the trees purplish black. They rode past open fields that gave way to wooded hills. A dense forest lay ahead.

Without flourish, they came to a simple block of stone. The fine pavement of the *viae publicae* abruptly stopped. The sunlit, civilized Roman Empire ended here. The simple stone *milliarium* marked the beginning of a *viae terrenae*, a rutted dirt road that cut through the densely forested heart of Gallia. The wild, tree-sheltered road stretched forward into gathering darkness. The journey home began in earnest at this point.

He urged Rubus forward. The pack mules trotted behind them on a long tether. The trees grew denser until their branches locked together overhead. Barely any sunlight reached the ground. He tightened his hold around Rutila's waist and kissed the back of her neck. The shadows brought a feeling of rising excitement. He hoped she would spontaneously turn toward him and return his kisses, but she did not. She acted as indifferently toward him as she had since morning. The effects of the herbed wine had long worn off and he was sorry he had not thought to bring more. Rutila no longer shuddered in ecstasy at his slightest touch. Her eyes glowered with loathing and resistance. He questioned if perhaps she was in shock. A sad yet familiar life had ended for her. Perhaps she feared for the future? He felt pity for her. She was out of her element and heading into the unknown with a stranger. He was determined she accept him willingly and completely. He was anxious to know what kind of reaction he could elicit from her on his own. He was curious to know if she had any kind of sexual appetite for him. He prayed to Jupiter she did. His desire for her simmered quietly.

Rubus carried them regally beneath the dark canopy of leaves. Atellus' hand reached inside Rutila's tunic. He gently cupped her warm breast. The blood rushed to his *dolon* when its smooth weight filled his palm. He softly brushed his lips against the nape of her neck and sighed.

She allowed it, saying nothing, but she didn't seem pleased as she swayed stiffly in front of him.

His calloused fingertips gently kneaded her breast and tugged on the pink tip until it peaked. His first thought was to unlace his *braccae* and rub the head of his *dolon* against her round bottom pressed provocatively against him. He became so excited he realized he was most likely curtailing any travel progress they might make that day. "I can't wait to make *castra*," he whispered, greatly looking forward to making camp by the roadside and enjoying the evening with her.

Her back tensed. She ignored his comment.

For a short stretch of road, the trees parted and the late afternoon sunlight flooded in. He pressed his thighs against hers. "Lean back, Rutila." He ordered her to lean against his chest.

She looked wary but did as he asked.

He pulled the woolen tunic from her shoulders and pushed the fabric to her waist. He made her ride bare-breasted through the forest. He gazed over her shoulder and watched her breasts gently bouncing with Rubus' gait. His fingertips lovingly traced across her pale skin. Her freckles looked golden in the sunlight. He thought them very beautiful. The freshly stamped bronze *nota* glittered at the base of her throat. The sight filled him with pride. "You're so lovely," he whispered. "I can't stop touching you." His fingertips stroked the tips of her nipples in lazy circles, gently tugging on them until they stood in hard peaks. He couldn't wait to make *castra* and take her. He wished he'd thought to bring the copper *catena* so he could once again watch the delicate chains tremble on her breasts. She was easily the most wonderful thing he had ever possessed. He had never loved an *ancilla* before, but he was certain he loved her.

His *dolon* stiffened uncomfortably. He winced and shifted uneasily on Rubus' back. He kept an iron grip around Rutila's waist while his other hand adoringly fondled her. This was his cherished boyhood fantasy, to make love on horseback to a *faun*, a *dryad* or even a *daemon*. Beautiful Rutila could easily be any one of those otherworldly creatures.

His lips gently brushed against her throat and accidentally grazed the bronze *torques*. The bronze collar had a bitter tang that his lips instantly rejected. He pulled away. "I hope you will be as pleased and accepting of me as your new *dominor* as I am pleased with you." He whispered the words softly, as if he feared someone were hiding in the underbrush on this lonely road who might overhear him mooning over his beautiful *ancilla* and laugh.

"Why are you whispering?" Rutila glowered. "Are you afraid of sounding *ludificare*? Only the wood newts and badgers can hear you."

His face warmed. She was bare-breasted yet he felt exposed. He indeed felt uncomfortable with his overwhelming reaction to an *ancilla*. He drew a deep breath. He had nothing to be ashamed of. He continued stroking her soft skin, making his *dolon* painfully hard. He was tempted to stop beside the road right then and there and show her who the *dominor* was but he didn't. He was deeply disappointed she had merely

submitted to his touch but not warmed to it. He did not want a meekly dutiful *ancilla*. He craved the fiery wanton who had dragged him to the foot of Jupiter and thrilled him. After a few minutes of openly enjoying her but seeing no appreciable response on her part, he gave up and covered her so the sun would not spoil her fair skin.

They rode deeper into the woods. He tried to talk to her. She had been nearly silent the entire journey. She had become especially sullen when he had not allowed her to ride separately on her own mule. Now he was in a mood to talk about himself, build up his stature and paint himself in a flattering light. If she knew more about him, surely she would warm to him? "Belgica is rich in earthly things," he enthused. "You will like it there. Rome does not always appreciate the potential of Gallia. The people are strong and stable and the land is very giving. I'm glad to be returning."

She said nothing.

"I have a daughter named Rosa." His voice instantly lightened. "She's five years old. I love her very much. Columba had the vanity to suggest I marry my precious daughter to one of her horrible sons." He scoffed at that unappealing idea.

Rutila huffed, "How revolting. I've met woman like Columba before. I'm sure she thought you'd grovel for the honor of mixing blood with that sad group of boys. You wouldn't do that to your daughter, would you?"

"No." His spine shivered. Rutila had spoken more words to him in a single burst than she had spoken the entirety of the day. He certainly liked what she had to say. Perhaps she was warming to him? It was clear she had not been impressed with Plutonium's spoiled boys. His lip curled upward. Rutila thought as he thought. A flash of compatriotism passed between them. He longed to speak further with her. Further conversation seemed so important. Perhaps the future hinged on it? He drew a nervous breath. Suddenly he had nothing to say.

He worried about being tongued-tied. What did that mean?

Fortunately after hours of silence, at last Rutila was tempted to speak. "Plutonium will never lead," she soundly denounced her old oppressor. "He is far too weak. Columba dictates what he can and cannot eat at midday. He cannot be relied upon to make a simple decision on his own. He is pathetic and so lacking in wit and charisma, he couldn't inspire vermin to raid a garbage heap."

Atellus exhaled. His heart swelled so tight he feared it might burst. He drank in her words and glowed inwardly. This was the woman for him. "I would fall on my sword before I condemned my daughter into Plutonium's *domus*."

"Of course." She nodded solemnly in agreement.

He was so pleased she agreed with his opinion of Plutonium and his boys. Apparently they shared a little common ground and maybe more. He remembered she had lost her home, dignity and family at the hands of Romans. He wanted to talk to her about it and offer his sympathy. After all each of them in their way had suffered under Roman negligence and violence. Admittedly, Rutila's suffering was immeasurably greater. It would have comforted him to say, *I'm your new family now. Show me your heart*

*and your love and I'll show you mine. I'll restore your dignity. You will bear my children and I'll love them too. You will have a special place in my household and in my life and you will never again be alone.* He wished he could truly assure her she would be happy in Belgica and the past would not seep forward to poison the present, but he said none of these important things. Instead he opted for light conversation. "Rutila is a pretty name. It suits you." He tried to woo her.

She answered coolly, "Rutila is the coarse name given to me by a greedy Roman *venalicius*. He knew he had to call me something in order to sell me. He pawed at me and gushed about my hair. He expected to make a large profit on my sale. I saw to it that he didn't. I left him with a frown on his face. I hate the name. I am not Rutila."

"What is your birth name?" he insisted.

"I won't tell you." She scowled.

"Why?" he asked indignantly. "I am your *dominor*. You must tell me."

"I've lost the right. I shame my loved ones and all my ancestors by speaking it." She became sullen once again.

He knew what she felt shame over. She had been captured and enslaved by the Romans. At the end of the Celtic uprising, once the Romans regained the upper hand in battle, the Celtic women had mutilated their beautiful faces with blades to make themselves undesirable as prizes. Many had taken their own lives to avoid becoming Roman chattel. Obviously Rutila had omitted both options. She had arrived at the auction block angry but whole. Abuse and punishment awaited her. "Don't feel ashamed." He pulled her closer. He spoke softly in her ear. "A man is expected to sacrifice himself to life, to surrender his life if need be. He is expected to fight for and defend what is his. If he dies being a man or has to take his own life serving others, it is honorable."

She tried to squirm away from him. She seemed desperate to tune out his platitudes.

"A woman is different." He reasserted his grip on her. "A woman does not deny life. She endures life. Her hard work and sacrifices pull the future closer. She is a gift to all life. You were right to live. There is no shame in it," he assured her. "The greatest shame that could be heaped upon the ancestors is to commit the act of apathy, to float through life bitter and filled with regrets. That would be an unforgivable insult to all those who struggled in the past to give you your life and your chance."

Her brow knotted. He watched as an uncontrolled wave of emotion rolled across her face. She tried to tamp it down, but its presence was undeniable. He ached for her inner turmoil. She looked horribly uncomfortable. He sensed his firm hold was causing her to panic, so he lightened his grip.

She cast her eyes onto the pack mules, seemingly desperate to get to the packs and search out a weapon as he had seen her do all day. His guard was up.

Obviously his words had knocked her off balance. She looked confused and then her gaze honed to sharp focus. He imagined he could actually see her plotting.

Columba's words and the *ferrarius's* warning haunted him. He saw how much his presence irritated her. She looked as if she longed to slit his throat before he could give any more speeches. He would tolerate no more of her evasiveness. He was her *dominor* and she must listen. He leaned forward, caught her chin in his hand and forced her to look directly at him. She gasped. For a moment she braced, as if she expected him to force his mouth upon her, but he formed a concise sentence instead. "You speak the Roman tongue perfectly," he observed. "You have no trouble understanding what I say. Your vocabulary is good. You use proper terms when you speak. Your speech more closely resembles a Roman diplomat's than a *servus*." His voice took on an edge of suspicion. "You did not learn to speak thus as a *domesticus* over a few months' time. I am certain of that. Who taught you the Roman tongue? Who are you?" He raised a chevron brow.

She paused a moment before answering, seemingly struggling to get herself under control. Her eyes glittered with a hardened coldness. "I'll tell you the truth. I trusted and I was betrayed. Now I am nothing, a living body without a soul."

The depth of bitterness in her voice alarmed him, and for the first time it occurred to him he might have a real problem on his hands. He heaved a worried breath and fell silent.

That was the end of what had been intended as light conversation. Both parties felt exposed and misunderstood. They rode together in silence until bluish shadows covered the road.

Atellus chose a small clearing near a meadow to make *castra*. The mules were hobbled within reach of a tumbling creek and lush clumps of clover. He removed a large pack from one of the mules. The pack contained a densely woven linen tent and a roll of bed furs. The bed furs were ermine, a special luxury his *mater* Corrina had sent to him when she had heard how harsh the winters in Belgica were. His bed furs were the only true luxury he allowed himself while traveling on the road. He loved them as irreplaceable gifts from his *mater*. The expensive furs had been her vote of confidence in him. Her gift was a loving gesture that silently said, *I know you must endure heartbreak and other privations in Belgica but wrap yourself in ermine until spring arrives*. His *mater* had genuinely sympathized with him over Plutonium's betrayal and he loved her for it.

He greatly looked forward to sharing his bed furs with Rutila. He longed to wrap her in ermine and lie beside her. He opened a second satchel and set out a tempting array of almonds, dried figs, smoked venison and a pigskin bag filled with wine. He struck a flint against a *cos* and started a small fire. He walked about, gathering more wood for later.

Rutila stood a short distance away from him as he worked to set up *castra*. Her eyes watched him intently as he unloaded the contents of the packs as if she were a hawk. Obviously she hoped a weapon would appear.

He sat near the food and coaxed her to join him for a meal.



She shook her head no. "I'm not hungry." But she looked hungry and her stomach growled at the sight of the venison. She partially hid behind a tree at the edge of *castra*.

He had been looking forward to making *castra* all day. He was eager to make a good impression with his ermine bed furs. He had hoped she would melt on them and spark the flames she had ignited in him the night before. He called to her and encouraged her to sit beside him. "Join me."

She resisted, completely refusing to enter his *castra*. She stood near a line of trees, staring at him.

He grew slightly irritated. He did not appreciate her peevish attitude. "Rutila, it's time to eat."

She frowned, turned away and ignored him.

"Stop frowning. I have to call you Rutila until you tell me your birth name."

She scoffed, "That will never happen."

He froze. His eyes focused on her with sharp clarity. Was she deliberately provoking him? Did she not understand the true nature of their relationship? He was being polite and lenient with her because they were new to each other, but he was her *dominor*. There was no question of that. That would never change. He did not like her defiant stance. He huffed with agitation, feeling very disappointed their first night alone was off to a sour start. He needed a moment of distraction. He walked toward a line of brush to gather tinder for the fire and accidentally disturbed a badger hiding in the underbrush.

The belligerent animal snarled and hissed at him. Its beady eyes reflected the red glow of the fire.

"*Meles!*" His eyes opened wide. He leapt back in alarm to avoid scrapping with the ill-tempered beast. "Watch out, Rutila, there's a *meles* in our *castra*." He threw a branch at the aggressive creature to frighten it away. The badger hissed and lumbered into the underbrush.

Rutila hissed at him, perfectly imitating the badger. "*Meles* don't scare me, not one bit."

His fears were correct. She was not respectful toward him. She mocked him. That would not do. He lost patience with her sullenness. He marched toward her, grabbed her wrist and dragged her toward the fire.

She resisted as if she were an obstinate mule, digging her heels into the soil and wriggling to twist free of his grip.

It took all his strength to budge her. He finally scooped her up and carried her into the *castra* with her feet kicking in the air. He set her down beside him and held on to her wrist to prevent her from rising and stalking off. "We are going to eat." His eyes blazed with triumph.

"Must you always be touching me?" she railed. "Must you have constant contact? Can I not have my own air to breathe?" She tugged with irritation at the *torques*. Its dangling tag was obviously a painful reminder she a conquered person.

He saw how bothered she was. "Rutila." His gaze burned possessively. "Be sensible. The *torques* is to prevent ownership disputes. You belong to me now and I will tolerate no claims from others." He had heard of unethical *venalicius* reselling the same *servus* numerous times to multiple unwitting owners. He would have none of that. She was his to keep, forever. Her pettish irritation over having to wear the *torques* made no sense to him. "I want you to understand the *torques* is a sign of my esteem. I do not want to lose you." He spoke firmly. "Eat."

"No." She snapped at him. Her eyes flitted about the *castra*. "I eat with a *pugio*." She was clearly disappointed no sharp objects had emerged from the packs.

He slowly shook his head no. "You also fight with a *pugio*. I deliberately provided finger foods and that's how we will eat until we know and trust each other better. Now please eat something." He grew impatient with her stubbornness. "You have eaten almost nothing today."

She glared at him, broke free of his grip and scrambled to her feet. She dashed toward the hobbled pack mules, taking long, fast strides.

He was on his feet in a flash and chasing after her.

Rutila's long legs were incredibly fast. She almost out ran him.

He caught up to her and grabbed her seconds before she reached the pack mules. He threw his arms around her and dragged her back to the fire. "That was a mistake." He panted as he struggled to hold on to her writhing, leaping body. "I'm not a monster." He breathlessly lugged her resisting body back to the *castra*. "I just want you to eat something." He thought she was so beautiful just the way she was. He could even imagine her a little plumper. He certainly did not intend to see his beautiful *ancilla* waste away on the journey.

He picked up a leather tether from one of the packs and deftly tied his wrist to hers, so she could not bolt away. "Sit!" he ordered her in a booming voice. "Eat."

She sat only because he pulled her down, but she did not eat. She scowled resentfully at the tether that linked them and scooted as far away as the short length of braided leather would allow.

He smiled, feeling victorious. He was hungry, so he ate. He poured himself a cup of wine with his free hand and watched her carefully from the corner of his eye, thinking her to be a very unpleasant dining companion.

She continually glared at him or frowned resentfully at the tether. Every time he refilled his wine cup, she smirked as if she enjoyed some private amusement he was not aware of. He tore the dried venison into narrow strips and chewed it up with his square white teeth and washed the venison down with a generous amount of wine.

She looked disgusted as he grew a bit tipsy.

The tether connecting their wrists was short. If he raised his cup to his lips or reached for a fig, her hand was forced to follow his motions. She was strung to him as if she were a resentful puppet, yet she refused to move any closer to him to lengthen the slack on the tether. Her lips turned downward. Clearly she hated the situation she was in.

He patted the ground beside him. "You could move closer." He chuckled at her self-imposed predicament. "Who here is starving and refuses to eat out of sheer stubbornness? Let's see a show of hands." He smiled at her and raised his arm high above his head.

Of course Rutila's hand went up involuntarily, though she struggled to pull downward on the tether. Her limp hand hovered high in the air.

He grinned at the sight of her raised hand. "I see you're ready to admit you're hungry." His eyes gleamed from wine. He tossed a dried fig in her lap. "Eat it."

She stared hatefully at the wrinkled fig, refusing to touch it.

His eyes sparkled with amusement. "Who here has the mind of a mule?" Again he raised his arm and her hand went up too, but this time he had to actually lift her weight off the ground, she heartily fought his actions. He laughed at her dour expression. The wine made his speech a bit sloppy. "By Jupiter, Rutila, you're humorless!" He wished her attitude would warm just a little. He so longed for some contact or connection with her. "Am I the most *formosus* and *virilis dominor* you could wish for? You know that I am." He burst into laughter. "So let's see a show of hands."

This time she was prepared for what was coming. She wrapped her fingers tightly around the tether before he could fully raise his arm and swiftly yanked the tether downward.

He was caught off guard and lurched forward onto his face, spilling his cup of wine onto the ground. He landed chin first in a puddle of wine. He looked up at her with an expression of smoldering disappointment.

Rutila tensed, as if waiting for him to lash out at her, threaten or strike her with his fist, but he didn't. As *dominor* he knew he had to be above such petty provocations even if she wasn't. He had to set an example. He recovered himself from the ground, sat straight and silently wiped his chin on his sleeve, but his heart silently burned with the dread of betrayal.

She seemed worried about what he might be thinking and he wasn't ready to put her at ease. He wanted her to reconsider her actions. They sat in silence for some time before he decided to pack the food away and add more wood to the fire.

While he puttered around the *castra*, the tether remained tied to her wrist. He refused to allow her the slightest freedom until she apologized or showed remorse for her disrespectful behavior. She was forced to follow him as if she were his unwilling shadow as he paced around the perimeter of the *castra*, collecting enough firewood to last the night. The long hour after sunset was tensely silent. Leaves crunched beneath their heavy-soled *caligae*, but there was absolutely no talking between them. The only

other sounds surrounding the *castra* were Rubus' soft snorts and whinnies and water tumbling over rocks in the nearby creek.

His first words to her in a long while were, "I have to piss." He dragged her behind him as he strode toward the trees lining the edge of the *castra*. The mules were tethered nearby, so the animals could wander to the creek and drink. They walked past the dozing mules. He stopped behind a tree and unlaced the drawstring of his woolen *braccae*. He pulled himself free of his trousers and pissed against the tree bark. He pissed so hard the tree trunk steamed. He smiled over this minor accomplishment and looked toward her. "Your turn," he announced. "Let's see what you can do."

She looked mortified and crossed her legs, obviously desperate to relieve herself.

He saw her hesitation and waved her behind the tree. "Go ahead. I won't bother you. I promise not to commit maliciousness. Though you don't deserve such considerate treatment."

She ducked behind the tree. The moment she was out of his sight, she started to untie the tether from her wrist. He knew because the tether trembled erratically. He guessed she was gnawing at the knot with her teeth as if she were a desperate animal. He looked down at the trembling tether and gave it a slight shake. "I know what you're up to. Stop it, Rutila."

The tether stopped trembling for a moment. "I'm having a hard time trying to do this with one hand. It's not easy."

"I'm sure it isn't. Which knot are you struggling to untie? The knot on your woolen *braccae* or the tether?"

"Would you step back?" She sounded extremely irritated.

"And give you a running start? I don't think so. I can't step back I'm tied to the other end of this tether." He heard her shuffling in the leaves behind the tree. His ears pricked for the sounds of flight. He fully expected her to break free and dash toward the woods and he was prepared to stop her.

"The ground here has a steep slope and it's damp," she complained. "I can't see what I'm doing." She finally peed a hard stream against the ground.

The tether trembled as she struggled to rise. He heard her topple over and hit the ground in a loud crunch of leaves and roll forward. The tether pulled taut. A burst of angry-sounding Celtic words poured from her mouth.

He bit his lip for fear he would laugh but he was pleased the gods had seen her wrongdoing and avenged him.

She hissed at him when she finally reemerged from behind the tree. "That wasn't amusing."

It was but he held a straight face. He noticed she was deliberately hiding her wrist behind her back. He immediately reached for her wrist to retie the tether but stopped when he saw how red and chafed her skin was. He instantly removed the loosened tether. "Poor *amare*." He carefully inspected the chafing with a look of regret. He took

her hand and led her down the embankment toward the creek. "Rutila, if you stop fighting me I'll get rid of the tether," he promised. "I don't want to hurt you."

Rutila turned her face away and ignored him.

He felt terrible about harming her. He quickly pulled her to the bank of the creek. "Let the cool water run across your wrist." He splashed a few handfuls of cold water on to her reddened skin. "I'm very sorry that happened. I won't let it happen again." He unlaced his *caligae*, stripped off his tunic and *braccae* along with the leather *baldric* that held his *pugio*. He tossed his clothing aside and hung the *baldric* from the highest tree branch he could reach in hope Rutila would not be able to claim the weapon. He waded naked into the dark water of the creek. He stood thigh deep in the swirling water, splashing the day's salt and the dust from his skin. He looked up at her expectantly. "Aren't you going to *lavare*?" He made the question sound more like an order than an option. He couldn't imagine she would not want to bathe.

"I've never met a people such as the Romans who were so *lavare* crazed. Daily bathing is a mania with Romans. Busy people had no time for such trivialities as daily *lavare*." She made no move to take her clothes off.

He smiled at her sour expression hoping to turn it. "As your *dominor*, I order you to *lavare* something, anything. Dip your little finger in the creek. I don't care."

"I will consent to *lavare* my feet." She pulled her feet free of her *caligae*.

"Come on. Don't be so sour." He coaxed her toward the water, hoping she would take her clothes off without a battle. "*Lavare* with me." His head buzzed from wine. "Show yourself. You're so beautiful. You can feel superior to me while I make an *asinus* of myself."

The slightest smile crossed her lips but she remained wary. Obviously she did not wish to flirt with him, provoke or excite him in any way, but it was far too late for that. She stood still on the bank of the creek until he came forward and pulled her toward him. He led her ankle-deep into the creek. The water was cold. The rocks beneath the slowly churning water were slimy with moss. She slid forward on the slippery rocks and gasped. Her skin pebbled with gooseflesh. She immediately tried to return to the bank. Clearly she wanted to get out of the water as soon as possible.

"Be sensible, Rutila," he hectored. "Don't get your clothes wet. If you do, you'll have a miserable ride tomorrow. You know I'm right. You don't want to spend the day wearing damp woolen *braccae* with your wet bottom slapping against a horse's back. Trust me on that." His firm stance made it clear she would not be returning to *castra* without a *lavare*.

Rutila silently submitted to the inevitable *lavare*. She stepped onto the muddy bank and struggled out of her clothes. She appeared to be struggling to find the least provocative way to undress and there wasn't one. She looked frustrated.

He enjoyed watching her wiggle and tug at the clothing, which had been improvised for her. He had acquired a set of *milites* clothing for her to ride in, a woolen tunic and *braccae*. Rutila was as tall as many *milites* and the clothing fit. The outfit was

practical, comfortable and easy to ride in. He thought the outfit better suited his *ferus faun* than the dour, sack-like, hemp tunics the *domesticus* of Plutonium's compound wore. He smiled with approval. The clothing of a warrior suited her well.

After an awkward struggle, Rutila finally shed the clothing and stood on the bank with her arms crossed over her chest, trying to cover her breasts.

He saw how miserable she was, standing naked at the edge of the creek. Last night she was Venus. Tonight she was a pouting sulker. He thought it a shame. Their time together in the *donarium* had been so wonderful. Aside from the birth of his daughter, last night had been the single best experience of his life. Tonight was a world of difference. Everything had changed. A steep chasm had opened between them and his heart fell in. She looked at him with anger and hate instead of wanton lust. He realized if he forced, threatened or kept her tied up, she would only resent him more. He would have to be patient. That he could do. He of all people knew how to be patient. He dunked his face in the creek and splashed around. Cold water unintentionally sloshed on to Rutila.

She yelped and trembled from the chilly assault. "Night bathing in a cold creek, yet more evidence of Roman *insania*."

"The *lavare* just started." He cupped his hands and scooped up a dripping handful of water and poured it down her back.

She shivered in misery.

"Don't worry. I'll warm you back up. I have ermine bed furs that I am eager to share with you," he promised. He hoped this cold bath would make her more appreciative of a warm bed. After he thoroughly drenched her skin with cold water, he lay down in the creek to soak.

She sat beside him, trembling.

He lounged comfortably in the cool current as if he were a salmon, but after a few minutes of listening to Rutila's teeth chatter, he realized she was not enjoying the *lavare*. He reluctantly pulled himself from the creek, gathered their clothing and walked toward the *castra*. She shivered the entire way as they walked.

They returned to the *castra*. He tossed the braided tether he had used to bind her aside. He decided she could not go anywhere at night and it was safe to leave her unbound. He threw more wood on the fire. It crackled and burned bright. Orange sparks leapt high in the air. He dodged out of the path of the rising embers and led her inside the tent. The heat of the fire had warmed the interior of the tent. He sat on the bed furs and drew her beside him. He lovingly wrapped an ermine fur around her. The luxurious fur draped around her shoulders and covered her body.

She curled forward with her knees to her chest, refusing to look up at him.

He watched her shivering under the fur with blue lips, wishing he could put his arms around her and warm them both, but he knew the gesture would be met with repulsion. "Rutila," he addressed her gently. "I know the adjustment is difficult but let's be done with the tether. I don't want to use it."

She tried to ignore him. She seemingly tried to consciously ignore him almost as if she were leaving her body, but she couldn't quite accomplish it. She kept looking up at him and looking away.

"Rutila, listen carefully. I want you to understand something important. I am a Roman." He spoke softly with confidence. "But I am not Rome. I'm just one man. I'm a *provincia*. I spend more time fussing in grain fields and vineyards, fighting pests and settling petty complaints between farmers than I spend repressing the people of Belgica. I'm not a tyrant. I wish you would give me a chance."

She looked away.

The soft tap of his hand on her shoulder coaxed her to look at him. "I wish you could see me as a man and not just a Roman." He dared to touch her hair but she flinched and he could see that she did not like it. "I know you have suffered. I know the Romans have done unforgivable things to you and your kin, but bridges must be built between Rome and the Celts. Some sort of peace or truce must be forged or else the slaughter will continue senselessly."

Her eyes narrowed at him. A look of pure defiance shone on her face. Obviously slaughter was preferable to her over negotiating with Romans.

"Rutila, I can assure you that is the wrong attitude to take. Rome will rule Britannia and Gallia for a thousand years. The Celts must submit. You must accept that fact. Once Rome possesses something, she does not let it go. It would be better to come to a peaceful understanding between us, don't you agree?"

"This is Roman *insania*." Her lip curled. "I won't submit. What you say about standing apart from fellow Romans makes no sense at all. I truly cannot imagine separating one man from the group. That concept is ridiculous to me. A man or woman is a product of their people. All share equally the glory or the blame. For one man to claim individualism from his peers is an absurd concept. I reject it."

His fingertips stroked the sides of her face. "I want trust, peace and compliance between us, that's all." He made his wishful statement, not daring to ask for love. He realized how quickly he had forgotten it was her *ferus* nature that had attracted him in the first place. In this moment, he was blind to it, so strong was the Roman desire to tame the world.

He put his arms around her and held her tight. She was forced to allow it. She was still cold but their bodies warmed quickly. He pulled a second ermine bed fur around them both. His lips nuzzled the side of her throat. He wished she would relax with him, kiss him or even become aggressive and take charge of him sexually. He was disappointed when she did none of that. He knew he had to show patience with her. Patience and care had tamed his horse Rubus. Rubus had started off untrustworthy and *ferus* as well but later became a loyal companion. He would do the same with Rutila. "Last night you put my pleasure first," he whispered. "Tonight is your night." He hoped that offer would please her. It was the most generous offer he could think to make. He did not want anger or force to become their dynamic. A half-*ferus* but willing

*amatrix* would be ideal. He set to work toward that goal. "Rutila, you will get used to me." He stroked her face and tried to get her to make eye contact with him. "You may even come to care for me. I already care deeply for you, *amare*." Part of him cringed as he spoke those revealing words, knowing he was making a dangerous statement by addressing an *ancilla* in this fashion.

Her heart lurched from his sincere words. It was not what she wanted to hear. He was deliberately clouding matters and confusing her. She reminded her heart to remain on high alert and under no circumstances trust a Roman. "You talk like a *ludificare* and I won't fall for it. It doesn't matter what a *servus* truly feels for their *dominor*. What a *servus* truly feels is beyond the control of any earthly master. Do you not know that?" Her fingers tugged resentfully against the *torques*. "I am free in my heart. I don't have to let you in there. Do you not understand I am free to fill my heart of hearts with whatever poison I please?" She had already made a deeply committed choice to be bitter toward Rome and she knew she would remain loyal to that choice until death. Her mother had willingly swallowed poison to avoid capture and humiliation at the hands of Rome. At that moment she wished she were as brave.

"I think you're confusing me with Rome and you must learn not to do that." His eyes lit golden from the flickering fire beyond. He wrapped his big body around her, gently forcing her to straighten her legs and lie beside him. He held her against his chest in a warm embrace. His hands stroked her damp hair.

She didn't want to willingly give in and tensed in his hold, but being so near, she soon became acutely aware of every sensation, each breath he took, his smooth brown skin and especially his dark, silky chest hair brushing against her skin. She was disgusted with herself for not feeling repelled by him. Her body warmed to his presence and gentle touch. He felt good to be near. It would be so easy to make love to him again. He was the most passionate lover she ever had and certainly the first to care about her feelings. Her wayward body wanted him even if her mind did not. They were completely alone in the forest, no one else was watching. She wondered, was there truly any harm in just giving in? She drew a deep breath and thought of their shared passion in the *donarium*. The act had felt sacred and far larger than a simple exchange of pleasure between one man and one woman. Perhaps it was just the herbed wine. It had been wonderful. Goddess help her, she did want to give in and willfully shame herself again. He felt so good. He was hard to resist. Why did he have to be intelligent, handsome and caring? Why did he have to be Roman?

His hands gently stroked her arm and his slight touch made her shiver with pleasure. She had no choice. Whether she liked it or not, if he touched her she responded. She hated her traitorous reaction to a Roman. Her heart ached when she realized she had let herself down again. Once again she had allowed herself to be used by the Romans. A ripple of guilt traveled up her spine. She felt like a dishonorable person. No wonder suicide was proscribed for those facing capture. Decline at the hands of the enemy was inevitable. The mind rationalized its situation. Degrading and



untenable acts became acceptable, even pleasurable. She realized this man could master her if she allowed such a shocking thing to happen. She winced. What would she be doing next, proclaiming her love and loyalty to Rome? She should have stabbed herself to death long ago, before Roman logic and Roman lovers invaded her thoughts.

"Kiss me," he pleaded. "Show me again how the Celts kiss."

Of course she refused to do it.

He ran his thumb gently along her bottom lip, coaxing her to respond. He looked down at her intently as she lay nestled in his furs. His gaze was warm and full of compassion.

She silently admitted he was a very enticing but quickly concluded that only made him more dangerous.

His fingertips gently grazed the side of her breast. "Relax, you don't have to do anything, *amare*. Let me pleasure you."

Her eyes flickered shut in confusion. Her nipples peaked and a warm rush of sensation flooded between her thighs. She was shocked her body could betray her so easily, but her body remembered how good he felt and her nose loved his warm scent. She gulped a deep breath, remembering how her body sank down on him and slowly rode him while he moaned in ecstasy. She got wet thinking about it. Now she was ashamed. Obviously her body had no political loyalties it felt inclined to honor. Her irrational attraction to a Roman was frustrating and impossible to rail against. This was a disaster. She stretched beneath him, trying to control herself as his lips traveled across her bare skin, gently kissing her. He felt too good to fight. She rationalized, *If I let him do what he wants, maybe he'll fall asleep afterward and leave me alone*. She sighed with pleasure as he kissed the side of her throat. She refused to admit she loved the decadently lush combination of his warm touch and the softness of ermine against her skin.

When she did not return his kiss, Atellus launched an assault of kisses on her. He slowly kissed her lips and her gently arched throat. Her throat was slender and pale. His tongue was met by the harsh tang of the bronze *torques*. He hated the acrid taste of the metal but it greatly excited him to see his *nota* permanently placed upon her. He was proud she wore his *nota* and grateful to have taken her from Plutonium who obviously could not appreciate anything as fine as Rutila. He was determined to patiently change her attitude toward him.

His kisses traveled downward to her breasts. His lips brushed against her soft skin with a whisper-light touch.

She sighed and slightly arched toward his lips.

He felt encouraged. The tip of his tongue slowly traced a glistening circle around her pink nipple. She made the softest, most helpless little sound. The nipple peaked. He drew the nipple between his lips and tugged gently on it until it bloomed within the heat of his mouth. His hand cupped her breast and lifted it toward him. He longingly sucked on her nipple until she wriggled beneath him and the nipple flushed a deep

shade of rose. He moved to the other breast and slowly stroked his tongue across her until she nudged her breast so firmly against his lips there was no mistake she wanted him to take it. Her actions warmed his heart. He was gentle with her and soon sensed she was struggling very hard not to enjoy it. She moaned with desperation when he let a tender nipple pop free of his lips and pulled away from her.

She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him back.

He was thrilled she wanted more. Her legs wrapped around his hips and she pressed her body against him as if seeking more contact. This wasn't the inevitable submission of an *ancilla*. He strongly suspected she wanted him as much he wanted her but couldn't admit it. He parted her thighs and settled his body in between. His *dolon* ached to push inside her but held off. He stroked his finger across her wet *gemmare* and discovered her sheath felt hot. He glanced at her face. Her eyes were barely opened, yet he saw they simmered with mixed emotions. He sensed she felt too much conflict and guilt to willingly give in. He wanted her to know him as a man and not dread him as a Roman. She did not have to suffer conflict. He would take responsibility. He decided to relieve her of all guilt by asserting his place as *dominor*. All she had to do was accept the situation. He carefully pinned her arms to the bed furs. His hands clapped firmly around her wrists. He spoke softly. "Will you accept me without a fight?"

She closed her eyes and collapsed against the fur, panting short, shallow breaths.

For a moment he worried she might cry but after she was firmly pinned, and there was no choice to be made, he noticed she actually seemed to relax and let go. He saw she needed to be relieved of her conflicts. He understood in a flash, this was the key. She needed to fight him and he had to be stronger without being harsh. "I own you. I care about you and I will be good to you. Be good to me." His hold on her tightened.

She writhed beneath him as if shocked by his words or angered at her rebellious body's reaction to him. She blurted, "I shouldn't want this." She obviously regretted speaking and immediately bit her lip to keep from saying another libelous word.

He soothed her. "It's all right. I've had the wrong idea many times and I know how much it hurts to let those illusions go."

She gulped a deep breath and seemed to be struggling with her emotions. The sight of her arching beneath him made him wish his hands were free to roam across her soft skin and fully enjoy its touch. He looked down at her and saw the depth of conflict in her eyes. She was having a difficult time submitting, though he sensed she desperately wanted to. Hope soared. There was no need for guilt. In a moment of pure practicality he asked, "Would this be easier for you if I bound you?"

She froze. Her eyes narrowed to slits and seethed at him.

He knew he had correctly guessed her secret. He understood now what was needed between them. She needed to be conquered and she needed to fight him, if only symbolically. He reached for a supple leather pack strap and wrapped it loosely several times around her wrists. She didn't fight it. She closed her eyes and actually seemed to embrace it. A peaceful expression crossed her face. Her body relaxed and sank against

the fur. Her coppery hair flared across the pale ermine as if it were flames. This was his victory. "I am your *dominor*," he gently reminded her of that inescapable fact to ease her mind. "Open for me."

Her arms stretched languidly overhead. Her wrists twisted nervously in the leather strap. She sighed and parted her thighs for him.

He gazed down at her, thinking her submission to be the most satisfying sight in the world. She fully surrendered to him. Her soft lips parted and her pink nipples pointed high into the air. She was completely his. His breath caught. His *dolon* glistened at the tip.

He shifted his weight between her thighs as his kisses strayed lower. He kissed the soft curve of her abdomen and teased her hipbone with the edge of his teeth. She began to writhe wildly to escape, but he firmly pinned her beneath him. His hands stroked her thighs farther apart as he buried his nose against her auburn curls and inhaled her scent. He loved her *ferus*, crisp scent, unembellished by Roman perfumes. He reverently touched his lips to her *gemmare*. His touch was whisper-soft to start. She slightly jolted even at the first light touch. He pulled back and waited for her to arch toward his tongue. He made her want it and seek him out. The first strokes of his tongue were infuriatingly featherlight. He wanted to dive against her and bury himself in her, but he restrained himself. His lips teased her *gemmare* with slow, lazy kisses that deepened into something more when his tongue pressed inside her and sucked.

She rewarded him by moaning softly and rolling her hips against him. He pulled back and penetrated her with his thumb. She bit her lip and dug her fingers into the bed furs. His mouth covered her in warm, wet kisses. His thumb traveled in lazy circles inside her while her hips gently rocked. She was his and she was responding to him beautifully. It was wonderful. He felt wonderful. He dipped his head to her *gemmare* and thrummed his tongue back and forth against her as she rhythmically pressed against his mouth and made soft little sounds. His *dolon* begged to get inside her. He had to fight the impulse to pounce.

She wished she had been able to ignore him. She wished she had simply allowed him do what he wanted to do after her spirit had safely floated away and fled the scene of the crime. No such thing happened. Her spirit was fully present. This was not rape, this was worse. She had been thoroughly conquered by a Roman. She was a willing participant, drenched in guilt. She was thrusting her hips against a Roman tongue. A Roman face was pressed between her thighs and she loved it. She thrust her hips wantonly against him, hoping he would suck harder. She hated herself for being so weak.

He took his time pleasuring her. He cupped his hands beneath her bottom and pulled her close in an act of adoration. He rubbed his face against her thighs. He bore down on her with soft lips and a wet tongue. The blood rushed to her *gemmare*. The slightest sensation was magnified. His warm breath felt hot. Her pulsing *gemmare* was so sensitive she was convinced she couldn't take a moment more of his torment. He

sucked hard on her *gemmare* until she writhed off the furs. The climax hovering above her struck down. It brought a wave of heated pleasure that curled her toes. Her body rocked forward. His hands gripped her possessively and held her down as his tongue stroked her through every last shuddering moment. She moaned with desperate shame when she realized she wanted him to thrust his *dolon* and flood inside her. What was wrong with her?

Clearly, this was the worst fate a conquered person could face. After willingly submitting, a captive might learn to crave the touch of the oppressor, respect or even want their love. A captor's words might even begin to make sense. She felt deeply ashamed of herself for even allowing this seed to be planted. She had plenty of reasons to hate the Romans and those reasons burned fresh in her mind, but was it true, she wondered, could one pick and choose individuals to love or hate within the group they belonged to? Was it possible Atellus was just a man and not Rome?

He sensed her attention had drifted and he wanted her back. "Look at me."

Her eyelids flickered open for only a moment but the pleasure shining in her eyes thrilled him. He was winning. His heart soared. His face was wet from her climax. His hand stroked across the scratchy beard stubble freshly reemerged on his jaw. He was deeply gratified she had come for him. It felt like victory. His eyes gleamed. Now it was his turn.

He was achingly hard and already very wet at the tip. He didn't want to wait a moment longer. He stretched across her. His weight gently settled on his elbows, being careful not to crush her. His hands clasped onto her wrists and pinned them firmly. He parted her ankles and glided between her thighs with ease.

Her breath hitched as he entered. A faint whimper crossed her lips. Her body welcomed him with a snug squeeze. The lips of her sheath felt lusciously ripe. He loved it. She was beyond excited and willing, and he had done that for her. She had fully accepted his pleasure. He was proud of himself. Soon she would know she could come to him for pleasure anytime she needed. He badly wanted her to need him. His *dolon* pressed deeper and rocked inside her, reveling in the wet friction. He bent his head to gently suck the tip of her breast. A ripple of pleasure rolled through her and gripped him hard. He gasped. She raised her hips and pressed against him. He released her wrists and held himself on straight arms. He gazed down at the spot where they merged and watched his flushed *dolon* slowly disappear in and out of her.

She wrapped her legs around his hips and held him tightly, thrusting her hips upward.

He saw she was being more than compliant. She was enjoying herself. In his mind, this was proof they had finally reached an understanding. He was the victor. He was the *dominor*. They had passed the hardest point. From here on there would be peace. The bittersweet thought made his throat tighten. He had never felt such emotion for an *amatrix*. This was perfect. He pushed deep inside her. His *dolon* swelled. He was ready

to lose it. His testes drew tight as he started to explode. "Rutila!" He rasped her name without any real thought or purpose as his world spun.

He lay peacefully inside her. It was only after some minutes passed that he noticed her shifting uncomfortably beneath him. He hoped he had not been crushing her under the weight of his exhausted body. He rolled onto his side and wrapped his arms around her, holding her close. He did not want her moving away from him. He wanted her close and available if he decided to take her again. His *dolon* stirred when he pulled her strong body against him. He knew he would take her again before he slept, there was no question of that.

His hands lazily stroked the curve of her belly with his fingertips. She felt rounded and soft. He wondered if he had started a baby within her. He hoped he had. He kissed the top of her head, wondering if she now understood all that she meant to him. How could she not? From now on she would be an *ancilla* in name only, surrendering only to him. He would treasure her, take pleasure in her and take ownership of her responsibly. She would bear his children and wear his *nota*. He would be loving and generous with her. She would want for nothing in this world. His lips brushed her hair. He smiled, but he knew she couldn't see his smile. He was certain she now understood after all they had shared this *vesper*, there would be no turning back. He had complete *dominium* over her but he would be beneficent. He got hard again just thinking about it. He pulled her beneath him and gently took her again before falling into a deep, peaceful sleep.

## Chapter Seven

He thought it was a nightmare but it was real. He awoke woozy and confused with his head throbbing in terrible pain. He felt as if a mule had kicked him in the forehead. His fingertips dabbed gingerly at his temple. A sticky, crimson fluid clung to his fingertips. He sat up, feeling dizzy. His thoughts were unclear. Where was he? He couldn't remember. An obnoxious odor surrounded him. The offensive scent of burning hair filled his nostrils. A layer of smoke blinded his eyes. He choked and couldn't breathe. The thick smoke made it hard to think. He tried to stand but extreme dizziness knocked him to the ground. He slumped forward, completely unable to organize his thoughts. The air around him crackled and hissed. Floating embers scorched his skin. He struggled to open his eyes and saw the tent was on fire. His bed furs were smoldering. He struggled to rise to his knees and drag himself from the burning tent. "Rutila!" He coughed out a harsh burst of smoke. His hands cast wildly in the darkness, searching for her. He wanted to rouse her and drag her from the flames but she was gone.

He crawled outside the tent on his hands and knees, squinting through the smoky haze, wondering if *latros* had attacked them in the night. A horrific thought filled his mind—had Rutila fallen prey to *latros*? "Rutila, where are you!" he shouted, but his voice was reduced to a husky rasp. She did not answer. It was no longer night. The sky had brightened the faintest shades of dawn. He glanced around the *castra* but saw no one. Smoke dimmed his vision and stung his eyes until they poured tears. He crawled forward, coughing. Why had he insisted on traveling alone with only a woman as a companion? If he had allowed the heavily armed *custodia* to ride with them this would never have happened. He had brought this tragedy on them by being so impulsive and *ludificare*. He had a woman to protect and he failed to do so. Now poor Rutila would suffer at the hands of *latros* for his failings. Surely they would feel free to use and sell her. He hated himself for endangering her. He thought camping in the forest would foster romance. He had led them into the wilderness and the worst had happened. This was his fault. He would make this right. He would get her back. She belonged under his care and protection. He reached for his *baldric* and *pugio* but discovered both were missing.

He tried to stand but his knees buckled beneath him. He crumpled to the ground. "Rutila!" He could not think coherently, the world was a painful blur. Smoke burned his lungs. He could not walk without listing over. He saw the pack mules had been loosed. They were milling around in a clearing on the far side of the creek. Why hadn't the *latros* taken them as well? He turned and saw half the tent was fully in flames. He staggered away from the sparking linen.

Rubus' shrill whinny pierced the smoke.

He moved toward the sounds, swaying unsteadily on shaking knees. The smoke parted. His heart soared when he saw Rutila on the far edge of the *castra*, struggling to get Rubus under control. "Rutila!" he called out to her, but he sounded like an injured animal.

She turned toward him. Her face filled with shock as if she did not expect to see him standing before her. Her face blanched in horror. She took a cautious step backward, as if confronted by a ghost. His *pugio* was in her hand.

His thoughts cleared long enough to realize this tragedy was not the work of *latros*. It was purely Rutila's doing. He was crushed. His heart wanted to stop beating.

Rutila desperately grabbed at Rubus' reins as she tried to get the stallion to follow her from the *castra*, but Rubus reared on his hind legs and kicked his fore hooves at her, clearly preferring his beloved *Dominor Atellus* to her.

Rutila yanked down on the stallion's reins and scrambled onto Rubus' back.

Rubus bucked and reared, trying to dislodge the unwelcome rider, but she somehow managed to hang on.

Atellus lurched in her direction but found walking almost impossible. He kept swerving to the side and stumbling. Each of Rubus' snorts and whinnies became another frantic call for help that Atellus was unable to answer. He quickly discovered he was far too dizzy to stand and lost all hope of chasing after her. He collapsed on the ground in defeat. She was leaving and she was taking his heart, his dignity and his favorite companion with her.

Rutila clung to Rubus' back as the huge horse twirled in an unguided circle. She tugged frantically on the reins, struggling to get Rubus moving in the right direction. She kicked at his haunches and finally succeeded in getting the horse to bolt from the *castra*, but as they galloped away, Rubus kept turning his big head around and looking for his *sominor*. She was nearly dumped to the ground several times as Rubus resisted his abduction. She kicked at Rubus incessantly until she got the stubborn stallion to charge off in full flight. Rubus galloped down the road at full speed, snorting and protesting as he fled. The forest shadows swallowed them. Rutila and Rubus disappeared into the morning haze.

Atellus turned toward his burning tent. The tent was a loss but he decided to try to save the furs. He swatted the smoldering furs against the dirt to beat the flames out. There was not much to save. The linen tent burned quickly. The bed furs were salvageable but singed. As he tallied his losses, his head felt as if it had been cleaved in two. He walked toward the creek but felt so dizzy he was forced to sit down while the floating spots cleared from his vision. The pack mules on the other side of the creek seemed an impossibly far distance away. He sat still on the ground, dabbing the blood from his forehead with a scrap of singed linen.

Why had she done this to him? He had saved her from becoming a victim of Plutonium's vicious *convivium*. He had offered her his love, protection and a new life, and she had thrown it all back in his startled face. Did she not feel some sense of allegiance

to him? Some connection? He accepted her and welcomed her into his life. He did not understand her. It seemed so unfair. He looked at the bloodied piece of cloth and felt the rising bump on his head. She had hit him hard. Why did she do this?

His head throbbed. He realized he had only himself to blame. Rutila was a savage Celt. A blue creature reared among blue men. He had been completely *ludificare* to trust her. He had fallen asleep beside a treacherous soul and awoken to treachery. Why should he feel hurt or surprised? It was predictable. Columba's prophecy about Rutila rang in his head. At least Rutila had not succeeded in killing him, though clearly she intended to.

This was his fault. He had ignored the warnings to his peril. What an *ineptus* he had been. The worst loss was Rubus. His workday companion was gone. He promised himself as soon as he was able to chase down a wayward mule he would ride after her, take revenge on her and reclaim Rubus. He would see to it Rutila would thoroughly regret what she had done.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was hours before he could trust his balance enough to even consider mounting a pack mule. It had taken a great portion of the morning to chase down the reluctant animals that were dearly enjoying their newfound freedom in a green meadow beyond the creek.

The unamicable mules kept strolling away from him every time he tried to cautiously approach one. The mules did not have to work very hard at evasion. When they saw him staggering clumsily toward them, they had only to step aside or scamper a few paces away to escape. He possessed neither the energy nor the balance necessary to chase them. The morally exhausting morning wore on. His frustration and his outrage increased with every wasted step he took. He vowed Rutila would pay for every tortured moment she had caused.

By the time he salvaged what he could from the burned tent and strung the pack mules together, it was well past noon. Rutila had a considerable head start and she was riding a fast horse, but he was still confident he could catch her. He wanted revenge on her. He now lived for it. He would ride as hard as he had to but he would catch her. He recommenced the angry journey on a muscular pack mule, its ornery *cameras* trotted on a tether behind him.

He knew Rubus was an intelligent but fickle animal. He consoled himself with the thought that loyal Rubus might throw Rutila to the ground and trample her willful body into the dust or, better yet, bolt away from her when she ducked behind a tree to piss and leave her stranded. He relished the thought of seeing her scraped, humbled and abandoned at the side of the road. She deserved it and much more. If he saw her thus, he promised himself he would ignore her, ride on without her and gleefully leave her at the mercy of forest wolves or Pluto, the lord of the underworld, whichever one claimed her first. Either could have her. He no longer cared. He would strike her from



his heart. Her memory would be purged. She was not worthy of his attention and trust when he found her, he would tell her so, retrieve Rubus and then let himself forget her, forever. A chill passed through him. In his heart of hearts, he knew Rutila would never reveal herself on the road nor ask for his help. She was *ferus* and belonged to the forest. The wolves and Pluto would welcome her as kin. He knew she did not need him. He might get Rubus back if she lost control of him, but he realized he would never see her again. She would go back to her own kind and be quietly reabsorbed into the wild.

He rode for two days and saw no one on the densely wooded road or the slightest trace of Rutila. The lump on his forehead swelled painfully. His only distractions from the pain in his pounding head were frequent revenge fantasies. As the bump on his forehead purpled, the fantasies became more verbose and featured ever-longer imagined speeches of Rutila's pleading apologies for what she had done. It became his sole entertainment as he swayed slowly down the road on the back of a mule.

On the third day, Atellus came across *carrus* traffic headed east. The two ox-cart drovers were polite, humble men who courteously answered all his questions. The drovers were completely respectful to him though he noticed their confusion as their eyes grazed across his Tyrian-trimmed *pallium* fastened with the fine silver *fibula*.

The first drover looked very concerned about the bump on his head. The man's eyes dwelled on it. "Are you all right?"

Atellus tried to sit straight and appear as regal as possible, but it was difficult with a spitting head, perched on the back of a mule. "Have either of you seen an *ancilla* with red hair wearing a bronze *torques*?" He paused, dreading to reveal the rest. "She is riding a black Egyptian warhorse."

A knowing look glinted in the drovers' eyes. They glanced between themselves in discomfort and said, "No."

Atellus rode on. He heard the drovers quietly laughing behind him. He should have turned around and struck them down but he didn't have the heart for it. This was his doing and he had to take responsibility for it. He knew he had exposed himself to ridicule and said too much. Any *ineptus* could deduce the truth of the situation. He knew the drovers might question why a Roman *provincia* with the prominent gash on his forehead was riding a pack mule while his *ancilla* rode in the distance on the back of a finely bred horse, but they were too polite to betray their suspicions to his face. He was thoroughly humiliated. He knew he had been *ludificare* and he deserved the men's private ridicule. He longed for the physical and emotion pain to stop. He wished his head would stop hurting so he could just forget about Rutila.

Five days passed. He saw nothing of Rutila or Rubus. The forested Roman road was lightly used in this season. There were few travelers to feel embarrassed in front of, yet he felt compelled to ask everyone he met if they had seen Rutila. No one had. Apparently she had vanished. He even stopped at several disreputable-looking *cauponae* beside the road that catered to suspicious characters. He rested at the *cauponae* and ate their disgusting food, hoping to speak with the low ones and gather information. He fully expected to hear *latros* had captured Rutila or taken her in as one

of their own, but he heard no such thing. He became convinced that by now Pluto had formally claimed Rutila or wolves fought over her bones. He knew it was time to forget about her, but he couldn't. The memory of her face haunted his waking days and invaded what little sleep he got. He was angry and exhausted.

He even considered going back to Plutonium's compound to rejoin the procession headed west to Belgica but the thought of completely losing Rubus and having to confess his situation to his *custodia* prevented him from doing so. His disposition was now quite sour. He did not wish for company at this time, nor did he wish to inflict his bellicose mood on others. At this time, traveling alone suited him. He knew it would give him a chance to forget Rutila, but he could not stop thinking about her. He spent many quiet hours on the road, just him and the pack mules, trying not to think about Rutila. He did his very best to forget her. His thoughts dwelled on not thinking of her. He refused to allow his mind to wander toward Rutila. His emotions were spent. He could not afford to give her another moment of his time. He promised himself he could go until sunset without thinking of her, but he couldn't even ride to the bend in the road without wondering if he would see a flash of copper hair when he turned. He knew if he caught her, his retribution would be swift. His heart festered for it. He finally admitted trying to forget her wasn't working. What he needed was resolution and revenge.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rutila was beyond hungry — she was starving. She swayed lazily on Rubus' back as the peevish horse chose a dubious path through the underbrush. She thought she was being clever by staying off the Roman *viae* during the day and riding parallel to it, along deer trails through the woods. It was a safer but much slower route for her to take. The woods were thick with debris and some days the traveling was done in increments. In fact, most of the traveling had been done at night. She would sleep most of the day or forage for whatever scant food she could find. She and Rubus would walk the road only at night, always careful to avoid other travelers or the grubby *caupona*e along the road.

The *pugio* she had stolen from Atellus was nearly useless. She had very poor luck with her hunting. It had been too difficult to flee during the night and take the time necessary to set traps or stalk prey. She had gone without real sustenance for days, but even a satisfying portion of escape spiked with a taste of revenge eventually wore off. She admitted she was completely exhausted and starving.

She was living on berries and greenery. She ate anything to trick her stomach into thinking it was full. A few birds' eggs and some boney little fish she had scooped from a stream had been yesterday's meal. At least Rubus could fend for himself. There was plenty of vegetation for him, though the poor, spoiled creature balked at the fact she would not or could not produce his usual daily ration of grain. The grain along with all the other useful supplies was left with the pack mules.

She now heartily regretted taking Rubus and wished she had stolen a fully loaded pack mule instead. Rubus was not the high-flying, majestic means of escape she hoped he would be.

Obviously, Rubus carried a grudge against her. As they rode, the horse continually lowered his great head, threatening to dump her to the ground. He tried to scrape her against tree trunks and brambles. He steered toward low branches in an attempt to knock her off his back. Rubus was a loyalist. Clearly, he wanted to be reunited with his *dominor*, but there was nothing to be done about that now. She could not turn back. Too much damage had been done. She knew Atellus would never forgive her harsh actions, and why should he?

She thought back on their last night together. After he had made love to her on the furs, he fell peacefully asleep. She lay awake most of the night, listening to him softly breathing beside her. The thought of submitting to a Roman and willingly enjoying a Roman sickened her. The Romans had been so cruel to her in the past. The words *pompous*, *rapist*, *liars* came to mind. How could she possibly find pleasure with a Roman? Perhaps she had lost her mind? Undeniably, she had willingly opened her body and her heart to Atellus, surrendering completely to the enemy. What had she become? Was there even a name for what she was now? She could think of a few vulgar words her tribe's people might use to describe her. She hated those names. She would not be known by those names. She knew she must act.

At that moment she knew with certainty what had to be done. She had no choice. The Romans had not been selective or merciful when they slaughtered her people, so she decided not to be selective or merciful toward the Romans. She silently stole Atellus' *pugio* from his *baldric*. She slowly drew the blade from its sheath over several minutes for fear she would wake him.

He didn't even flinch.

She was surprised she had been able to do it so easily. She had expected him to sleep light and be on his guard, but he was not. He slept deeply and trustingly beside her, completely unaware of her plans. She held the glittering blade of the *pugio* above his throat, prepared to strike. After an entire day of longing to kill Atellus and be free of him, the moment was anticlimactic when she actually held the *pugio* to the softly pulsing artery on the side of his throat. She wavered. His lips slightly smiled in his sleep. There was no resistance or suspicion on his part, just peaceful sleep. His eyelashes fluttered as if deep in a dream. He looked beautiful to her. She discovered to her great shock she could not slit his throat. She panicked as a perfect opportunity to take her freedom threatened to slip away. She felt enraged with herself for indulging such sentimental feelings. Sentiment was useless to a warring, vengeful person. She wanted revenge on Rome for herself and for her family. She was entitled to it. Her constant desire for revenge had kept her alive. It was her only justification for living. She owed the goddess of revenge a hearty meal. The moment for revenge had finally arrived and she needed to act. Her fallen ancestors would demand it.

Her nostrils flared with rage. She thought of the slaughter her loved ones had faced at the hands of Romans and struck Atellus hard with the heavy, bronze hilt of the *pugio*. The strike landed with a sickening thud against his skull. She cringed. Atellus groaned and lay still. She felt a stab of despair she had killed him and admonished herself for even worrying about such an unimportant fact. He was Roman and his life didn't matter. She leapt to her feet in confused panic. Her heart pounded as horrible feelings of doubt crushed down on her. She wanted no one to see her crime. In a moment of hysteria she threw a smoldering log against the tent before bolting away to loose the pack mules from their hobbles.

It was accomplished. The Roman was vanquished, but even as she fled to freedom, a rending conflict erupted within. She did not feel the usual exhilaration she felt when fighting back and taking revenge on an enemy. This act of defiance brought as much doubt as satisfaction. She could hardly believe she felt even a twinge of guilt over what she had done, but she did. A nagging feeling of remorse had already set in. She tried desperately to talk herself out of it. She knew in her heart the Romans deserved everything they got but doubt lingered. Atellus had trusted her. Pleasured her, offered her his heart. She quickly realized harming him was wrong even if he was Roman. A guttural sob wrenched from her throat as she chased after the obstinate Rubus and tried to mount him. This should have been her moment of triumph but there was no sense of victory in this act. Even as she did it she already regretted it.

She was both horrified and greatly relieved to see Atellus stagger from the burning tent, alive. Her gut wrenched with guilt when he called for her in a smoke-ravished voice. The painful look of betrayal on his face when he realized what she had done scalded her soul. In his weakened state, she could easily have rushed forward and finished him off. She was armed. He was not. She could have slit his throat and ended his misery. If it had been Plutonium on his hands and knees she would not have hesitated to do so. But when the actual moment came and she had her perfect chance, she was as unable to take his life as she had been unable to take her own.

Now, many regret-filled days later, the novelty of freedom had worn thin. She was guilt stricken and consumed with self-loathing. She was exhausted and so was Rubus. There had been nothing useful or edible in Rubus' pack. She had not stopped today to hunt or forage. The weather was cooler. Autumn was giving way to early winter. The terrain grew more severe. She realized she was in trouble and she was too exhausted to take proper action. She knew hunger and cold would soon kill her and she didn't care.

She was starving. Her stomach no longer went through the formality of growling. She knew she had better start taking care of herself or else she would die by the side of the road, which wouldn't be so bad. A worse fate would be to face recapture at the hands of *latros* or Roman *venalicius* to be resold at the Roman slave markets. She could not endure that prospect. She preferred to starve. She had to stay alert. There were numerous *cauponae* along the road. The ramshackle inns were covered in vulgar graffiti, promising all manner of vice cheaply delivered. She studiously avoided them, not wanting to end up there. She knew a lone woman wearing a *torques* and riding a fine

horse would prove too much temptation to the thieves and prostitutes who haunted a typical *caupona*.

She tugged at the incriminating *torques* that dangled around her throat. The *torques* openly marked her as a runaway slave. She continually tried to twist free of the *torques*. Her nervous fingers tried to flex the bronze ring and locate its most brittle spot. She spent hours flexing it to no avail. Several times the slender circle of bronze warmed from the friction of being flexed and slightly bent but did not break. She hoped sooner or later the metal would fatigue. She had heard of such miracles. *Torques* broke but her *torques* didn't, so it would have to remain hidden beneath a shred of fabric she had wrenched from her tunic. She would have to remain hidden until she could reach sympathetic lands and have the *torques* removed.

Rubus was exhausted and resentful by the ordeal as well. He seemed to not appreciate the night rides along brambled deer trails. He too was not getting enough to eat or enough sleep. He missed his *dominor* and his pampered existence in Belgica. Rubus tried to nibble a wildflower or two as they walked. The horse's rubbery lips stretched forward to steal a few flowering weeds from the side of the road.

She frowned. Her heady moment of escape had become a miserable forced march, one she was ready to collapse from. Today hunger and sleeplessness caught up with her. She heard hoofbeats echoing in a canyon behind her and decided to cut the travel day short. She could not afford to be seen on the road by anyone. Rubus grew uneasy at the sound of other animals. He whinnied in agitation as if a wolf were stalking them.

She knew this was a good time to get out of sight. She led Rubus off the road into a copse of trees. She found some water to hobble him near. She tried to quiet the uneasy animal, but Rubus did not seem to be in a cooperative mood. He continually snorted and sniffed the air. Several times he burst into shrill whinnies. She left him by the side of a creek to drink and rest while she considered setting a trap for a pheasant or else hunting down one of the many rabbits that kept darting across her path like willing sacrifices. Her feet dragged. She quickly realized she was simply too exhausted to do any of that. Several ravens made clicking sounds in the trees above. Surely the carrion feeders would not bother her as long as she was alive? She mounded a nest for herself out of dry, scratchy pine needles and lay down beneath the tree. She was so tired she fell asleep instantly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Atellus stood triumphantly over Rutila's sleeping body. Rubus' whinnies had alerted him to their presence in a thicket of trees. He had expected a fight and was surprised to find Rutila unguarded and sound asleep. He was even able to reclaim his *pugio* and hold it over her and she did not wake. He easily reclaimed Rubus with an offered dried fig and a pet on the snout.

He took a deep breath and prepared for Rutila to wake and see him lording over her. He wanted to savor the first look of shock and regret on her traitorous face. Lying

in the pine needles, she looked obliviously lost in sleep, dirty and *ferus*. Her hair was badly tangled with brambles and twigs. It looked as if briars and branches had scraped her skin. She lay curled on her side in the fetal position with her arms crossed protectively over her chest. She looked pathetic. She looked nothing like the shimmering coppery Venus he had shared bliss with at the foot of Jupiter.

A lump of emotion rose in his throat, his hands trembled. He actually felt pity for her. He decided she was a highly treacherous thing. Even in her dishabille state her charms enticed him. She looked vulnerable and in need of protection and care. She was a siren who called to his sympathies and he couldn't allow that to happen. He would never again fall victim to her. He had learned his lesson. He deeply regretted putting his *nota* on her. She did not deserve the honor. He wanted to forget his mistake. He leapt on top of her and wrapped his hands around her throat.

She woke, screaming in terror.

He pinned her down and wrapped his fingers around the *torques*.

She tried to kick her way out from underneath him but he was determined to finish what he had started and his weight would not be budged.

"Please!" she howled at him as his fingers tightened around the *torques*. She looked astonished that any coherent word had escaped her mouth. "Stop!"

He twisted his hands around the *torques*. "You couldn't stand to have someone care for you, could you?" He glowered. His grip on the *torques* tightened. His teeth flashed white. The *torques* snapped.

She flinched at the loud, brittle sound of snapping metal.

He yanked the broken, twisted *torques* free of her throat. Its ragged edge slightly scraped her skin as he pulled it off. He stood and angrily threw the mangled *torques* high onto a treetop where it dangled from a high branch.

Some curious ravens squawked loudly and hopped across the branch to investigate it.

He stood over her with stormy eyes and a heaving chest.

Rutila lay wide-eyed on the ground, panting, as she waited for the final blow.

"Go!" He pointed toward the road. "I don't want you anymore." His voice cracked. "You're not worth it." He glared at her. Tears stung his eyes. "You're an ingrate! Were it not for me, you'd be ashes in Plutonium's garbage heap!" He looked down. His chin dropped to his chest. His body shook. He covered the gash on his forehead with his palm and turned away.

She lay gasping for breath on the chaotically strewn bed of pine needles. Her body trembled from shock. She looked up at him. Atellus' face was a mask of sheer devastation. It physically hurt to look at him and see so much pain. She knew her own face wore the same expression.

Atellus drew a shaky breath and backed away from her. "Leave, I can't look at you."

She couldn't budge from the spot or believe she was still alive. Her hands absently reached toward her naked throat. Her fingertips skimmed across her skin. The only wound she found was a tiny scratch. Her fingertips rubbed at the faint scratch in disbelief. The sudden absence of the *torques* felt strange to her fingertips, even alarming. She had not been free of a bronze collar for nearly three years. It was startling to touch her own throat and feel only pulsing, warm skin but no metal. The presence of the *torques* had constantly provided something solid to rail against, a physical object to focus her hate upon. She realized she felt completely exposed in front of this crushed and angry man who surprisingly had shown restraint. Who now would she hate? A chilling void opened inside. She gasped and rocked forward onto her knees.

Atellus' posture straightened. He struggled to compose himself. He stepped around her and walked toward the creek to retrieve Rubus.

She knelt on the ground, shaking, unable believe she had survived such a wrathful attack. She turned and watched as Atellus walked toward the tree where Rubus was hobbled.

Rubus excitedly stamped the ground with his heavy hooves as his *dominor* approached. The horse thrust his big muzzle toward Atellus and begged to be petted.

Atellus stroked Rubus' ears. "We can leave now, my friend. I'm finished here." He spoke softly to the horse.

Rubus whinnied enthusiastically, obviously happy to be reunited.

Atellus took hold of Rubus' reins and led the horse toward the road. He stopped in front of her as he passed.

Her heart pounded as she quaked on the ground. She had done a poor job of composing herself. She knew she had earned Atellus' wrath as he had earned hers. She felt justified in hating the Romans, yet there was a great sense of loss over the amount of anger floating between them. It seemed so unnecessary. She wished she did not have to hate him. She wished he were not Roman. She glared at him but silently admitted he was not the worst of men or tyrants. She admitted she was no better. She could be a tyrant as well.

He reached for a small leather pouch dangling from his hip. He opened the coin pouch and shook a handful of bronze *nummus* into his palm. He dashed the coins into her lap with disgust.

The coins pelted her thighs. They felt unreasonably heavy for their small size as they plonked down on her. She glanced at the coins and noticed they were stamped with an idealized portrait of Emperor Nero. She did not want to touch the Roman coins. Her lip curled in revulsion.

"You're free." His brows knit. Emotion had left his voice thin and unsteady. "Not because you deserve it but because I'm done with you. I want no more. I never want to see you again. There's enough *nummus* to get you home to Britannia." His voice

trembled. "You can stab yourself to death in public when you get there." He turned around. He and Rubus marched toward the road.

She gulped a panting breath. It was over. He was done with her. He was simply letting her go. This was it and she was being left behind in the forest with nothing. She quickly gathered the coins, leapt to her feet and ran to catch up with him. "Leave me a pack mule," she pleaded.

Atellus heard her calling behind him and cringed inwardly. He could not bear to hear another word from her mouth. He wished she'd stop and turn back, but she persisted. His heart pounded so hard he feared it would burst. For all that was decent he wished she'd keep her mouth shut and quietly go away. He was afraid she would say something so provoking that he would kill her. He did not want to do that. She ran to keep up to him. She stood so close if he turned and straightened his arm he could strike her. By all the gods, she was fearlessly bold. He would never have possessed the nerve to ask for mercy, but she did. He turned on his heel to confront her.

She came to a startled and abrupt halt.

He stared at her dirt-streaked face and spoke to her with cool indifference even though his heart had been cleaved in two. "I gave you your freedom and your life. Isn't that enough? After what you've done, after your betrayals... I can't believe you're asking for mercy, so don't ask." He turned away from her. He ignored her request and continued walking toward the road. His heart thumped in his throat. He didn't dare look back at her. He was surprised by how gut churning the entire transaction had been. He felt awful. He feared he might vomit. He had expected revenge would soothe his hurt but it did not. It didn't come close. He had expected and planned to do far worse to her, but when given the chance, he discovered he could not. He could not harm her even after all she had done. He was shocked and confused by this. He realized he was not that kind of man. He took a deep breath, feeling grateful he had not done worse than he had. There was no need for it. He did not want to be senselessly cruel. He knew cruelty would destroy his own soul. He had seen it happen to others. He decided it was punishment enough for Rutila to be left alone in the world. She did not want his love. She was too *ferus* and ungrateful to appreciate anything decent that was offered to her. Leaving her alone was the right thing to do. He knew she could punish herself more thoroughly than he ever could.

She followed a safe distance behind him as he led Rubus through the brush. "Don't strand me in the wild," she begged softly.

He didn't answer. He kept walking and pretended not to care, though he was shaking on the inside. He didn't dare speak to her for fear his voice would betray his emotional turmoil. The only answer he offered to her request was his silence and the sound of his heavy *caligae* crunching leaves and gravel.

By the time he reached the road, he had grown very uneasy with the idea of abandoning her in the forest. She already looked hungry, ragged and defeated and he



wondered how long she could last in the forest alone and on foot. He drew a labored breath, hating himself for caring. He knew he should not care what became of her. She had been harsh and uncaring with him, but against his will he worried about her welfare. The pack mules stood patiently at the side of the road, nibbling grass. He approached the slowest, most stubborn dun-colored mule and thoroughly searched the animal's pack.

She stood breathlessly nearby, waiting to see what he would do.

When he was satisfied the pack contained nothing of real value such as dried food, weapons or the ivory hair combs he was bringing home as a gift to Rosa, he relinquished the pack mule to Rutila. He held the reins toward her, silently offering the use of a mule.

She lurched forward in disbelief. Her hand hesitated to accept the pack mule's reins as if she feared trickery. She started to mumble a thank-you but the flood of hurt burning in his eyes seemed to stop her. She looked relieved and confused as she accepted the gift of the mule.

He mounted Rubus, eager to ride away from her. He needed to be as far away from her as possible. He couldn't escape her presence fast enough. He did not turn around or have final words with her. He was afraid he would be tempted to plead with her to explain her actions or kill her if he stood in front of her a moment longer. He did not want to think about what might become of her. He decided she would just have to fend for herself as best she could. She was no longer his property or responsibility. Once again she belonged to the wild.

He rode away at a full gallop, forcing the three tethered pack mules to run behind him at a frantic pace. He desperately needed to put some distance between them. He did not feel lighter or free. No part of him felt better about anything that had happened. He rode far ahead of her, resisting the impulse to look back and see if she was following. He forced his gaze to stay focused ahead and brutally pushed Rubus and the pack mules in an attempt to leave her as far behind as possible. A half-*mille* lead quickly became a full-*mille* lead and so on. Rutila's stubborn little pack mule did not keep up with a galloping Rubus. Soon she was a spot in the distance. By afternoon she had completely disappeared from sight but not from his thoughts. Unfortunately she filled his thoughts completely.

\* \* \* \* \*

She stood numbly by the side of the road, watching as Atellus and the other pack mules galloped away without even looking back. The animal's pounding hooves kicked a cloud of dust into the air. She stared at the back of Atellus' dark head, willing him to turn around, but he didn't. She realized she had no power over him and he no longer had any over her. He had freed her of her *torques* but she did not feel free. Her heart was heavy. She did not know why but she wanted him to turn around and look at her.

She refused to admit she wanted to see his handsome face one last time, even if it wore an angry expression.

He rode fast, and soon his flowing cloak was a tiny spot of pale buff against a sea of dark green. At a turn in the road, the forest swallowed him and the pack mules. He was gone and she was left alone with her somber thoughts.

She gracelessly clambered onto the back of the pack mule and halfheartedly encouraged it to trot.

The mule lurched forward with a series of choppy little steps. Its jarring gate was so different from the graceful but treacherous strides of Rubus.

All energy seemed to flee her body. She suddenly felt extremely shaky and weak. Being so hungry didn't help matters. Atellus had left her nothing to eat and she had dared not point out that crucial omission before he left. She had been lucky to get the use of a mule and she knew it.

She wondered if she should climb off the pack mule and do a little foraging. She was starving but she pressed forward, hoping for the first time on this journey to meet fellow travelers and perhaps barter some food. Now that she possessed some *nummus* and no *torques* she might be able to buy food. Where was one of those nasty *cauponae* when it was needed? She saw nothing but pristine forest and hills ahead, not even the hint of a village or a bandit's camp.

The harsh trot of the pack mule made her head vibrate. She huffed in disgust at her current situation. This was quite unpleasant. How low she had fallen. To think she was once the spoiled daughter of royalty, first in line to inherit the land. She was bred to be a queen.

The mule stumbled across a rut in the road and she jolted backward and bit her tongue. A burst of pain bloomed in her mouth. The faint taste of blood brought to mind a worse pain.

Immediately following the departure of her father King Prasutagus from this world, the Roman procurator, the tax collector, arrived.

King Prasutagus was a shrewd man. He used his connections with Rome to intimidate the neighbors and impress his enemies. He entertained Romans in his home and indulged in all manner of Roman luxuries. He had his wife and daughters educated so they might deal wisely in the future with Rome. His grand hall in Icenia was patterned on that of a Roman villa. Even his final will and testament reflected a strong allegiance with Rome. He named the Roman Emperor Nero co-heir to his kingdom along with his wife Queen Boudica and his two daughters—her and her younger sister.

Unfortunately along with the will, he also left debt. Lots of it, and when he died, those debts were passed on to his subjects. Even before the funeral processions disbanded, ruthless Roman financiers were calling in those debts.

She witnessed greed on an unheard-of scale. The kingdom of Icenia was in debt and in danger. Catus Decianus, the world's most avaricious procurator, strongly suggested

the people of Iceni could avoid Rome's wrath by handing over their harvests and selling their women and children into slavery. Of course this impractical solution to paying King Prasutagus' debts was met with utter outrage. The humble people of Iceni had not enjoyed Roman luxuries in King Prasutagus' hall. Their bottoms had never sat on silk cushions from Rome and they resented having to pay the king's debt by selling their women and children as slaves.

Her mother Queen Boudica openly showed Rome her disgust and resistance toward Roman taxation. The people of Iceni followed her lead and rebelled, but Decianus was determined to have his way. In an attempt to demoralize them, he forced his way into the Druids' hallowed oak groves, chopped the sacred trees to the ground and brutally slaughtered and burned alive members of the Druid priesthood.

When this act failed to win the people's cooperation and respect, Decianus publicly stripped and flogged her mother the queen. Roman soldiers raped her and her younger sister while others watched. The Romans did not recognize the matrilineal line of inheritance and this coarse act was meant to end King Prasutagus' bloodline once and for all by making her and her sister outcasts, unworthy of a noble marriage...

Her chest tightened. She could barely remember that day. The details of that horrifically painful day were lost to her. Her mind had blanked them out. The multiple rapes and the entire humiliating day had fused into a single sooty moment. She had blocked the sights and sounds from her memory and forbade them to ever return. This ploy had been somewhat successful. She could not recall a single face among her abusers. If they passed her in public she would not know them. All were a blur. The men were simply Romans, completely interchangeable with any other Roman. The whole event remained a nightmare hovering on the edge of consciousness, yet it occupied the lion's share of her heart. Hatred was something she could not block out. She learned that day how to will her soul to flee the flesh. She also learned to hate Rome and all things Roman...

The Romans had taken everything from her. They deprived her of her family, land, innocence and nobility. Hate and revenge were her only birthrights now and her constant companions. They were the only inheritance Rome would allow her to claim. She steeled her heart. Rome must always remain an object of hate, a thing to shun and despise. All things Roman must be excluded from her life, no matter the cost. Rome must be pruned from the land like a dead limb. She knew she could stagger forward for the remainder of her days, reeking of venom and hatred, if she chose to. She had that right. She had every reason to continue hating the Romans, yet she couldn't work up the will to hate Atellus. Her heart ached. She couldn't understand why. The matter should be simple, he was Roman and she should hate him. The equation was brief and straightforward, yet her conflicts confounded her. Her thoughts continually returned to him and she suffered doubt.

The day on the road passed slowly. Her heart and her mind steeped in turmoil. She resented the fact she could not decisively hate Atellus. She no longer knew what she

hoped for. She saw no other travelers on the road and she did not stop to hunt or gather anything to eat. She was too weak for that. She clung to the reins of the pack mule and let the tough mule carry her forward. By sunset she had grown so hungry she was dizzy. It was long past time to stop for the night but she pushed onward, hoping to cross paths with someone she could barter with, but no one appeared.

The evening air grew chilly. A cool mist sank down on the forest. At a bend in the road, the welcoming sounds and scent of a fire greeted her. She came upon a *castra* in a clearing. She gazed longingly into the warm glow of the clearing and saw a pair of glistening rabbits crackling over a cheering fire. The aroma of roasting meat thrilled her senses and left her stomach growling. She scanned the *castra* for its occupant.

"Don't even ask!" Atellus' disembodied voice boomed from behind a tree. "Keep riding."

Her heart dropped. Hope evaporated. She was so frustrated and humiliated she bolted away from Atellus' *castra* before she cried in front of him or pleaded.

## Chapter Eight

She and the weary pack mule made *castra* a short distance down the road from Atellus. It wasn't much of a *castra*. She hobbled the mule near a stream thick with clumps of watercress. The mule enthusiastically nibbled the watercress so she ate some too, but it didn't do much to quench her hunger. She mounded some sticky pine needles into a makeshift bed. She had no ax or flint, so she had no fire. A fire would have been wonderful. The night had grown cold. Her skin pebbled. She wished she still possessed Atellus' stolen *pugio*, but she was in no shape at the moment to hunt or chase anything. She nibbled pungent watercress and scooped cold water from the creek to fill her empty belly. She thought resentfully of Atellus' fully laden packs. Certainly he had much more than one man could eat. Why should she starve? She decided to sneak into his *castra* and steal food while he slept.

She patiently waited until the moon set so she would not be seen. She took the extra time and trouble to stalk a wide circle around his *castra*, being careful not to rouse Rubus' suspicions or the man's. She passed the dozing mules. The exhausted animals flicked their ears at her but did not bray. The fire had burned down to orange embers and the *castra* was nearly dark. Beside the fire a solid lump lay hunkered beneath a pile of fur. She assumed it was Atellus. Her lip curled. He was enjoying a fire, bed furs and a peaceful night's sleep while she shivered in the dark with damp sleeves that had dragged through the stream. The sight of his cozy comfort strengthened her resolve.

On the far side of his *castra*, she crept toward the fire to see what she could find. She saw the rabbit carcasses propped up on sticks beside the fire. Most of the meat had already been eaten. All but one crooked haunch had been stripped to the bone. Her mouth watered at the sight. She couldn't believe her good fortune. She grabbed the roasted rabbit haunch off the stick and ran away into the forest to devour it.

She leaned against a tree and bit into the roasted meat. It tasted heavenly, perhaps the best meal she ever had. It was crispy on the outside, smoky and greasy on the inside. She didn't even care that it was chewy. It was stolen from a Roman and it tasted of bliss. She closed her eyes in ecstasy. The rabbit was feeding her soul as well as her body. There wasn't much of it so she chewed slowly, hoping the joy would last. The peace was broken when she heard a male voice chuckling in the darkness and turned.

"What took you so long?" Atellus stepped from behind a tree, looking smug. "You don't really think I would fall sleep with you nearby, do you?" He set some dried figs and a handful of almonds down on a piece of singed linen and pushed the offering toward her. "Take them, I know you're hungry."

Her stomach growled aggressively at the sight of the food but she dared not reach for the figs or almonds.

"Don't worry," he assured her. "There is no obligation attached. I have no need to barter pleasure from a dirty, vicious woman when I'm this close to home."

She immediately reached for the figs and almonds for fear he might change his mind and snatch them back. She stuffed a fig into her mouth. The taste of pithy, sweet fig nearly brought tears to her eyes. She closed her eyes in gratitude for the realization that life was hard but she was going to live.

He noticed how tired and thin Rutila looked. Obviously this journey had been a wrenching physical and emotional hardship for her as well. For some irrational reason he cared about her and it pleased him she accepted his food instead of stubbornly refusing to eat it. He wished he didn't care. He watched as she bolted the food down, knowing she would be getting up in a moment to escape his *castra*. He lured her closer. "Sit by the fire while I get you more food."

She wandered toward the fire and seemed to drink in the warmth it emanated.

He quickly offered her more almonds and a cup of wine to anchor her in place. He handed her the food and drink and stepped back so she would not feel cornered. He walked to the far side of his *castra*, leaned against a tree and left her alone while she ate.

She kept her eyes on the fire as she chewed the almonds. She did not say "thank you" or acknowledge him in any way. She refused to make eye contact. It bothered him that she could ignore him so completely. She did not stop chewing nor did she look up as she ate. She simply pretended he was not there.

He grew tired of being invisible. "What do think went wrong in Britannia?" he asked softly.

She stopped chewing and looked up from her meal, seemingly confused by his question. "What does Rome care about Britannia? What do you care of my opinion?"

He crossed his arms over his chest, impatiently waiting for an answer to his question.

She chose to ignore him and casually reached for more almonds.

He marched forward and pulled the almonds out of her reach. "Be polite, Rutila." He gave her a scathing look. "You are my *hospes*, eating my food, and I have asked you a direct question."

Her eyes narrowed at him. She silently held up her empty wine cup and waited for it to be refilled.

He begrudgingly refilled her cup. He could clearly see she was weak and starving and he had all the food, yet she managed to put him at a social disadvantage. How did she do that? he asked himself.

Only after the wine cup was refilled and the almonds returned did she speak. "The Romans cut Britannia in half with the Watling road. We did not ask them to build it."

"I hear the road is beloved as a great convenience and much used by the Britons." He defended the wide road through the heavy forest of Britannia, which ran from Wales to Londinium.

"It's used as a highway for war." Her voice rose. "Our people face the prospect of tens of thousands of Roman *milites* swooping down on us at any time."

"Britannia is an occupied territory of Rome," he spoke simply. "You must accept that."

"We are starving!" she railed. "We often starve so that we can feed our occupiers. It is untenable. Our children die so your *milites* can eat. The legions are always asking for more. Their treatment of the local women is appalling. It is said by the *milites* that it is a great honor to birth a Roman citizen but I should not want that honor." She became angry and loud. "We are being starved and pushed off our own land. We are forced to live Roman lives. Live by Roman rules and forced to pay unjust Roman taxes all for the privilege of being occupied." Her indignation grew. "The intolerance of it." She continued. "Rome has many gods, but Rome could not tolerate our gods. Entire priesthods were butchered or burned alive. Our sacred circles of oak, living temples, were hacked down without thought. What was lost can never be brought back. You would never understand this but those oaks were a living library, there were living souls in those trees." Her body trembled and she became silent.

He bowed his head in shame, knowing she was telling the truth. He had heard firsthand of these offenses. Queen Boudica staunchly resisted the Roman campaign and she was punished for defending the women and children of Iceni by being stripped of her clothing and flogged in front of her people. Everyone was outraged. The procurator responsible for ordering the deeds done fled to Gallia in a panic when he realized he had gone too far. He fled in great haste, thinking only of his own safety. He left the Roman settlements behind, filled with innocent, unwarned people who were forced to face slaughter at the hands of the enraged Celts. The sheer number of Roman dead and the manner of their deaths were shocking. The Celts decimated or butchered anything Roman they could swarm over. Tens of thousands of Romans died and the Celts were on the defense, all because a handful of greedy *ineptus* had been poor managers. He realized if Rome were to be a continuing presence in Britannia, better leadership and a clearer understanding of the Britons would have to be reached.

She sat on the ground, glowering at him.

He loomed over her with his arms crossed tightly over his chest. "Rutila, since the time of your capture," he wanted her to hear the truth, "the rebellions have failed. Rome has refortified its settlements. The Roman presence will remain a fact in Britannia, forever. There is even talk of someday building a great stone wall to separate the civilized, Romanized parts of Britannia from the *ferus*, rebellious parts." He hoped she understood what he was saying and was not filtering out his words because this was the heart of his argument. "Someone must speak for the Celts. Roman politicians do not understand the west. To them, all Celts are a savage *mysteria*. The Celts do not need

Rome and that frightens Rome. The Britons need a champion, an ambassador or liaison."

"Rome is an untrustworthy partner." She spat the words. "My father swore allegiance to Rome in exchange for basic considerations. Later, I watched my uncles die on the tips of Roman *pila*. I witnessed Roman treachery in our own banquet hall. I watched as, one by one, every Roman promise was broken. I will not befriend Rome. Rome is corrupt. It shall rot and crumple from within under its own ponderous weight." She angrily swiped the rabbit grease from her fingertips.

They looked at each other in silence. Each mulling over what the other had said. The comments had been sadly enlightening. There was little wonder now why they were having such a difficult time understanding the other's behavior.

He thought he now better understood the political problems in Britannia. He had only heard the Roman side. It was obvious to him the problems in Britannia could not be solved quickly but they might be improved. Perhaps healing could begin. After all, Britannia was a near neighbor and the tragedies of the Britons were sure to overflow into Belgica.

He let her finish her food in peace. Once she was finished eating, she grew sullen and seemed disinclined to speak any further.

He thought it best to send her back to her *castra*. He walked over to a pack and rummaged through it. He pulled out a leather *tunica* and held the jacket out to her. "I found this after you left. You'll need it now. The weather's grown cold at night." He gently draped the *tunica* across her shoulders.

Her eyes avoided him as he stood close but he saw she was moved. Her eyes glistened and threatened to spill tears.

"Take this with you." He handed her a branch still crackling with red embers at its tip so she could have a fire of her own. "You should go now." His lips held a firm line.

She accepted the smoldering branch cautiously and seemed equally surprised to be asked to leave as she was to be offered a warm *tunica* and fire. She held the ember-dribbling branch in front of her as she quietly walked into the darkness.

He leaned against a tree, watching her until long after she had disappeared into the forest. He sighed heavily. At least he had learned one important thing about Rutila. Apparently her father had been a person of consequence who had spoken the Roman tongue in his *domus*. She seemed to be politically astute and unafraid to take up arms. His mind dwelled on those facts along with the fact that even though she was ragged and her cheeks were streaked with road dust, she still looked regal to him.

His body stirred at the thought of her, as it had continually done all day. He had been forced to send her away. He knew if she stayed a moment longer or slept beside his fire, he would go *insania* with longing and reach out to her. He didn't dare give in to that. His heart and his pride couldn't bear another rejection, argument or conflict. It was difficult enough to be around a woman he had already touched and tasted and still



wanted and not act. He had watched her eat and listened to her speak through hooded eyes. Despite all she'd done, he feared he still loved her.

Sadly, she had betrayed no such lustful feeling in front of him, though he silently prayed she would. He wasn't *ludificare*. He knew she had appeared in his *castra* solely because of the food and fire he offered. He felt lucky to get a little company and enlightenment in exchange for his generosity.

He wished there was something he could say or do that would act as a *magica* charm and transport them back to their first night together in the *donarium* of Jupiter. That had been a perfect night. He could happily spend his entire life reliving those hours. He wondered, in all the world, was there some enchanted glue or incantation to Venus that could mend broken trust? Such a thing would be welcome and worth any price. He asked himself, *Wouldn't it be wonderful to once again love and give of my heart without fear or memory of betrayal?* He longed to purge his heart of anything dark, angry or gritty. He did not want to live in fear of betrayal. He wanted to bask in love.

Once he was certain Rutila had returned to her *castra*, he lay down on his singed bed furs. He scanned the woods beyond the dying fire to make sure he was truly alone before loosening the drawstring of his *braccae*. His hand slid below the waist of his woolen trousers and took hold of the swelling *dolon* that strained against the soft cloth. He tugged the fabric over his hipbones. His *dolon* sprang free, heavy and hard, despite a punishing day of riding Rubus. He gave the head a harsh squeeze that almost hurt, just to feel his blood rush. He decided a little harshness was exactly what he needed. He wanted to feel all the emotional intensity of the day. He even wanted to hurt so he pinched the tip firmly behind the crown and hissed as the flesh purpled.

He conjured the memory of Rutila's golden-red hair spilling across the bed furs and how her aroused scent drenched his face. His *dolon* leapt. He wanted more of that. He felt a bit ashamed of his mixed emotions. Today had been filled with violence, anger, pity and regret, yet at the end of the day, he still wanted her. The more he knew about her, the more his heart opened. That thought truly worried him. She could hurt him in so many ways. He gripped the shaft so fiercely, color bloomed across the surface. A drop of fluid glistened at the tip. He wished she were here so he could pour himself into her. He thought of her snug sheath and stroked harder. She had been made for him. No one could possibly love her as well as he. She was so much more than a gilded illusion or beautiful *ancilla*. He could help her and she could help him. Why else would fate toss them together? Who was she? What was she? Why did she have to do that? His fist pumped faster. Her image consumed him. She was strength covered in soft curves. She was a vulnerable young woman forced to fight a lonely war. *She didn't have to hurt me like that.* He loved her. He hated her. He wished he never met her. Angry or not, he had to do this every night since their violent parting if he was to have any hope of falling asleep. Her scent and the silky glide of her skin haunted his thoughts. Her defiant attitude haunted him as well. He wished she were lying beneath him, parting her thighs. He was *ludificare* for falling for her. She was an ingrate. He squeezed his *dolon* so hard it swelled purple at the tip. He wished it were pumping inside her. He was a

complete *ludificare*, there was no doubt. Even lying on singed bed furs, did not blunt his desire for her. His fist pumped faster. His testes tightened. His back arched. He gushed hot seed all over his hand. A brief sensation of floating lifted him upward. He groaned. "Rutila." *What have you done to me?*

\* \* \* \* \*

She wandered through the moonless night, carrying the lit branch. The branch trickled red embers onto the rutted road. Walking openly along the road instead of sneaking through the underbrush quickly returned her to the spot where she had hobbled the pack mule. The distance was no greater than a quarter of a *mille* but it felt worlds away from Atellus. It had actually been very difficult to get up and walk away from him. Some treacherous part of her soul wanted to stay and enjoy the comfort of his fire and the sound of his voice. His actions completely surprised her. He had willingly fed her, listened to her angry rant and demanded nothing of her. He had every reason to turn her away or be spiteful, but he had shown patience and kindness instead. He had proven beyond doubt he was the greater soul. He was better than she. She silently acknowledged that fact. In actions if not words, he had forgiven her. The thought made her heart ache uneasily. Forgiveness was an unknown thing to her. Her eyes stung with unshed tears. She realized in her entire life she had yet to forgive anyone for anything. She didn't even know how.

She walked carefully through her makeshift *castra*, gathering twigs to build a fire, and accidentally disturbed a badger.

The badger darted from the underbrush to hiss at her.

Her eyes widened in surprise and she leapt away from the embattled animal. Fortunately, the smoldering branch convinced the badger to turn and amble back into the brush without a fight. She was left shaken by the unexpected visitor but quickly managed to pile some leaves and twigs together and lit them with the branch. She frantically fanned the struggling flames, anxious to discourage the badger or the chill of the night from returning.

The twigs lit but the fire was unimpressive. The leaves were damp with night mist and she had no dry logs. The fire was more of a smolder but it did put off a little heat. She dragged a chunk of broken tree limb near the fire, hoping it would ignite. When part of it finally caught fire, she cheered.

She sat upwind of the smoking fire, unable to sleep. Her fingers clutched the leather *tunica* around her. She looked beyond the glow of the embers into the night sky. Now that the early autumn stars faced no competition from the moon, they shone brightly against the blackest sky. To see the moon at that moment would have been nice. She craved the comfort of seeing the rabbit on the moon and goddess's glowing silvery face. The moon goddess Rhiannon had many facets to her story and many duties to perform for those who acknowledged her. She too had been tricked away from her homeland,

humiliated, accused and abused, but she also held on to her dignity, redeemed herself and forgiven as only a deity can.

She stared skyward. The glittering swath of stars felt close, almost within arm's reach. Her mother, sister, father and all her loved ones were now traveling the path of stars. Her breath caught. Her heart felt heavy. The weight of the night sky pressed down on her. She bowed her head. Moon or not, she realized some prayers to the goddess Rhiannon were in order. She lifted her hands into the air and mumbled above the billowing column of black smoke rising from the fire. She asked with complete sincerity, "Rhiannon, teach me to forgive." Her voice cracked and her words were not clear but she fully opened her heart to any or all teaching or healing the goddess was willing to share.

Rhiannon was infinitely compassionate. She knew her plea would not be ignored, but she was completely unprepared for the wall of emotion that welled upward and overwhelmed her. Three years' worth of unspent tears poured forth in a moment. She choked on their unexpected arrival. She suddenly found herself drowning in tears and gulping for breath. The salt stung her cheeks. Her heart ached so badly she was almost afraid it would stop beating.

It all came back to her. She remembered her mother grabbing her by the arm to drag her in front of the waiting people of Iceni. Her mother winced as she pulled her along. The wounds on her mother's back were fresh and clung to the fabric of her undergown. A few sticky stains had bled through and she knew her mother was in pain from the vicious whipping she had received. They were all in pain, but she refused to think about it. She held her younger sister's hand and helped the trembling girl step forward.

Her towering mother Queen Boudica looked down at them. "Daughters, I know this is difficult but I expect you to be strong. Despite what the Romans have done to you, you shall be queens someday. We must show the people the true nature of Rome. I will tolerate no waffling or indecision from our tribe. The people must know the truth. The crimes against us are crimes against all free Britons."

Her sister broke free of her hold and ran to the corner to sob and rock herself.

"Don't do that." Her mother spoke sternly. "I hate what has happened but I will not give Rome the satisfaction of breaking us. We must not fear them. We shall fight them. Rome shall learn to fear us. Today is the first step. You will be avenged. Come, the people are waiting."

She watched in awe as her mother struggled to don her heavy woven tunic.

Boudica winced when the beautifully dyed fabric of sea green, sky blue and wheat gold weighted against the raw stripes on her back. Obviously it would have been less painful to forego her royal robe, but of course she refused to do it. Her thick red hair was unbound and wild. Her golden royal *torc* glistened at her throat. She took hold of her daughters' hands and marched them outdoors into the sunlight.

A waiting crowd of Iceni burst into cheers when Queen Boudica appeared before them.

Her gaze squinted into the sunlight, as she trembled beside her mother, wearing only her lightweight tunic that had been defiled by the Romans. All eyes were upon her. Rage simmered through the crowd. She instantly wanted to run back indoors and hide.

Queen Boudica yanked the royal tunic from her own shoulders and exposed her injured back to the crowd. "Look what Rome has done to your queen!" she boomed. She pointed to her daughters. "Look what they have done to your daughters and mine. They were our future. If we do not avenge these innocent girls we will all be slaves of Rome and die like dogs!"

The crowd burst into war cries and thrust their blades high into the air. Their shouting and cries were deafening.

Boudica's eyes lit with approval. Her hand swept above the crowd. "We are in agreement. I am a queen but I am one of you," she appealed to her people. "I bleed like you and I will fight beside you. The war against Rome is our war!"

The crowd went mad with bloodlust.

Several exhausted-looking young acolytes stepped forward. The young Druid priests' and priestess' faces were tear-stained and visibly grief-stricken.

She wondered if perhaps they were the last survivors of the Roman slaughter of Druids in the sacred grove.

A young priestess stepped beside her mother and stealthily slipped a live, wriggling animal into her mother's tunic. The animal fought wildly to escape.

Boudica lifted the hem of her tunic and enveloped the creature. She marched triumphantly past the cheering crowd toward an open field. The living creature kicked frantically inside her folded skirt.

Everyone followed behind the queen, including her and her sister.

When Boudica reached the field, she shouted in a deep, husky voice that could be heard by all. "Andraste, our goddess of victory, shall show the way!"

Everyone watched in suspense.

Boudica dropped the hem of her tunic and a startled rabbit hit the ground, ran in a frantic circle and then headed directly toward the Roman settlement of Camulodunum. She threw her arms into the air. "Andraste has chosen Camulodunum! We go to Camulodunum. March! Take no prizes. Show no mercy. If it is wood—burn it. If it is stone—topple it. If it is Roman and its heart beats—slit its throat!"

The mayhem that ensued was difficult to describe, generations of resentment and hate toward the Romans overflowed in a single moment. The war against the invincible Romans had begun and her mother led the charge.

A chill passed over her. She ran to her mother's side and wrapped her arms around her waist, feeling afraid of what was to come. Together they watched as the rabbit

darted across the fields. In the name of Andraste, a rabbit had divined the unsuspecting people of Camulodunum should die first.

Her mother leaned over and gently kissed the top of her head. "Remember, daughter, sometimes it's the small things that help us make the most fateful decisions."

What started as a justified act soon became a tragedy on an epic scale. The Celtic appetite for slaughter spread. Three Roman cities were completely leveled and reduced to ash but one day the Celtic victory came to an end.

Rome was now on her guard. Fresh reserves were sent to Britannia to fight.

One warm spring day, she once again found herself mounting the war chariot beside her tireless mother and sister. She wore a pale blue tunic that was easy to see against the mass of dun-brown clothing on the battlefield. Her mother's reasoning was that it good for warriors to see their women proud and present.

A Roman *castra* filled with heavily armed *milites* had been spotted near the Watling road, which her mother had sarcastically renamed the *Ickniel Way*, or the War Highway of the Iceni. Once the newly arrived Roman *milites* were spotted, Boudica quickly moved her warriors into place.

The Celts came to fight by the thousands, determined to uproot Rome from the land. They outnumbered the Romans to a vast degree. She had never suspected there were so many people in all the world. A Celtic gathering of this size was unprecedented. They brought their families and wagons, and a few of the women fought too. An easy victory should have been within reach.

Queen Boudica walked through the camps the night before the battle. She always made sure the warriors were inspired and knew exactly what they were fighting for. She walked between the fires with her strong voice booming warm greetings to her people and giving the most moving speeches. The Celtic women were always held in the highest esteem. Warrioreesses, priestesses, noblewomen were brought to the front of the lines as if they were war generals to inspire the men to fight harder.

The war chariot rolled across the Watling road. Scouts informed them they were within a half-*mille* of the Roman *castra*. The mood became tense as everyone's senses shifted to high alert.

Queen Boudica stopped her chariot and broke the silence. She turned to face her warriors. "They know we are here and we know where they are. There is no sense in whispering." Her voice boomed down the road.

Everyone's shoulders visibly relaxed. If the queen was so bold surely the goddess was with them today.

Boudica spoke with her arms raised so all might see her, even if they could not hear her at the far end of the line. "I've been honored to fight beside you. You are all great men and women. The Celts are many tribes but today we are one. I'm just like you. I'm wondering what a new world and a united Britannia will be like once the Romans are gone! At our fires tonight we shall discuss it!" She whipped her horses forward and rode off at full speed.

Her body lurched violently inside the bolting chariot. She dropped to the floor as the wheels pounded jarringly against the uneven road.

Boudica whipped the horses and broke into a trilling war cry. Her guards galloped on horseback behind her. A harrowing war cry thundered behind them as the Celts raced forward.

She closed her eyes. Her nerves screamed. She wanted to jump off the chariot and flee. She felt her sister's hand brush against her knee and reluctantly opened her eyes.

Her sister stared back at her with a strange expression on her face.

"It's all right." She tried to sound reassuring.

Her sister, who seldom spoke, confronted her. "It's not all right," she whispered. "I know because I'm not afraid."

A chill passed through her.

The chariot turned sharply off the road and rambled into a dense copse of trees. When they emerged into the sunlight, once again they found themselves facing the Romans in a very narrow clearing.

The Romans held back and waited.

Thousands of Celts crowded behind them. Wagons, carts and horses clogged the tree line. Suddenly their great numbers were a disadvantage. The warriors tried to funnel forward but soon everyone was trapped where they stood. Boudica struggled to put her chariots and horsemen in front but many could not work their way forward. The wagons full of women and children blocked the flow.

She stood on shaky legs and looked into her mother's frustrated face. "We must go. We can't fight here. This is a trap."

Her mother's attention snapped toward her. Her green eyes burned with indignity.

She cringed, expecting to be soundly rebuked for being a coward.

Boudica spoke surprisingly softly. "I think you're right. You'll make a good queen someday, far better than I."

A deafening volley of steel-tipped *pilas* whizzed through the air. For a moment, the missiles blackened the sky. Clouds of birds burst from the treetops in alarm. Their thousands of beating wings added a strange note to the sounds of horror. The *pilas* arched high overhead in graceful flight. They appeared to hang in mid-air. She felt as if she had all the time in the world to gaze upon them. For a second, it looked as if the sky might keep them but they fell to earth and the screaming started. Every man and horse in the front line was instantly struck down.

The horses on their chariot reared frantically. Boudica could not turn or control them. They sat on the edge of the clearing trapped between the Roman legion and the Celts' own fortifications.

The Romans had deliberately chosen a battlefield that was extremely narrow and surrounded by a thick copse of trees. For the great number of Celts present there was little cover and no way to retreat safely beyond the reach of the Roman artillery.

A volley of *pila* struck from the side. There were Romans hiding all around.

Rows of Celts fell.

Panic broke out. The Celts fell back but soon there was nowhere left to go. They pressed against their own wagons and people.

A third deadly volley of steel *pilas* prevented them from turning back. The heavy, steel-tipped *pilas* crushed bodies and pinned them to the ground. The meadow became muddy from blood. The Roman legion had grown in determination and strategy. The Celts were cornered. Chaos reigned in the Celtic ranks as everyone came to the ultimate conclusion. It was over.

She heard children screaming in the wagons beyond the tree line. "I have to help them," she shouted over her shoulder as she leapt off the chariot and darted past the armed guards that protected her mother. She broke from the fragile circle of protection to help some women budge the wagons, which had been set in a blockade as the last desperate line of defense. She knew if they moved a few of the wagons they could open a space to maneuver the horsemen and possibly surprise the Romans in the flanks.

When she got to the wagons, she saw only women and children manned the blockade and they were in direct line with the next volley of *pilas*. The wagons bunched atop each other. The animals pulling them were knocked to the ground as *pilas* zipped through the air. She stopped to push a wagon out of the way. "Go!" she shouted to the women in the wagons. "Leave the wagons. Take the children and run!"

The women who were committed to staying with the wagons were reluctant to go. She had to bodily pull a few of the women away from their wagons to get the rest moving. "Come on!" she scolded as she sprinted into the woods, trying to bring as many women and children with her as possible.

The few souls who managed to escape the blockade of wagons broke away from her and turned back, but they quickly found themselves running toward a rear flank of Roman *milites*.

When she saw the rear flank of Romans marching through the woods, her heart broke. She knew there was no one left on the battlefield to go back for. She threw her head back and screamed.

She ran through the woods for hours until she was so exhausted she fell down at the foot of a giant oak. Nothing like sleep came for her. She was too nervous, too on guard. She simply lay on the ground, wondering if she should allow herself to go on living.

Darkness came and so did the odd sound of digging. She lurched upright and saw a badger digging a deep hole beneath the oak. She started and leapt back for fear the badger would attack. It did not. It continued digging a hole in front of her. Finally the creature turned and faced her. Its beady eyes shone in the darkness. She braced, prepared to feel the creature's sharp teeth sinking into her skin, but instead, the badger tugged at the hem of her fine blue tunic and snarled.

She was so terrified she could not move.

The badger seemed to take offense at the tunic and shredded its hem with its claws. Unexpectedly, the badger stepped back and stared at her.

She stared down at the damaged tunic as realization dawned. The goddess had sent the badger. She stripped the easily identifiable item over her head and tossed it in the hole the badger had dug. She threw her royal torc in as well, knowing she must never wear it again. She was on her own now. "Thank you," she whispered to the badger. "For reminding me to stay angry and live."

Several days later, she was captured by Roman *milites* and set aside as a prize. She was mistaken for a common tribeswoman and spared the blade because her brilliant hair color was pleasing to her captors, but she was spared nothing else.

Soon after her capture, she heard her mother had drunk poison and died. She waited to hear news of her sister but none came. The Romans were busy raping and slaughtering any noblewomen they could find. Roman wrath was keenly focused on the women. The Celtic women were blamed entirely for instigating the rebellion in the first place.

She went into shock, hid her face behind a ragged shawl and refused to speak her name. She suffered in silence, knowing her tribe expected her to be honorable and commit suicide to deprive the Romans of their chattel, but to her horror, she found she could not do it. She had been strong in all other ways, but she could not force her hand to take her own life and there was no one left in her family to do it for her. She was left alone in the world and that should have been punishment enough, yet the Romans continued to punish her for choosing to live. She was shipped to a slave market on the Mediterranean. Her shame increased with each Roman trespass against her. A Roman slave broker burdened her with the unimaginative name "Rutila", which only described her golden-red hair. She had her mother's hair. It was the last noble thing she possessed...

Her pathetic little fire had smoldered to coals. "Help me, Rhiannon." She choked on the words but she managed to speak them clearly, knowing those who practiced true forgiveness were beloved by the goddess. At their last breath, after all life's suffering had passed, Rhiannon would come for them on her white horse and carry them away from all fear, pain and regret. Rhiannon and the forgiveness she brought restored dignity to any and all who asked sincerely. She needed to forgive and she needed forgiveness, so she opened her heart and asked sincerely.



## Chapter Nine

The next day, Atellus out-traveled Rutila once again. He rode ahead while she struggled far behind on her pack mule. When he stopped in the late afternoon to make *castra*, he was very fortunate with his hunting. He speared a young boar that naively wandered up to one of his tethered pack mules to nibble a few fallen almonds off the ground. The stripped piglet must have been separated from its *mater* or else sent as a gift from the gods. He spotted the snorting piglet in his *castra* and immediately pounced on it, accepting it as the gift it was. Now the unwary creature dripped and splattered succulently over his fire.

He was not surprised when Rutila appeared that *vesper* in his *castra*. She did not sneak up on him as she had done the night before, instead she openly walked into the *castra* with her hand raised in greeting. He could tell she was hungry. Her nostrils flared as the scent of roast boar wafted toward her. Apparently she had washed in the river and tried to make herself presentable. Her hair was still wet. He felt encouraged she had made an effort to be civil though he would have welcomed her even if she had not.

The skin of the piglet popped loudly and crackled. He was grateful to have something good to offer her. He waved her toward the fire. "Sit, I have plenty tonight." He would have asked her to stay even he had nothing.

She gracefully knelt across from him. The heat of the fire quickly dried her damp curls. The rising heat of the fire lifted a few copper strands into the air.

"Are you hungry?" he asked the stupidly obvious question.

She nodded her head and looked at him for the briefest moment. Her eyes darted back to the fire.

"Long day," he mumbled. "It's getting colder at night."

"It is." Her fingers knotted together in her lap. Her eyes looked everywhere but at him. She seemed to be suffering some internal conflict. The anxiety showed on her face.

He turned the roasting boar over the flames. The dripping fat caused the fire to crackle and spit sparks. "This poor piglet felt the cold. He walked right into my *castra* and asked to warm himself by my fire." He glanced at her sideways and smiled. "Do you think he feels warm enough now?"

Her lips curled upward at the edges and almost burst into a full smile.

His heart leapt. He'd never seen her smile. Her beautiful smile transformed her face. For a moment, he glimpsed who she might have been had tragedy not visited her life, but the smile was fleeting and quickly disappeared. She instantly returned to staring at the fire or gazing into the woods.

"The mules seem especially tired today." He looked at her graceful profile. "The hills are a steep climb."

"Uh-hmm." She barely nodded her head in agreement.

"Did you see the nest of peregrines on the cliff face?"

She shook her head no.

He tried to make light conversation but she seemed disinterested or distracted by what little he had to say. He wondered if she was too tired and hungry to feel social, so after a few failed attempts to with talk with her, he let the hope of conversation go.

Even though she was quiet she was also polite. She did not scowl at him. No attempt was made to condemn Roman ethics. Sadly, she successfully avoided his every attempt to draw her into conversation.

She waited patiently, without comment, while he served himself first before serving her.

He gave her a choice piece of boar, including half the liver.

She looked impressed with the offering, which greatly pleased him. She needed to eat. He fed her. At least they were not fighting. It was a civil yet emotionally charged exchange. Unspoken thoughts crackled like static in the air.

After she ate the roast boar, she thanked him in the softest, most sincere voice. "The boar was very good. I'm so grateful." Her eyes searched his face.

He held his breath, waiting for her to say more but she did not. It was as if unspoken words were trapped behind locked lips. He fully expected her to speak but she remained uncomfortably silent.

Finally she rose, nodded her head and slowly walked out of his *castra*.

He watched her walk away in utter disappointment and almost begged her to stay. Their night had ended too soon. He longed for her company. He rose from the fire and followed a short distance in disbelief she truly meant to leave.

She walked back to her *castra* without ever turning around.

He was sorry she had not stayed to visit with him. She looked as if she wanted to talk but couldn't bring herself to do it. He wanted something from her and he didn't dare name it. He would have welcomed her company, even one of her angry rants. Rubus, good companion that he was, had even less to say than Rutila. He had begun to understand her better. He was even willing to forgive her, if she would just reach out to him. As the gash on his forehead healed, he had to admit, he still longed for her. He wanted her trust and he wanted to trust her as well. He had never known a woman like Rutila. She was such a strangely independent creature, almost a separate species from the sweetly docile or the overly ambitious, plotting Roman women he had known.

After he was certain she was gone, he packed away what was left of the boar for tomorrow and washed his hands and face at the river's edge. The water was cold and his sleeves became soaked. He walked back to his fire, sat and watched it slowly die down to a dull red glow. He lay on his furs and started to untie the drawstring of his

*braccae*, needing a rough moment of pleasure to ease his thoughts before sleep. His fingers worked to untangle the knot in the woolen drawstring.

"May I stay?" Rutila's cautious voice floated softly from behind a tree.

He gasped in surprise. "Are you sure?" He bolted upright. His startled hands quickly abandoned the drawstring. He hated that his voice was riddled with alarm.

She stepped from behind the tree. The low-burning fire underlit her face and hair with a glowing halo of scarlet. She sat so closely beside him, her knee brushed against his thigh.

His breath caught from the unexpected but welcome moment of contact. He recognized this moment for what it was, a turning point. She had voluntarily wandered back into his *castra* and sat beside him. He knew if he pounced on her and devoured her the way his body begged him to, all would be lost. He knew just because he had fed her did not mean he had tamed her *ferus* nature in any dependable way. Some silent part of him remained on guard.

His fingertips reached out to gently stroke her hair. She had rinsed the dust of the road from her hair but now it was badly tangled. He rose and walked toward the pack that contained the ivory hair combs. He retrieved the ivory combs and sat behind her. "May I?" He didn't wait for her answer before choosing a knotted lock of hair and carefully picking the comb through it. He worked slowly and diligently, untangling a few coppery strands at a time. "This might take awhile," he whispered softly, and added more wood to the fire.

She bowed her head forward as Atellus patiently untangled her hair. The fire sparked and crackled as the new wood lit. It was almost too warm to sit near. Her face flushed. He had worked his way through her many snarls and was nearly at the end of his task. She sat calmly, though her mind was in utter turmoil. There was so much she wanted to say to him and there was nothing she dare say to him. Her ancestors would hate her if she spoke her heart to a Roman and she would hate herself if she didn't.

He finished combing her hair and set the combs down. His palm adoringly smoothed the last strands.

She turned to face him.

His eyes reflected the amber glow of the fire. They seemed to silently plead with her to speak.

She brushed her fingertips across his face and leaned forward to kiss his lips.

His lips softly parted with a sigh.

She gently brushed her lips against his. "Atellus," she whispered. "You're a far better man than I gave you credit for. I was wrong about you." She stroked her fingers through his wavy hair and felt his body tense, as if he didn't know what to do next. She decided to act before her conflicted emotions stopped her. She tugged her woolen tunic

over her head and laid it on the ground beside them. Her hands crossed protectively over her breasts.

His throat tensed. He reached out and moved her hands away from her breasts and looked at her longingly. "You owe me nothing for the food. I was happy to share."

Her chin dipped. "I know."

He lifted her chin with a fingertip. "You don't have to be alone in the world. Let me take care of you. I want to." He leaned closer. "Choose me as your *dominus*."

She recoiled slightly at that word.

"I ask not as a Roman but as the type of man I am. I will never be cruel to you nor will I degrade you, but I need the security of knowing you are mine. I need to be the *dominus*."

She shuddered at the shocking but tempting thought. Her next words were spoken so softly they were barely audible. "You used the word *dominus* instead of the more common term *dominor*, why?"

"You know why," he whispered.

Her heart beat faster. A *dominus* was a husband and lover, a chosen one. It was much more than a brutish owner. A thrill raced through her when she realized she could meet him on these terms. He wasn't demanding the use of her body or taking her freedom. He was asking for her. She could give herself to him willingly. They could agree on this and hold it secret between them. She longed to surrender to a greater soul. For fear she would change her mind, she lay down on the tunic and stretched her arms over her head, offering herself. Her breasts thrust upward. "For tonight only you are my *dominus*. Ask anything of me."

"Anything?" His eyes glinted.

She drew a deep breath, feeling a twinge of regret for her hasty words.

"I want you to keep your eyes open and focused on me as much as you comfortably can. I want you to see the truth. I want you to see who I am. I will not have you mixing me in your mind with other despicable men."

Her throat ached so tightly she was afraid she might cry. "I understand." She heard a faint bustle in the underbrush and saw a badger had wandered to the edge of the *castra*.

The creature poked its striped head out of the brush, bared its jagged teeth and stared at her with riveting black eyes as if awaiting the order to charge.

She silently appealed to the beast. *Go away, my friend. I thank you for lending me your spirit. You helped me survive the worse, but we are finished.* She silently bargained with the combative animal. *I don't need your protection anymore.*

The badger backed quietly into the shadows without incident.

"What's wrong?" Atellus asked softly. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing." She glanced at him. "I'm looking at you."

He kissed her lips. His warm breath flooded the side of her face. "A *dominus* need not be a shameful thing to endure. I need someone to give my heart to. I don't want a sentimental illusion, a weakling or an *ancilla*. I'm done with that. I want something real that suits me. I want you." He paused. The tension on his brow relaxed. He spoke softly. "Surrender to me and I'll lift you up. Depend on me and I'll prove myself loyal. Be loyal to me and I'll lay down my life for you. I always keep my word."

She carefully watched his face as he spoke. His eyes filled with warmth and sincerity. The armor around her heart was shed in a single beat. A future previously unguessed at and unsuspected until that moment opened to her. The world was a different place, or perhaps the world had been reborn. Her compact with the goddess had been rewritten. Anything could happen now.

He leaned over her. His fingertips brushed a strand of hair from her face. "Say my name. I must hear you say it."

Her arms reached out to pull him closer. "Atellus." She spoke his name slowly. It was surprisingly easy to look him in the eye and say his name. This was not what she had originally wanted but it was exactly what she needed. She didn't dare think past the sunrise. "I don't want to feel angry, guilty or damaged anymore. I can't bear it."

"Then don't." His hand dropped to her waist and pulled her closer. "Let me help you." His body slid across hers. His took hold of her hands and intertwined his calloused fingers with her slender ones. His fingers gave her hands a firm squeeze to prove to her they were securely locked to each other.

She sighed from the comfort of his solid body bearing down on her. His lips brushed against hers. In a single fluid motion she was pinned beneath him and consumed, but this was not brutal domination, it was bliss. His lips bathed the side of her throat in kisses. Her body arched upward. She no longer wanted to be a passive participant or flee her body. She wanted her hands free. She knew if her hands were free, tender thoughts not yet ready to become words would easily pass through her fingertips. "I want to touch you."

His eyes lit with hope. He slowly released his grip on her fingers and rolled onto his back. He lifted her on top of him, wrapping his hands around the curve of her waist.

Her thighs straddled his hips. She felt him rising hard against his woolen *braccae*. Her weight settled down on him, feeling his robust body push back. She squeezed her thighs together, enjoying the rush of blood the tension brought. Her fingers dropped to his hips and toyed idly with the drawstring that held his *braccae* up. She considered freeing his *dolon* now and caressing it with her mouth so she could enjoy the heated power of taking control. She wanted control now. It felt like a great privilege. She loosened the knot in the drawstring and teasingly ran her fingers over the rising bulge in his trousers. The finely woven fabric did little to disguise his excitement, in fact, the soft wool highlighted every detail. Her hands cupped his warm testes and held them gently in her palm. She was in no hurry and wanted to linger over every detail.

He moaned from the pleasure of being held carefully in her warm hand.

She felt his body heat radiating through the fabric, against her palm and slightly smiled.

He stared up at her half-naked torso with shining eyes. His full lips parted. His fingertips grazed the soft under curve of her breasts. "Make love to me. Move at your own pace and don't do anything until you're ready. Do as little or as much you want." His words slowed. "I ask this as your *dominus* and as someone who cares deeply for you."

She looked down at him. His face was half hidden in shadow. Bits of crushed leaves tangled in his dark hair. Her fingertips gently brushed a few crumbled leaf bits aside.

He smiled up at her, his eyes filled with trust.

She hadn't seen that look in a man's eyes for a long time. She was used to seeing anger, wariness, greed and lust. Trust was refreshingly different. Her heart opened to him. She realized what a brilliant strategist he was. In showing trust, he encouraged her to be trustworthy. In granting freedom, he had bound her to him. If he wanted to be the *dominus*, so be it. He was worthy. He had genuinely earned the title, not stolen it.

This was her introduction into their new dynamic and she did not want to rush the experience. From this moment onward he was no longer just a man. He was her man, her *Dominus* Atellus, and every detail about him was important.

Her fingertips slowly strayed beneath his woolen tunic. She ran her hands blindly over his lean torso, letting her fingers do reconnaissance beneath the cloth. She traced her fingers across the silky trail of hair on his chest. There was something thrilling and forbidden about him allowing her to reach under his clothes and touch him at will. His skin was smooth and warm, and the landscape of flesh her fingers explored was ridged with thick layers of muscle. His torso was a broad wedge that tapered downward to sleek hips and ropey thighs. An active life had perfectly shaped and chiseled him. Her searching fingertips discovered he had a small but pronounced callus on the left side of his hipbone where his leather *baldrich* rubbed against his hip as he rode. How had she missed such a significant detail? It was something unique about him that exposed so much about the way he spent his days. The tiny callus was a reminder that her man, her *dominus* wore a heavy *pugio* on a thick leather belt and rode a fine horse every day, and his body carried a permanent record of that fact. She committed the tiny detail to memory. Her fingertips brushed against his flat abdomen. The center of his abdomen was covered in straight, silky hair. Her fingers teased the edge of his navel and dipped slightly inside it. At that moment, it was hard for her to believe the tall, life-weathered man lying beneath her had ever been someone's infant son. It was actually a staggering thought to imagine he had ever been small enough for a woman to hold in her hands. "Is your *mater* still living?" she whispered.

"No." His eyes clouded. "Corrina is dead. I'll never return to Rome."

Her fingers rumbled the tunic and pushed it higher up his chest. Her fingertips sought out his tiny, pointed nipples. Her fingernails gently rubbed faint circles around them until they stood in hard contrast to the soft nest of hair surrounding them. He

squirmed a bit under her touch. She wondered if his nipples were as sensitive as hers. "Take this off." She gathered the fabric in her hands and pulled the tunic over his head.

He helped her with this task by curling forward and tugging the garment free. The hard muscles of his abdomen tensed. His wide shoulders were exposed as he pulled the tunic over his head. She saw he had a faint white scar on his shoulder. The wound had healed long ago but the tight, shiny surface of the scar clearly demonstrated it would always be part of him. Somehow this minor flaw seemed important. Her eyes fixated on the scar as her fingertip gently traced across it. She looked at him as a whole person and for the first time she truly wondered what he saw when he looked at her.

She gazed down at him. She had seen his bare chest before, but this moment was different. She allowed herself to truly see his masculinity and appreciate it. He was a beautifully made man. There was a sweeping solidness to his build.

He lay back and looked up at her with sparkling eyes. His pupils were so dilated; his eyes looked black. He reached out to graze his fingertips across the tips of her breasts.

She intercepted his calloused hands, brought them to her lips and gently kissed his fingertips. His fingers felt rough against her soft lips. His calluses and long-healed scars marked him as a veteran of life. She had many flaws too, but her emotional calluses and scars were for the most part invisible. She now realized she would have to expose them to the cleansing properties of sunlight or firelight before they too could be healed. Her breath caught. It was a daunting thought. Her hands stilled.

He sensed her hesitation. "It's a little frightening, isn't it? A first *amare* can be very different from a first time."

"It is," she said breathlessly. Her chest felt tight, as if the wind had been knocked out of her. She looked into his eyes.

His eyes were filled with a look of understanding patience. "Stop if that's as far as you can go. I won't force you or make demands. I'm not that kind of *dominus*."

She studied his expression to discern if he truly meant it.

His eyes told her he did.

It was exactly what she needed to know. She leaned closer to him. An incredible feeling of warmth filled her soul. She realized she wanted to please him completely. She also knew in pleasing him she would heal her heart. It formed a perfect circle. It made sense. "Atellus." She whispered his name as she unknotted the drawstring of his *braccae* and tugged the woolen trousers down the broad sweep of his solid thighs. "Tonight I belong to you."

He smiled and slightly lifted his hips to assist her but otherwise allowed her to act on her own.

She leaned over him and rubbed her cheek against his bare thigh, feeling the coarser texture of his springy hair on his leg.

He groaned softly. His eyes flickered shut and his *dolon* stood straight in the air.

She glanced at his languid expression. "I thought we agreed to keep our eyes open." Her fingers stroked the side of his hip.

He slowly opened his eyes. "We will."

She realized his statement had a double meaning. "Lie on your side." She encouraged him to lie on his hip, facing her.

He rolled onto his side and propped his weight on one elbow. His long body sank into the bed furs. His hand stroked her hair as he looked at her.

She slid down the length of his body until she was face level with his groin. Her hand wrapped possessively around the thick base of his *dolon* and gave it a firm squeeze. A translucent drop of fluid bloomed at the crown. Her lips reverently brushed against the head of his *dolon*. Her tongue slowly caressed the wet tip.

He groaned softly at the first contact.

A faint bitter-salty taste washed over her tongue. She swirled her tongue around the head of his *dolon* and slid it past her lips, feeling its smooth width and enjoying the sensation of drawing him into her.

A low groan rose from his throat. His body tensed and his hips rocked slightly forward, encouraging her to take more. His hand grabbed the bed furs and wrapped them around her. He gathered her against him, leaving the cool night at bay. His fingers settled in her hair and brushed several errant strands away so he could clearly see her face.

The cocoon of fur added greatly to the intimacy of the act. She was blanketed in ermine and his warm male scent. Within the darkness and the privacy of the furs she was able to focus her senses on every detail of this sacramental act, the sound of his breathing, the bristled texture of his thighs and the warm musk of his skin. Her hands stroked him, giving the shaft a slight twist on the way down. The shaft thickened and filled against her palm. Her tongue swirled in slow circles over the crown. Her lips capped the head with the sweet sounds of a suctioning kiss.

His breathing hitched. He pressed the blunt head against her lips and waited for her to take him again.

She covered him in slow, wet kisses, drenching the crown and slicking the shaft with her tongue. She took a deep breath and let him slide past her lips. Her tongue swirled across the tip, bathing it thoroughly before allowing him to sink deeper. His flesh had a slightly salty taste. Her lips tightened around him. The blood-heated skin of the shaft grew taut as a drum. She stroked the shaft slowly against her lips and sucked.

He grew harder with each stroke. "This is perfect," he rasped.

Her tongue explored the tiny cleft in the crown and pulled him deeper into her mouth. His *dolon* thickened and curved upward, almost overflowing her mouth. She tipped her chin upward and drew back. The soft cushion of her bottom lip dragged against the ridge that ran beneath the shaft. She slowly sucked only the head. Her hands dropped to his solid thighs and stroked them. Her fingers wrapped around each of his thighs as she pulled him against her in a tight embrace. Her thumbs rested near the



heavy arteries of his legs. She felt the blood pulse rhythmically against her hands. She could almost count his rapid heartbeats. The tension in his body told her he was trying to restrain himself, but he couldn't completely resist the impulse to push against her and physically beg for more.

She drew him deeper into her mouth and sucked harder, almost tugging him to the back of her throat. She willed her throat to relax and let him linger there. Her lips gripped him in a vise of slippery heat as she held him still.

He moaned desperately and gave in to the temptation of taking several short strokes within her mouth.

Her palm cupped his testes, feeling them tighten and rise in her hand. He felt especially full. Her tongue flicked rapidly behind the crown. She was ready to feel him moving against her lips. She wanted to hear his growl of pleasure at climax. She was ready to taste him in his entirety. A drop wasn't enough. She was ready for all of him. It was a gift she wanted and she vowed to swallow all of it.

He shifted uneasily on the fur. His entire torso tensed. He seemed dangerously close to the edge. He pulled himself free of her lips with a sharp gasp. "Slower," he pleaded.

She nuzzled her face against his thighs, eager to have him back. Her hand stroked his hip and drew him toward her.

He cautiously penetrated her mouth, holding his breath as he slowly reentered.

She sighed, released some pressure on him and simply held him in the wet heat of her mouth. At that moment she did nothing more but provide a tight, warm place for him to be.

He seemed enthralled and unable to move.

The tip of her tongue barely stroked him. His taste pleased her. Her breath warmed his skin. She could accept more. She slid closer to him, twining her legs around his and pressing her breasts against him.

He pressed back against her. He seemed to crave the snug contact of brushing against her silky breasts. He reached down to cup her breasts, gently lifted them and pressed them together, creating a warm cushion of softness to rest his thighs against. A throaty sigh escaped his lips as he nestled himself between her breasts and rubbed his body gently against her.

She snuggled closer, curling her body forward to get better contact with him. She held him gently in her mouth, slowly sweeping her tongue back and forth behind the crown.

His body jolted. He softly sighed and abruptly pulled his wet *dolon* from her lips and grasped it in his fist. He took a deep breath and struggled to compose himself. He held his *dolon* still in front of her. The glistening head pointed between her breasts. His fist tightened around the shaft until the crown purpled. He surprised her by gently thumping the shaft against her breasts several times. The soft cushion of her breasts

warmed under the firm taps. The gesture seemed to excite him very much. "Offer yourself to me."

Her hands delicately circled the sides of her breasts and pressed them together. She arched her back and glanced upward at him.

His eyes blazed. He aimed the head between the twin curves and pushed insistently between them. The first stroke was slow and gentle but the second was a firm thrust. He seemed to love it. His body shuddered, his buttocks tensed. He breathed a long sigh. His hands reached down to cover hers, as he possessively stroked himself against her padded curves. His hardness was in direct contrast to her softness. The head of his *dolon* skimmed between her breasts. His breathing grew ragged. He pulled back to rub the head against her swelling nipple.

Her breasts were already incredibly sensitive from lightly bouncing against her woolen tunic on horseback all day. The reddened head of his *dolon* and her stiff pink nipple met. The two were well paired, both were flushed, sensation rich and eager to be touched. He pressed the head firmly against the tip of her breast and slowly rubbed it back and forth across her nipple. The sensation felt incredibly intimate. Her nipple stood hard.

His breath hissed through clenched teeth. Impulsively his fist grabbed the shaft and milked it. A drop of fluid welled from the tip. He struggled to control himself, almost holding his breath as he watched a single warm droplet slowly fall onto her skin. He rubbed the head against her, circling her nipple until it was slick. He gently pinched the glistening tip and tugged it upward.

She gasped as a sharply ecstatic sensation passed through her. Her hands cupped her breasts and pushed them higher, letting him know he was free to take her this way if it pleased him. She offered the smooth valley between her breasts. "Finish if you're ready."

He gulped a quick breath as if badly tempted. His hips rocked forward and took one final stroke between her breasts. His legs trembled. "I want to come inside you." He looked at her hopefully. "I've been dreaming of it."

The blood rushed between her thighs at his blunt confession. Of course she would allow it. She realized she was already drenched at the thought of him moving inside her and knew she would eagerly do anything he asked. Any or all acts would be welcome and sacred with Atellus. She simply wanted to open to him and share everything. She asked softly, wanting to completely surrender to the moment, "How do you want me?"

"I want you aware." His hands gathered her closer and scooped her upward. He held her tightly against his chest.

She found herself looking into the soft expression in his eyes.

His fingertips grazed her shoulder as he spoke in a soft, low voice. "I've been a stranger to the women I've loved and to the women I've had in my life. I want something more from you. I've been the unwanted suitor. I've been a dutiful husband.

I've been a *dominor* but I've never been myself. You could offer that to me. I know you're strong enough to be my match."

She felt a slight stirring of anxiety. She worried if she could return this level of passion and honesty. She was terrified at the thought she may discover she was broken in ways that might never be mended. The desire to bolt to freedom rose inside. "This secret is for tonight only," she whispered hurriedly.

The edge of his lip slightly smiled. "I don't think that will prove true, do you?" His gaze searched her eyes. "You will be mine tomorrow as much as you are mine tonight." He paused. "A millennia from now this moment will stand as a perfect act. I ask only that you respect me, treat me decently and see me clearly."

When phrased this way, she knew she could do that and much more. "And what else?"

His hand reached for his *baldric*, which lay on the ground beside them. He removed his *pugio* and held the heavy leather belt in front of her face. "I want you to trust me."

Her breath caught. It was one thing to silently agree to be bound and taken on his bed furs as a way to avoid responsibility for the act. It was another to openly acknowledge she wanted this.

He gently brushed the belt across the side of her cheek. "Your willing surrender is a privilege to both of us that you must ask for."

Her heart beat faster. She pressed her palms together and offered her wrists. "Please." She spoke the word so softly it almost floated unheard into the darkness.

His hand clapped around her wrists. His large hand easily spanned both her wrists in a single grasp. His gaze locked on to hers as he wound the leather belt around her wrists and buckled the ends. When he was finished, his hand capped hers. His steady gaze seemed to openly gage her reaction.

She sighed at the surprising sensations of the restraint. It did not feel oppressive. In a way, it was oddly freeing. The snug compression the belt provided was actually very soothing. The leather felt heavy on her wrists and bound her almost to her elbows. Its bronze buckle felt immense as she lifted her wrists to her nose. She now noticed the expertly crafted leather smelled of cedar and almond oil blended with the acrid scent of the bronze fittings. She became highly aware of the pulse in her wrists. Her bound wrists informed her spirit, *I'm here and fully present, nothing shall distract me from you, Dominus*. A tiny shiver of excitement raced through her that made her want to jump out of her skin. This was her *dominus's* belt. This was the belt that rubbed a callous on his hipbone. This was the belt that worked in his service, every day holding his *pugio*. This was a magic belt that would allow her to give more of herself than merely her body.

He stretched her arms high above her head and bowed her back onto the furs.

She felt giddy almost dizzy as she sank into the furs.

His weight settled across her. His mouth brushed against her lips. "I want everything. Will you agree to that?"

She gazed into his eyes, barely nodding her head.

He slowly lifted his weight off her and sat up. "I want to undress you and look at you." His hands reached for her *braccae*. He untied the drawstring and tugged them down her legs.

She carefully kicked her feet free of the woolen trousers.

He knelt in front of her and gazed at her lovingly. His hands gently stroked the curves of her hips before wrapping his hands around her and lifting her toward him. "Watch." He commanded her to look at him.

She looked up at him as he parted her thighs and held himself poised in front of her sheath. Her pulse raced. Her fingers knotted nervously together overhead.

He rubbed the head of his *dolon* against her *gemmare*. A shuddering thrill passed through her. She was so wet, more so than she had ever felt.

His eyes hooded as he slowly stroked his *dolon* against her. "Are you mine?" he asked softly.

She arched upward. "Yes."

He gently lifted her hips and sank his *dolon* slowly inside her.

She arched upward as the crown slid easily inside followed by the warm stretch of his thickening shaft until he completely filled her.

He sank up to his testes, yet he tried to press deeper. A low groan rattled deep in his chest. Heat radiated off his big body. For a moment he tensed and held himself perfectly still. His eyelashes fluttered erratically. He exhaled a deep breath and curled his torso forward, arching over her. His hands gently stroked the length of her bound arms. His hands sought out hers. His fingers locked around her hands. His hips pumped slowly as he gently took possession of her.

She sighed and let her limbs fall limp beneath him. There was nothing more to do but fully surrender. The muscles of her sheath grasped at him to hold him tight, but he was so slick he easily slipped away from her only to plunge slowly inside her again. If she tipped her hips at the right angle his wet *dolon* dragged against her *gemmare* and drove her mad with desire. She wanted him to keep moving exactly as he was.

His rhythm increased. His head tipped back.

She kept her eyes open and allowed herself to see everything. She glanced up at his tousled dark hair and furrowed brow. She allowed herself to feel everything, especially his warm breath against her skin and the excited sounds of his racing breath. This moment was so unlike the past when she escaped the act and floated far away from her body, intent on seeing and feeling nothing. She was anchored to her body now. As he moved inside her, his leather *baldric*, his warm hands and sheer determination pinned her to the spot.

His lips gently brushed against her ear. His breath panted in a heated rush. His ecstatic sounds filled her consciousness. His moans seemed especially emotional. She tipped her head away from him and realized some of those sounds were actually hers.

She had been panting for breath and softly moaning and had not realized it. The boundary between them had blurred so.

His muscles tensed. The motion of his hips sped to short, fast thrusts.

She knew he was reaching a crisis and took advantage of his tempo. She rode his wave. She arched beneath him, wantonly rubbing her body against him. Her *gemmare* and her nipples stood hard. The intense friction persisted just long enough.

He finished with a gripping, tensing growl.

She came too. The rush was incredible. Heated ripples traveled outward from her sheath to her toes and scalp. Surprisingly the pulsing contractions continued on and on. A warm flush heated her skin. She stroked frantically against him, feeling the sensations sharpen. There was a fleeting moment when she thought, *I could go even higher and let this go on forever*. But of course she couldn't.

He exhaled a long, shuddering sigh. A few moments later he relaxed on top of her and wrapped his hands around her shoulders. All tension left his body as he melted on top of her.

Her heart pounded against her ribs. She was left panting for breath. Her body still pulsed on edge from the certainty the slightest stimulation could bring another wave of bliss. Her hips thrust longingly upward hoping for more.

He heaved his body onto his elbows with an anguished groan and readjusted his weight. He pressed himself inside her. They lay perfectly still for what felt like an eternity, each of them afraid to move and lose contact. He still occupied her body but they were both so drenched he was having a difficult time staying inside her without slipping free. He reached for the buckle on the *baldric* to free her wrists.

"Not yet," she pleaded. "Just a moment more." She wasn't at all ready to be released.

"*Amare*." He looked down at her. Intense emotion shone in his eyes. He almost looked sad. His eyes were shining almost brimming, as if he had been deeply lost in thought and brought to the edge of tears. "Morning will come." His dark pupils perfectly reflected a crackling orange ember as it escaped the fire. "And things will change." The ember slowly floated upward and extinguished itself in the cold night sky. "Nothing lasts, does it?" he quietly muttered the words.

She suspected the statement was not addressed to her, but it made her feel a sharp pang of sadness anyway.

He bowed his head to kiss her lips. His fingers stroked her arms. He pressed himself as deeply inside her as he could go. He moved slowly on top of her. His *dolon* grew harder with each stroke. He took his time making love to her again.

She watched him through enraptured eyes as he moved reverently on top of her, taking slow, full strokes. "Atellus," she whispered. "Please free my wrists so I can touch you." She wanted nothing more at that moment than to feel his warm skin beneath her hands.

He stopped and carefully unbuckled the *baldric* and freed her wrists. He cautiously set the belt away from the heat of the fire.

She lowered her arms, feeling a mild rushing sensation of prickling pins in her fingertips. The sensation was thrilling and provided a stingy little reminder of her promise to surrender. Her lowered hands reached out to cup his muscular butt and pull him closer. She held him tightly on top of her.

“You’re mine until morning,” he whispered.

She floated away on that thought.

## Chapter Ten

The fire burned down to a pile of glowing red rubble.

Atellus slept soundly beside her.

She lay awake on the bed furs, staring up at the shimmering, inky-black sky. The stars blinked back at her in cool shades of palest blue. Tonight there seemed to be more stars than ever. A bright path of stars filled the center of the sky. She wondered if it was true, if there was a human soul attached to each star. Everyone she had ever known, ever would know or ever lived was somehow attached to this river of stars sparkling above her head.

Atellus lay beside her on his belly with his ropey arm thrown across her.

The night had grown cold. It was pleasant to lie beside the warm body of another, though she could not sleep. He was deeply asleep. His sleeping face bore a deceptively sweet appearance that was at odds with the keen-eyed man she knew by daylight.

She knew she wasn't going to get any sleep with someone lying beside her. She fully accepted it. She had been unable to fall asleep beside others for almost three years. Even the presence of women kept her on edge. She feared being surprised in her sleep. During her time in Plutonium's compound, she would wait for the other *domesticus* to fall asleep before wandering away from the *servitus* quarters. She was in the habit of seeking out a quiet corner in a storage room or even a planted field, anywhere apart from others would do. Once alone, she could sleep. The benefits outweighed the risks.

Now she looked at Atellus in his sleep, wishing she could fall asleep beside him and enjoy the security of another's company. She sighed at the irony of Atellus of all people should be sleeping peacefully beside her. How did he do it? How had he come to trust her and move forward so easily?

She shifted uncomfortably beneath the warm weight of his arm. She picked up his heavily muscled arm and gently moved it to his side. She sat up and left the comfort of the bed furs. The air was very cold beyond the blanket of fur.

Atellus immediately woke. "Are you all right?" He rubbed his eyes with the heel of his palm.

She gathered her clothing and quickly dressed. "I can't sleep and if I don't get a little sleep, today's ride will be miserable."

"You're not leaving?" He sat. A look of concern creased his brow. "It's not morning yet." His hands reached for her. "Stay, I want you safely beside me."

Her fingers gently brushed across his hand. "It will be dawn soon. I need a little sleep. I left the pack mule alone."

"I don't care about the pack mule." He frowned irritably.

She silently prayed Atellus could understand her deep need to test her freedom. "I need to be alone."

His hand firmly gripped her wrist. "This is *ludificare*. It's dark and cold. There could be *latros* lurking." He finally registered the resolute look in her eyes. His hand slowly released her wrist. He gathered up one of the bed furs and gently handed it to her. "Take it. Stay warm and bring some embers with you." He spoke sullenly. "I'll see you on the road tomorrow."

"Thank you." She wrapped the fur around her shoulders. His body heat and warm scent still clung to the soft fur.

He picked up a branch and stirred it through the shifting coals of the fire. "How far are you walking?"

"Not far. I'm just around the bend."

The dry leaves on the tip of the branch easily caught fire. He held it in the fire until the wood ignited. He handed the lit branch to her. "I'll fetch the pack mule. You can stay here in a warm bed." His eyes bargained with her.

She was tempted but accepted the branch and backed away. "Good night."

His lips parted as if he was ready to speak but he remained silent.

She turned and walked into the cold darkness of earliest morning. His *castra* was not far from the road. She had only a short distance to walk, but it felt vast. She considered turning around and rejoining him, but she knew she shouldn't. After what they shared this night, she desperately needed to prove to herself and to him she still owned her independence. She had gone as far she could tonight. At this moment, she could go no further. She admitted it would feel good someday to belong to him completely, committing to all things, accepting his love, trust and sleeping peacefully beside him. Maybe someday.

A blaze of light caught her eye. She glanced up in time to see the coppery-orange tail of a falling star as it streaked across the sky. The star was especially bright with a golden, glowing head. It burned brighter and traveled farther across the sky than any falling star she had ever seen. The beautiful star fell to the west. For some reason she thought of her mother. Her mother had been charismatic, brash and unapologetic about her many hard choices and absolutely courageous about defending them. Her mother had been only thirty-seven summers when she took her life. Thirty-seven years seemed far into the future, but she knew it wasn't. Part of her recognized the truth that life would come and go quickly. The time for making clear choices was now.

A second star not as brilliant but just as beautiful shot across the sky—she was convinced it was her sister. A third star streaked overhead, her uncle Arn who had stepped forward in the name of his dead brother King Prasutagus and treated the queen's commands with unquestioning respect. A fourth star traveled past and she knew it was her patient nursemaid Brigit. Another star streaked overhead then another and another. Soon a shower of stars beyond count raced toward the west. She realized she owed so many so much. So many Celts were gone from this earth. She was perhaps



the last of her family. She had done the right thing in enduring what she had. She had made the right choice by choosing to live. She now knew it was essential someone in their group live long enough to tell the tale.

\* \* \* \* \*

Atellus found her the next morning asleep on the ground. Her fire looked cold and charred as if it had never really lit. He was grateful she had the fur and the day was growing warmer. He leaned over her and poked her shoulder with an impatient finger.

She jolted awake, looking bleary-eyed.

He hunkered beside her. "Ride with me." He held his hand out. "The sun is already above the tree line."

She lifted her chin and squinted into the daylight. "Go on without me. I'll catch up."

He smiled. "I knew you'd say that." He handed her a leather pouch filled with almonds and dried figs. He straightened his legs and rose. "I'll be looking over my shoulder for you."

She waved him away and covered her face with the bed fur.

He turned and strolled toward the road. As he walked away, he casually called out to her. "Did you see the star shower?" He waited for her response but she didn't answer and assumed she had not heard him with her head buried beneath the fur. He shrugged. It didn't matter anyway. It was merely a beautiful thing to see though he had felt it was of incredible significance at the time.

He mounted Rubus and rode slowly down the road with the pack mules in tow. The day seemed especially lovely. He even glimpsed the golden flash of orioles in the trees. He rode until noon, continually looking over his shoulder to see if she was following him but he saw no sign of her on the road.

The dirt road he rode on became a *viae rusticae*. The packed gravel crunched beneath Rubus' hooves. For the first time in many days he saw his first stone *milliarium*. The compact block of limestone stood silently beside the road but spoke much. In the short space of a horse's graceful stride, he left the wilderness and reentered Romanized Belgica. The adventure was over. He noticed the terrain looked very familiar and realized he had ridden the back roads to the edge of his jurisdiction. Wooded roads gave way to open fields and vineyards. The sky opened up as well. Blue skies and sunlight replaced dappled forests and shaded canyons. Farms and villages lined the road ahead.

Soon he would see his daughter Rosa. He would give Rosa the ivory hair combs, Antonia's ivory *fibula* and a handful of trinkets he had hurriedly gathered in Plutonium's compound. His real life would begin again. The return trip home was nearly complete. The standoffs, the compromises, the drama and the passion of traveling with Rutila were coming to an end. He realized how lonely he was. For both his and Rosa's sakes he knew he should remarry and live a stable life.

He finally saw Rutila riding far behind in the distance. He stopped and let Rubus and the pack mules graze by the roadside while he waited for her to catch up.

She seemed surprised he had waited for her. "You needn't have waited. I would have found you on the road this evening."

He knew his expression was grave from the suddenly somber look reflected in her face.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"My compound is in the next valley." His heart was burdened. He knew Rutila would never willingly consent to enter a Roman compound ever again. "I should say goodbye to you now."

She bowed her head. "Goodbye."

A moment of panic washed over him. His heart raced. He was terribly disappointed she had not offered to kiss him or insist he accompany her the entire way to the coast. He wanted to say he was glad they had met and he was grateful they had shared so much, even the painful things. It had been an intense education for him. He now knew himself in a completely new way. He knew the limits of what he would and would not do to another human being. He was not perfect but he could live with his conscience. Many things about his life that had been mere conjecture before he left Belgica were now proven facts. Columba had never loved him and he was grateful for that truth. He knew with certainty he was no longer a true citizen of Rome and his spirit was not corrupt. He had shown himself fully to a lover and been accepted. He silently thanked Rutila for that. He was not a cruel or violent man at heart. He knew that now. His life in Belgica was the right life. There were many areas of his life he would never have to wonder about or suffer doubt over ever again.

He looked at Rutila's coppery hair in the sunlight and committed the dazzling shade of golden-red to memory. He knew she was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. There would never be another redheaded *ferus* lover like Rutila. He suspected a *ferus* thing like Rutila would grow apathetic and fade if forced to live behind compound walls. He wondered who would or could take care of her. What was her fate? He now fervently hoped she would not stab herself to death when she returned to Britannia. "Where will you go?" he asked softly.

"I don't know," she answered honestly. "I'm no longer certain I should go home to Icenia." She hesitated for a moment. Her fingers grazed the faint scratch mark on her throat left behind by the broken *torques*. The scratch mark was faint and had nearly healed. "Am I really free to do as I wish?" Her chin tipped upward.

"You are completely free," he assured her.

As they spoke a *cuniculus* darted onto the road. Rubus and the pack mules actually stepped aside for the bold little creature as it hopped between Rubus' hooves. The *cuniculus* stopped and made eye contact with Rutila. It looked up at her with liquid brown eyes. For a *cuniculus* it was odd. The small creature seemed to have no fear of being seen in the open. It defiantly sat in the road, staring at them as if it feared no

hawk or crushing hoof. The *cuniculus* turned and darted straight down the road. It did not run for cover as it should have. It raced down the middle of the paved road that led to his compound.

Rutila gasped. She stared for many moments as the *cuniculus* ran into the distance, never once leaving the road. She looked at him as if she required an explanation to such an odd event. She licked her lips nervously and spoke softly. "If I am free to do as I wish, I choose to go home with you, *Dominus*."

His breath caught. Rutila sat on her little pack mule, looking at him with unwavering eyes. Her gaze was so steady he almost felt confronted. He did not know if he should feel joyful or wary. She was no longer his *ancilla*. He really didn't know what she was or even who she was. For certain she was an unpredictable creature entering his life and his home. She was becoming a part of his future. She was a *mysteria* walking under his roof and floating past the compound's sometimes sad but peaceful walls. What had he brought upon himself? "If you come home with me, I ask that you sleep beside me and share my *lectus*. Will you agree to that?"

"Of course." A brilliant smile lit her face. Her entire appearance lightened and transformed.

The sight of her first true smile dazzled his eyes. He realized he did not yet know her but he was eager to know more.

"Let's go home." She spurred her mule to a fast trot and jostled past him and Rubus. She continued up the hilly road that led to his valley. They rode in stunned silence toward his compound.

He was almost afraid to speak and break the spell. He did not wish to say or do anything that might frighten her away. He let her lead the way, quietly watching as she led.

She continually glanced over her shoulder at him. Her copper waves bounced as she rode. She smiled slyly at him as if she were very sure of herself or even plotting something. Her attitude was both intriguing and alarming. At least she was not dull. He doubted he would ever tire of her. He knew he could love her with all of his heart if they could just reach a point where they completely forgave and trusted each other.

As they approached the gates to his compound his *domus-administrator* and *domesticus* poured out to greet him. He was welcomed home with affection and respect. His daughter Rosa was called for. Her shrill little voice could be heard excitedly squealing within the main hall as a nursemaid struggled to dress her in a clean tunic.

The *domus-administrator* approached Rutila as she sat seated upon the pack mule. He waited politely for his *dominor* to introduce him to the visiting lady.

Atellus hesitated for an awkward moment to say anything. He did not know how to introduce Rutila. He wanted to be careful about what he said. He did not want her to suffer the stigma of having once been a captured *servus*. He did not know what he could safely say about her that she would not rudely contradict in front of his entire *domus*. He began to clumsily say, "This young woman is..."

Rutila raised a righteous hand into the air and interrupted him. "I am Rhiannon of Icenī, liaison to Britannia." Her voice was regal and steady. She looked directly at him instead of the *domus-administrator* as she spoke. "I will require a *lavare* and a clean *stola*." She gave the order to the *domus-administrator* as imperially as any Roman matron, dismissing him politely.

The *domus-administrator* hurried off to do Lady Rhiannon's bidding.

He looked at her in amazement. He spoke softly so no one else could hear. "Rhiannon is not your real name, is it?" He began to suspect the truth. Was she truly who he thought she might be? Was she one of the very few Celtic nobles to escape the slaughter? He questioned his right to possess such a prize.

She nodded her head and whispered, "Rhiannon is the name I shall embrace and learn to love. I hope some good can come from this. I've lost my old life, perhaps I can be useful in a new one." She reached out and stroked the sleeve of his tunic, as if she needed his physical presence to safely ground her in her new role.

He basked in her affectionate gesture. He dismounted Rubus and lifted her down from the pack mule. He felt her relax in his arms.

He led Rhiannon into his home to meet his daughter and live under his roof. He was surprised and pleased she had listened to him and taken his words to heart about Britannia's need for an ambassador. He looked at her as if he saw her clearly for the first time. She still looked stubborn and defiant. Perhaps now, he hoped, she could focus her wrath more constructively on the greater injustices of the world, instead of focusing her wrath on him.

Rosa's excited voice echoed in the hallway beyond. The sound of her footsteps pounded toward them.

Rhiannon whispered in his ear, "I hope I'm not being a traitor to my people."

He smiled warmly at her. "We've learned to get along. Tomorrow the world may change. Let's wait and see."

## Afterword

Though many of the events and names mentioned in this story are based on actual persons and events, this is a work of fiction. This story was written to serve as entertainment and metaphor and not as a historical account.

The name Boudica means “victory”. The legends of Queen Boudica are many, but most of the familiar images associated with her were created to suit the desires of the Victorian age.

Victors write history and the people of Iceni—pronounced “I-kee-ni”—possessed no written language. All of Queen Boudica’s story was retold through Roman eyes and will never be known in its completion.

To research this story, I drew on the Roman historian Tacitus’ accounts. His accounts are closest to the source. His father-in-law Gnaeus Julius Agricola served in Britain as a military tribune during the Celt uprising and most likely bore witness to actual events. Tacitus’ own father may have served as the procurator of Belgica and Germania—modern Belgium and Germany—hence his special condemnation of Catus Decianus’ avaricious behavior. Later in life, acting as consul, Tacitus eloquently prosecuted fellow Roman Marius Priscus, Proconsul of Africa, for corruption. For much of his life Tacitus was dutifully on guard to concisely report and record Roman history and corruption.

Of special note, Tacitus makes the first secular mention of Jesus Christ. He cites Jesus in his *Annals* in connection to Emperor Nero’s persecution of Christians.

History makes much of the image of Queen Boudica’s raped and defiled daughters being paraded before the enraged Celts, but then those same daughters are abandoned to the mists of time. They are reported to have entered the final battle alongside their mother in a war chariot, but Tacitus makes no mention of their ultimate fate or even their names.

I also drew on the Roman historian Cassius Dio’s more detailed but further removed and thus more questionable account. Tacitus says Queen Boudica is reported to have poisoned herself to avoid capture. Dio’s simply says Boudica fell sick and died. The exact cause of Boudica’s death and the site of the final battle are in dispute. The daughters of Boudica were likely to have been girls in their mid-teens who suffered the same fate as their mother. Dio claims Queen Boudica was given a lavish funeral but the final fate of her daughters went unaddressed by Tacitus. The real story is likely grim, as it was for most Celtic noblewomen, but Tacitus’ omission opened a door for me. I dearly wanted a daughter to escape the Celtic genocide, slip through the cracks and live long enough to forgive.

Katalina Leon.

## About the Author

Writing is a new love of mine. I recently arrived at Ellora's Cave after feeling inspired to share my overblown vision of reality with my friends. I started my life as a fine art painter and illustrator but became frustrated that I couldn't crowd everything I wanted to say onto a canvas. I was forced to put down the paintbrush and pick up the pen to explain myself in greater detail. I've been fortunate to live an adventurous life with the love of my life, and fellow artist, at my side. We share our lives with a wonderful son and a very sweet border collie.

Ps: I still paint. Just because I have a new love doesn't mean I'm ready to abandon an old one. One can never collect enough old "loves" or have enough joy in life.

Katalina welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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