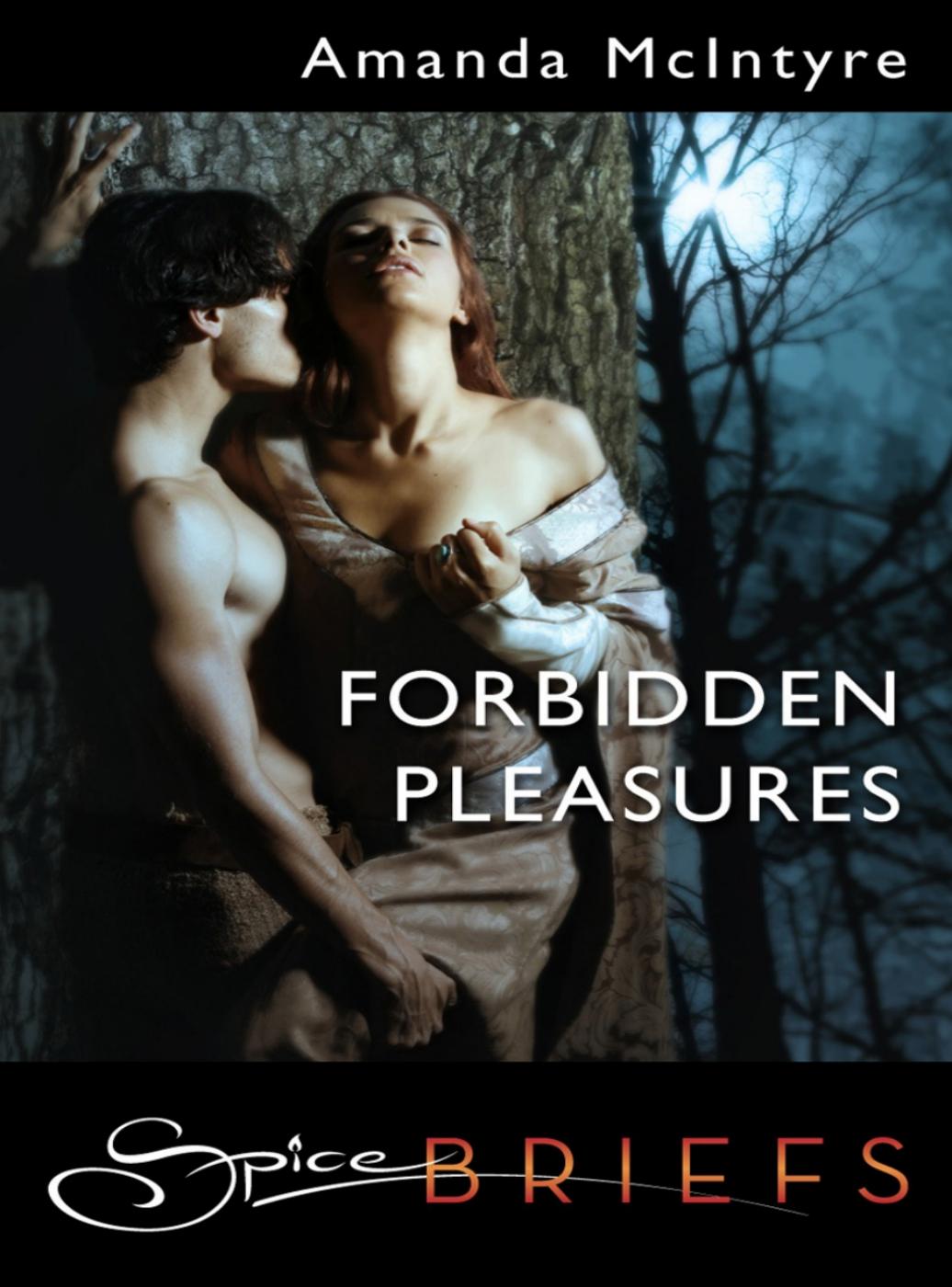


Amanda McIntyre

A man and a woman are shown in a romantic embrace in a dark forest at night. The man, on the left, is shirtless and has his hand on the woman's waist. The woman, on the right, is wearing a light-colored, off-the-shoulder dress and has her eyes closed, leaning her head back. The background features a large tree trunk and bare branches against a dark sky with a bright light source, possibly the moon, visible through the trees.

FORBIDDEN
PLEASURES

Spice **BRIEFS**

Forbidden Pleasures

Amanda McIntyre

Spice

Britannia, 400 A.D.

Torin has dedicated his life to battle, first as a Roman warrior and now defending his native Britannia from the Saxons. Finding pleasure with a woman is far from his mindâ€”until he encounters Alyson, a flame-haired Celtic servant who arouses his desire like never before.

Alyson is also drawn to the strong yet gentle warrior, especially when she feels magic in his touch. How could she resist his allure when the gods themselves compel her to be with him? But while fate may have a special destiny in store for Torin, it is Alysonâ€™s choice to act on their passionâ€™.

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Prologue

Britannia, 500 A.D.

“You are certain he is of my blood?” General Ambrosius stated, studying the soldier’s eyes. You could tell the character of a man by the look in his eyes, a skill honed from years on the field of battle. He also had the reputation of being meticulous. To be any less, would have meant certain death for him and his men. He’d searched far and wide to pin down the recent rumors of a Romano-Brit warrior with a questionable lineage. Few others knew Vortigern, the former High king of Britannia, as well as Ambrosius or the king’s insatiable lust for women. And this rumor, if it was true, could change the course of Britannia forever.

The guard pressed his clenched fist to his breast in homage to his liege. “I found the village where he was born. They say that Commander Torin’s half sister is the Saxon executioner’s apprentice, but Vortigern is not her father.” The guard kept his eyes lowered. “There is confirmation from the husband of an old midwife in the village who delivered the boy child. He said that his wife went to her grave carrying the secret that she was sworn to keep.”

“You imply that Commander Torin is Vortigern’s bastard child?” General Ambrosius drew his own conclusion. He’d known, of course, of his half brother’s horrific reign. At a vulnerable time for the Brits, Vortigern had stepped in proclaiming himself high king. A brutal, greedy and cruel ruler, even to his own people, it was possible that Vortigern had numerous bastard children throughout the lands he’d lost. Though none, perhaps in a strange twist of fate that was now an esteemed Roman warrior. Even more strange, it was said that an unknown Celt, a rebel warrior against Vortigern’s bloody reign, put an end to the high king’s violent reign, and then disappeared.

“Is there any more to report?” The General asked, anxious to find this great half-Celtic, half-Roman warrior. The general wondered if this Commander Torin had any idea of his potential lineage.

The young warrior’s fierce loyalty to Rome had brought his skill and leadership to the attention of many—especially the Roman emperor. It was said this Torin was a loner, trusting few, and only those with whom he’d trained and gone into battle. General Ambrosius had heard that Commander Torin was a physical man, unafraid of confrontation, barbaric in his methods and having a keen head for justice. Such a man would serve Ambrosius’s purposes well to have such a man at his side to rally the Celts together in battle against the Saxon horde. In recent months, a number of Romano-Celt leaders, what was left of those driven from their villages, migrated to General Ambrosius’s villa, knowing he was a sympathizer to their plight. They’d offered their servitude in return for his help in waging war to claim back their land. Though Ambrosius was sympathetic to their suffering, he was aging and

without the numbers of men to face the Saxon army.

“I may speak freely, General?”

“Go on.” General Ambrosius directed the soldier as he held his goblet for the lovely servant girl, daughter of one of his finest Celt workers. In fact, the entire family had worked in his household for a number of months. She filled his cup, her smile shy. She was young, fair and polished, her skin scrubbed fresh of paint, unlike the custom of most Roman women. Ambrosius smiled at the young woman, her rich, fiery hair looped over her shoulder in a single braid. With a gentle touch, he reached out and traced his finger along the gentle curve of his jaw. She slipped away, eyes lowered. Celtic women, he’d discovered, had a simplicity about them that was beautiful in its own way and their loyalty was as fierce as any man’s.

“It is true that the Commander was indeed raised in the area, his knowledge of the terrain would be an advantage in battle against the Saxon ruler. There is more to confirm my findings.”

“Yes?”

“There is rumor that Commander Torin and his men living in secret caves in the mountains, hiding village survivors and training them.”

“Perhaps planning an attack?” the general said, thinking aloud.

“That would appear to be one possibility, sir.”

General Ambrosius raised his eyebrow. Retirement had made him too easily distracted by earthly pleasures. He was tired of the fighting. Still, these wandering souls were counting on him. They felt abandoned by Rome, left to the murderous rampage of the Saxons.

The bottom line was that he needed a strong leader and Commander Torin and his men were *ex-bucellari*, the best of Romans’ trained armies, reserved only for high-ranking Roman officers.

As to the matter regarding the future of Britannia, and who would be its next ruler, that would be decided on the field of battle. “See to it that he and his men receive my invitation to visit at my villa. Let them know that I wish to discuss with them, our mutual dissatisfaction with present conditions in Britannia. General Ambrosius stood, looking at the view of the lush green valley beyond his gardens. He lifted his glass in hope of Lord Aeglech’s demise and the fall of his bloody reign.

Chapter One

The woman's flesh was silky smooth against Alyson's hands, which were calloused from hard labor. She wondered if Tulia, great-niece of her master, General Ambrosius, was aware of how rough her hands were. More conscious of that fact, she tried not to press too hard against the woman's flesh.

Since the wealthy woman's arrival three days before, Alyson had been assigned to her personally. She'd helped to fit and sew a new gown, bathed her daily, including generous oil massages, and had fixed and served her meals—in essence, attended to her every need. Tulia's tastes were picky and extravagant. A woman used to finer luxuries, thinking only of herself. If it were not for the arrival of one of Rome's most noted young warriors, Alyson doubted if Tulia would be caught dead out here in the Gaelic countryside, surrounded by barbaric Celtic servants. Just why she was there remained a mystery, but the servants said that her father had sent her to keep an eye on what Ambrosius was up to. Tulia showed no respect, even to her uncle, and so received none in return. Most only tolerated her presence and tried to avoid her unruly temper.

A quiet sigh brought Alyson from her reverie and she glanced down at Tulia's softly rounded backside. She was beautiful. There was no dispute in that, if one did not bother to go deeper than the surface. Every day, she lavished her skin with perfumed oils and her hair was brushed in a nightly routine, always by a male servant. Perfectly applied, she lined her dark eyes above and below with smoky dark kohl and painted her lips and cheeks with the dusty rose hue of crushed earth powders. Whatever the reason for Tulia being sent to visit her uncle, she was taking every preparation to impress him.

Alyson had never before sensed such a vivid contrast between herself and another woman. Her hands were dry, chafed from tending the wash, minding the garden. Her skin was golden brown, parched by the sun, and her fiery red hair knew not the scent of roses, but was washed in a sacred pool deep in the woods.

“More oil, and be certain it has the proper balance of rose scent. I want to leave a subtle allure in the room, not overwhelm the good commander.”

“Aye, milady,” Alyson responded. Tulia had not, in the recent days since her arrival, been an easy person to please. She flaunted her wealth and royal lineage, using it in selfish fits of temper when things weren't to her liking. Because she was of the general's blood, the entire staff had made the effort to please her as best as they could, trying to avoid any backlash from the general.

With a disgruntled sigh, Tulia flipped on her back. It was an exquisitely odd occurrence for a routine massage. Alyson dropped her hands to her sides, looking down as she awaited her orders. From the corner of her eye, she could see Tulia's dark eyes, almost sinister, glittering with wickedness. She knew her body

was alluring, too perfect for any man to resist. Her breasts, pale and creamy, their rosy tips peaking atop the soft mounds of flesh, thrust upward in proud display.

“Continue,” she ordered bitterly as though perturbed she had to ask.

Compliant to her request, Alyson continued, having earlier in the day been the object of Tulia’s lightning wrath. With a snarling accusation that she’d purposely brought her too tepid a wine, she’d thrown the goblet at Alyson, barely missing her head.

Alyson tipped the delicate, long-necked pitcher that held the warmed oil, letting the oil drizzle over the slope of Tulia’s belly, causing her to squirm in sensuous bliss. Alyson kept her eyes focused on her hands, viewing the task as a command, trying to ignore the whispered sighs of arousal coming from Tulia’s lips. She was not oblivious to the pleasures of the human body, but to her, such things were a gift from the gods, meant for satisfying the one intended for you by the gods. She’d never before touched a woman for purposes of pleasure. But she’d heard the stories of the Roman excesses—in food, drink and carnal pleasures. Some of the stories paled in comparison to the thought that Celts were barbaric in nature.

She moved her palms—saturated with warm oil—over Tulia’s ribs, brushing lightly over her breasts, and moved quickly to her shoulders and neck. The thought of such intimacies with a man Alyson had now and again pondered. She wondered how passion could be achieved with another woman and the thought frightened her, but not as much as Tulia’s demanding ways.

“You have family here? Is that true?” she purred quietly, her hands relaxed at her sides.

“Aye, milady. They work the fields. General Ambrosius has been very kind to them, and to me.”

“How kind?” she asked, casting a curious look at Alyson.

Curious to know what she implied with her question, Alyson guarded well her tongue. If Tulia could find reason to belittle her uncle, Alyson guessed that she would do so in a heartbeat to gain favor. “A good home and fair wages. He is a just and noble man,” Alyson replied.

The young woman snorted. “My father says that will be his ruin, consorting with the barbarians to save land that by rights belongs to Rome.”

Alyson quelled the urge to squeeze the woman’s flesh tight until it left an ugly bruise.

“Not that all the Celts are *entirely* barbaric, of course.” She gave Alyson a condescending smile. “So you are saying that my good uncle has never laid a finger on you?”

Alyson gave Tulia a side glance and continued to perform her duty.

“Oh, not that I expect you to admit to such a thing. Of course, you may already have a man that you wouldn’t want to find out. I know that if my father ever found out that I had offered my body to a man he’d strip me of my flesh.”

Alyson silently continued, the pressure of her fingertips increasing slightly.

â€œYour hands are rough,â€ Tulia stated quietly. â€œMuch like a manâ€™s.â€ She closed her eyes, her dark lashes fanning black against her pale cheeks.

â€œMy apologies, milady,â€ Alyson mumbled. â€œPerhaps you would prefer someone elseâ€â€

Tulia grabbed Alysonâ€™s wrists, her dangerous, ebony gaze holding her hostage.

â€œThey are perfect, in fact. Just the way I like hands to be.â€ She covered her breasts with Alysonâ€™s hands, sandwiched beneath her own, and began to move them, caressing her fleshy mounds.

â€œDo you enjoy such pleasures?â€ she sighed breathlessly.

Unsure of what to do short of casting a druid spell on the woman, Alyson tolerated the motion, unaffected, but apparently not so for Tulia, as she watched the womanâ€™s eyes flutter. A look of ecstasy washed over her face.

â€œTouch meâ€there.â€

She pushed one of Alysonâ€™s hands lower, where Alyson had, in her morning regime, shaved clean the womanâ€™s triangular patch of blond hair.

â€œI want oil there, between my legs,â€ Tulia demanded, parting her knees.

With the thought of what might happen to her or her family if she did not comply, Alyson slid her hand between Tuliaâ€™s thighs, repeating the massage technique she used on the rest of her.

The beautiful womanâ€™s eyebrows pressed together, her body writhing with pleasure. â€œHarder,â€ she whispered, her teeth raking over her lower lip, as she lifted her hips against Alysonâ€™s palm. There was a moment when Alysonâ€™s mouth grew dry, caught up in the sensual bliss, but most of her just wanted to complete the task so she could move on with her day.

Tuliaâ€™s breathing grew shallow, catching with the rhythmic movement of hips. â€œNo, no,â€ she muttered angrily. A low growl of agitation crawled from her throat.

She knocked Alysonâ€™s hand out of the way, sending the oil vase crashing to the floor. Grasping one of her breasts, Tulia shoved the other hand between her legs, stroking herself in unashamed wild abandon.

Alyson attempted to avoid watching the woman lost in her own passion and bent down to pick up the shards of broken pottery. Gasping, exaggerated groans flew from Tuliaâ€™s lips and the sound of her hips slapping against the marble table sounded next to Alysonâ€™s ear. A moment later, Tuliaâ€™s breath caught, followed by a prolonged scream that echoed in the small windowless room. Then all was silent, save the quiet sound of Tulia regaining control of her breathing.

â€œNext time, you will find me an adequate servant to care for my needs.â€

Alyson stayed on her knees, the slick-oiled pottery shards dripping between her fingers. â€œYes, milady.â€

â€œI will be in the *tepidarium*. Bring me refreshments.â€

â€œYes, milady.â€ She kept her gaze down, hearing Tulia slide from the table. After a moment she stood, believing she was alone. Her eyes met Tuliaâ€™s,

whoâ€™d stopped at the door and was looking back at her, her towel draped over her elbow. She offered Alyson a deadly smile.

“œdo like the roughness of your hands.” She licked her lips and continued on her way.

Alyson turned her hand and dumped the bits into a nearby urn. The woman was insatiable. Her greed equal to her lust, sheâ€™d bedded more than half the servants since her arrival, insisting on massages daily. She came from the roots of Rome, where people were used to taking what they wanted, when they wanted it and by force if necessary. Hadnâ€™t their forefathers seen that happen? And then when another power greater threatened what theyâ€™d taken, they suddenly had other wars to fight and pulled out all their troops, leaving hundreds of villages at the mercy of the Saxon. General Ambrosius, however, was not like most Romans. He was sympathetic to their plight and, Alyson believed, was looking for ways to help the Celtic people. His niece, on the other hand, was a different matter altogether. Alyson gathered the towels left on the floor from the morning baths. No, Tulia was well versed in how to take what she wanted and gave little thought it seemed to giving back. The imbalance in her spirit was volatile and Alyson knew how dangerous such a woman could be. Moreover, Alyson pondered why the general in Rome would choose now, of all times, to send his daughter for a visit to her uncle? Perhaps the rumors were true that somewhere in the mountains small bands of villagers had been gathering in greater numbers to face the deadly Saxon. Sheâ€™d overheard her father talking to other men, but he did not discuss such things openly.

Grateful that her duties today included only the wash and serving *cena* later in the day, she was glad that the general had not requested she entertain guests with her reading of palms. This skill, and her visions, came from her druid origin, which both her mother and grandmother possessed and was nurtured at an early age. She used her powers sparingly, letting the gods dictate where and how they were to be used.

She hurried to the kitchen to see if her mother needed any help before she began the wash for the day. Tonight the general had planned a special feast for his guests, complete with sumptuous foods, music and the favors of certain village women. No doubt, it would stretch into the wee hours of the dawn. Already rumors buzzed among the servants that these men must be very special guests indeed and that the warriors were reported to have the strength of the gods and a magical power over women. Already Alysonâ€™s father had determined she was to return to the house immediately when her duties were complete.

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“œYouâ€™ve heard that the generalâ€™s niece is visiting?” Dryston grinned wickedly at Torin. “œIâ€™d bet my sword that the timing of her visit is not mere happenchance.”

Torin cast him a look of warning. Dryston, his brother by choice and not blood, was forever teasing him about his lack of adventure when it came to women. The truth was he had too many concerns on his mind to entertain such thoughts.

“I hear she is the most desired of women throughout Rome.”

“Only Rome?” Torin quipped.

Dryston offered a smile that said he knew he had gotten through to Torin. “I’ve heard, too, that her hair is like a golden sunrise and her skin pale and smooth as moonlight. That her breasts—”

Torin interrupted his spontaneous sonnet to the woman. “My poor depraved brother, do you not think of anything else?”

Dryston chuckled. “Apart from imprisonment or battle, no, sir, my mind stays readily occupied on the fairer creatures. It is one of life’s few pleasures I can afford.”

“That must cause you substantial pain, then, for you have not been engaged in any of the three in recent weeks.” Torin grinned.

“A discomfort resulting in far more dips in cold lakes than I care to number, good brother. I hope that the general’s impending retirement does not mean that his Roman hospitality wanes as well.”

Torin shook his head. In the throes of battles that seemed to have lasted for years, there had been no time to think of such things as warm, soft flesh, scented like the flowers and rain. His body tightened at the thought, but his fleshly thoughts were overturned by the memory of the countless lives lost to the cruelty of the Saxon king. He had a deep hatred for Lord Aeglech, stemming from the fact that Aeglech’s men had killed the only family he’d ever known, as well as the village he’d been raised in. After he was released from his duties to his Roman captain, it did not take Torin long to decide to return to his native people and see what he could do to save them from the barbarians attempting to swallow Britannia whole.

The aftereffect of losing their family however was different for Dryston. Equal in battle to Torin, he was fearless, but was prone to taking risks, without careful thought to their outcome. He was insistent on using his cunning and brawn to forge his way through obstacles. Often Torin wondered if Dryston was tempting fate, challenging the powers that had taken his family from him, seeking revenge for their senseless deaths.

Of course, his penchant for risk-taking, he supposed, is what ended up saving Torin’s hide. Dryston had been hunting alone, only a boy, in truth, when he stumbled upon Torin, half-frozen and mute from cold and fear, hiding in a hollow log. Not only had Dryston saved him from a bitter winter death, but he had also faced a hungry wolf in the process—or so he’d told Torin the story countless times of the great white wolf encountered that day. The truth of that day, what and how it occurred, Torin had no choice but to believe all that Dryston told him. So much of his childhood before that was a dark abyss. Torin could remember very little until the day he came upon a giant oak, its thick branches, spreading its arms wide, lifting upward to the sky. Something about it struck a familiar chord and without reason, he heard his name in the rustle of the leaves. From the shadows of his obliterated past came a name—*Torin*.

That was all of his memory that was jarred loose. The rest remained locked tight somewhere in his mind, but his stepmother, a druid, practicing in secret, believed that Torin had suffered an event so great that the gods in their kindness had blocked it from his mind. "Until you are ready to accept the truth, Torin, then your memory will be restored and you will see your purpose," she said in her wisdom.

From the night Dryston had carried him home from the frozen woods of winter, Torin had been plagued with nightmares—shadowy faces, angry sounds and crying—though he could not discern who they were or what their anguish. In time however, with the love and hard work supplied by his new family, those anguished dreams regressed further into his mind, until they were but a dull ache—a hurt that would not heal. Eventually Torin accepted that he might never know the truth of his past. Perhaps that is why he felt such empathy to the plight of the Celtic survivors. Whatever his reason, he wanted to see Lord Aeglech's reign of terror end and the fact that the powers in Rome had pulled out their troops when Britannia needed them most only fueled Torin's desire. When General Ambrosius, a well-known sympathizer to the Rom-Celts, sent word that he wished to meet, it strengthened Torin's conviction that he was not alone. With the great leader's skill and a combined militia, together perhaps it would be enough to stage a successful assault on the Saxon horde.

"Be watchful. We've no way of knowing where Aeglech might have his spies. Even wrapped in soft flesh and alluring features," Torin cautioned.

Dryston chuckled. "Duly noted, but he has already lost if he sends a female spy. It would take but one night to turn her to our side."

"Your humility astounds me," Torin joked.

"Yet another attribute that I exceed you in."

A loud gurgle emitted from Dryston's stomach. They had munched on goat cheese and brown bread much earlier in the day.

"I am famished," Dryston remarked, rubbing his stomach and searching the horizon. "You didn't tell me that he lived in the middle of nowhere. They'd ridden for miles through dense groves at the base of the hill country."

"Food and women, some warrior you are," Torin laughed.

Dryston raised an eyebrow. "Do I hear a challenge?"

Torin glanced at Dryston, knowing that his swaggering confidence was the result of being the youngest sibling of two bossy older sisters. That alone would challenge any boy to survive those conditions as Torin, a lost soul himself, soon discovered after they took him in and welcomed him, teaching him the importance of family, of his heritage. And while, to this day, he still did not know where he came from, he knew the people he would lay down his life for. And one of the foremost rode at his side. "Unless, of course, you are too tired from your journey," he chided his older brother. He received a wry grin in return.

Ahead a scout signaled to indicate he'd spotted the villa. Torin made out the white tendrils of smoke curling up from what he hoped was a *caldarium*. It had been a

stressful journey, traveling at the edge of what was now Saxon territory. Once, long ago, it had been the place he and Dryston created great adventures, exploring the mountains, caves and hidden lagoons. The thought never occurring to them that one day they would have to fight in reality what were then only imaginary foes.

At the top of the hill, they paused a moment to take in the luxurious villa before them. Made of brilliant white limestone, it spread out in a maze of rooms, with ornate sculptures, trees and flower gardens. From the crest of the hill you could see the Baddon, a tiny village where the Romans had created one of the greatest temples to the goddess Minerva in all of Britannia. Along the hillside servants tended to their work and near the general's villa, a young woman was busy hanging wash on the ropes that stretched across the side of the house.

A loud shout preceded the rush of several men in simple clothing toward them. Torin's hand went immediately to the scabbard at his side as a precautionary reaction that this was not an assault by the Saxon. Men could be bought for a price. Torin had seen it many times, even among Roman generals. His concerns eased, as their purpose was to lead his men to the stable area, where their horses would be tended.

Torin glanced at the woman hanging the wash as they drew close. He noted first her fiery red hair and when she glanced up at him, the beautiful deep green of her eyes captured him, making him forget all else. A jolt of awareness curled in his gut. She boldly held his gaze. He was transfixed. Was that his imagination, or had he seen his smile? Torin barely missed hanging his neck on a stretch of rope ahead, swerving his horse just in time, so as not to look like an idiot in front of Dryston and the others.

Or so he thought.

"She is a lovely lass. Wouldn't you agree? Celt most likely," Dryston commented as he dismounted. He stretched his arms overhead and waited for Torin to slide from his horse.

"I hadn't noticed," Torin lied, wanting to look back at the red-haired beauty, but not wishing to prove Dryston's assessment correct. Still, no woman had caused such an immediate and powerful reaction by his body in some time.

Dryston laughed as he drew off his satchel, which contained his few belongings, and relinquished his horse to the general's servants. "I have a feeling you will soon enough, little brother. Come on, I need a bath before *cena*. I don't wish to offend our good hosts."

"You think a bath will do the trick?" Torin grinned and offered Dryston a quick look, briefly checking to see if the woman was still watching. The courtyard, however, was empty.

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Oiled from head to toe and dusted with fine dirt, and wearing only thongs around their waists, Torin and Dryston relaxed in the heat of the early afternoon sun. After a round or two of friendly wrestling and lifting of weights to work up a good sweat, they lay stretched out on slabs of stone, soaking in the heat of the day, before heading

inside to the *caldarium* for a hot soaking bath. Torin took a deep breath, letting out a sigh as his skin warmed to the sun, his muscles growing more pliant and relaxed.

“With any luck, Torin, she’ll be part of the entertainment tonight,” Dryston said, his face turned to the sky, his eyes closed.

“What makes you think I am interested?”

“You aren’t?”

“I cannot afford to be interested in anything but what I came here to do. Dryston,” Torin replied, adjusting his arms so that they supported his head.

“And you needn’t be distracted to the point of not being able to understand your reasons for being here. There is nothing wrong, Torin, in allowing yourself to be vulnerable to some things,” Dryston said.

Torin had always kept his emotions closely guarded, unsure if he were to allow them any freedom, where the road might lead him. Perhaps it was a fear of finding out about his past, or simply upholding the image of the man he wanted himself to be—strong, unyielding to his view. The thought of letting someone see what he tried to forget, worse to make him face it, did not settle well. “You call flitting from woman to woman allowing yourself to be vulnerable?” Torin challenged in return, defending his own inability to pursue an intimate relationship.

“Well, at least I’m not afraid,” his brother remarked.

“Of all the things you could use as weaponry to justify your point, Dryston, *fear* is not one of them.” Torin grew irritated with his brother’s nagging. Just because he was not of the mind to sleep with every woman within a five-mile radius did not make him afraid of intimacy.

“Of course,” Dryston responded, not holding back a blithe tone.

“I’m going to get a massage,” Torin muttered. He pushed from the stone bench and ambled into the dark shadows of the preparation room, where a servant used an instrument to scrape off the mud and sweat before he took a bath in the *tepidarium*. The cool waters in the small windowless room eased the tensions that Dryston had aroused with his taunting about women. Torin was not a virgin, far from. Rome had its share of women who loved to offer their favors to willing soldiers who were passing through before heading out to the next battle. But for Torin, the appeasement was temporal, welcoming a stranger’s attention to his carnal needs and the sensual feeling of a set of warm legs wrapped around him. But life in battle had left him with a yearning for more and he grew frustrated with what the gods had in mind for his life, even as he found himself looking at once more going into battle.

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Torin lay face down on the table as the heels of the servants’ hands pressed into the tight muscles of his lower back. Torin sucked in a deep breath, letting a soft groan escape his lips. The man’s hands were strong, seasoned from practice, he surmised. Torin clenched his teeth between the pleasure and the pain afforded from the servant’s ministrations, heaving a great sigh when the muscle relaxed. Unlike Dryston, Torin preferred the solitude. This dark room, with no one speaking to him, left

him free to ponder his thoughts, weighing them from all angles, instead of laying them out on the table for all to see and dissect. Foremost on his mind was the plight of his people. The Saxons had been eating up much of Britannia, and many of the survivors had not at first trusted him because he wore a Roman cloak, claiming that the Romans had abandoned them. And they were correct in that as far as he was concerned. When at last he was able to convince them that he and his few men would help them, they seemed to arrive at his temporary camp on a daily basis—a single family one day, an entire village the next, wandering nomads, seeking a leader to help reclaim what was taken from them. They’d kept them in the safety of the mountains, teaching them the fighting skills they would need to know. In return they became loyal followers, trusting Torin to do whatever he asked of them. They had enormous drive and heart, but Torin wondered if heart would be adequate against the battle-savvy Saxons.

“Hurry with your task, you should not be here.” The servant slapped Torin’s back, bringing his head up in time to see the young woman duck her head and bend down to stuff fresh towels into the warming cubicles. It was the red-haired beauty he’d seen earlier. She worked silently and swiftly, and was graceful in her movement. His cock twitched when she bent, her tunic stretching tight across her curves. Her skin was radiant, kissed by the sun. To get a better look, he rested his chin on his hands, watching, willing her to look at him. Just one glance to prove the spark he thought he’d seen when their eyes met. The male servant barked out another order in the ancient language, causing the woman to move in haste from the room. She did not raise her eyes from the floor. Disappointed, again, Torin cradled his head in his arms, his eyes on the door she’d quietly shut behind her. He had no inkling of what it was about this woman that made him curious about her. Maybe Torin was right. Maybe he needed to lie with a woman to release his tensions. But Torin sensed that this woman, whether part of tonight’s entertainment or not, would not be so easily won. He shut his eyes and let his mind conjure how beautiful her hair would be out of the confinement of that braid. How luxurious to slip his fingers through it, to have it sweep across his chest as she sat astride him, riding him like a wild steed.

Two slaps on his arm brought Torin from his reverie. He sat up, careful to draw the towel over his semi-hardened state from his recent wicked thoughts. He waited for the servant to gather his things and leave, before wrapping the towel around himself. He held the thin fabric fisted in one hand and made his way to the *tepidarium*, where the cool water was a welcome relief to his current state. He found the stone bench beneath the water’s surface and sat down, spreading his legs apart to alleviate the throbbing ache between his thighs. He leaned his head back against the cool tile, his mind swirling with pent-up stresses of every kind—the Saxons, the training, the lost look on the faces of displaced villagers melded into the woman in the yard, pushing the fiery tendril of hair from her forehead as she looked up at him. Allowing himself the need for release, to quell at least part of his tension, he closed his eyes,

sliding his hand down his length as he pictured her in his mind, a lovely wood nymph dancing naked under the stars. His body grew tight as she danced around him in his mind, her full breasts bobbing as she swayed in time to the thrumming that was his heart beating against his ribs. Torin's head hit the tiles with the intensity of his release, his body quaking in the aftermath. He opened his eyes and saw the shadow of a figure slipping through the door. Too relieved to care if a servant had seen him, he leaned his head back, the stress of war pushed aside for a moment, replaced by an increasing desire for the red-haired woman.

Chapter Two

Alyson sensed his dark eyes watching, following her with each platter of food that she brought to the table. She tried to keep her hands steady, tried not allow herself to be affected by his unwavering gaze. There was no doubt in her mind that he was interested, it was the why that concerned her. All evening it was clear that Tulia had been vying for his attention. A small gasp blurted from her throat as the wine pitcher in her hands faltered, splashing a drop of wine to the pristine tile floor.

“Foolish girl,” Tulia snapped, grabbing the pitcher from Alyson’s hands. “Pay heed to what you are doing!” Her sharp tongue sliced through Alyson’s pride and she quickly bowed her head, hoping to receive her grace. No stain had touched Tulia’s beautiful royal blue garment that so perfectly matched her painted eyes. Eyes that now turned to Alyson, her point to show her power. Alyson dropped to her knees in submission to admit silently to her disgrace. One of the Roman guests, a man called Dryston with soft green eyes, spoke.

“Apologies, milady, should be mine, for I believe I moved my foot and rendered your poor servant her imbalance, causing the accident, I’m afraid. For that I am deeply apologetic.”

“Arise!” Tulia barked.

Alyson did as instructed, keeping her eyes lowered.

“You are dismissed and be advised. I will deal with you later.”

Alyson nodded. Not even the general himself had ever spoken to his servants in such a manner. Ambrosius sat at the head of the table, his niece at his side, the guests, stretched out on their sides, positioned so that Alyson, her cheeks aflame with embarrassment, had to walk past each of them. She knew the general would not humiliate his niece in front of his guests. She kept her eyes cast to the ground as she picked her way through the group of now silent musicians and dancers, awaiting word for their performance to resume. She heard two smart claps behind her and the music began anew. She bolted then for the garden at the other end of the hallway. With the moon lighting her path, she skirted quickly around the potted fruit trees and statues to the small pool honoring the goddess, *Sulis Minerva*. She knelt by the shallow waters, watching the moon’s glow ripple across the dark water. Safely alone, Alyson allowed her tears to flow. She wondered how much longer her people would be at the mercy of others’ rule. First Rome and then the Saxons would Britannia ever belong to the people that once lived and nurtured it, or were they a people destined to become only a memory, a story told around a fire on a cold winter night?

“It is far too beautiful a night for tears.”

Startled, Alyson sprang to her feet, swiping her cheeks in haste. She lowered her head. “Milord, I did not wish to disturb anyone.” She knew without looking that it was him, the dark-eyed man who’d caught her eye when he rode in today. His

presence was becoming both an allure to her and a hazard to her safety and that of her family.

“I fear, good woman, that I am, in part, responsible for your weeping. It seems I cannot keep from looking at you.”

She was taken aback by his considerate tone. For a warrior so talked about for his strength and skills, he seemed a most gentle man. There was, however, no reason for him to apologize. She darted him a quick glance. “No, milord, it was my clumsiness.” She began to edge her way around him, careful not to get too close. She would surely be whipped by Tulia were she found with him. Already that possibility hung over her head, depending on Tulia’s mood when she saw her next.

He reached for her, gently grasping her upper arm. Alyson froze in her place, thinking perhaps that she’d been too quick with her grace. An aura of white light, seen only by one familiar with the spirit world, radiated from his touch. Inside the brilliance, a watery image wavered and she stood mesmerized as the image grew clear. It was a gilded warrior astride a great horse, his sword raised to the heavens in victory as he looked out over a smoke-covered valley. Her breath caught in her chest. She clawed at his fingers, trying to pry them from her arm.

“What is it? Have I done you harm?”

Alyson blinked, and the image dissipated into thin air. She found him staring at her, an intent look on his face. “I have been too long in battle, my apologies. I’ve forgotten the finer graces of being with a woman.”

She backed away from him, slamming accidentally against a potted fruit tree, nearly knocking it over. “There is no harm. Please, I must take my leave.” She hurried down the stone path that wound through the moss-covered fences to the road beyond. From there it was a short walk home. Her father, however, would want to know why she was home so early from her duties. What would she tell him? She looked over her shoulder, seeing Tulia appear from the villa, hurrying to the man. Her expression was stern and she scanned the garden to see if he was alone.

Alyson ducked quickly behind a tree and prayed the guest would not mention he’d seen her. After a moment, she peeked back to see that the garden was empty. She continued her walk home, at a slower pace now, breathing deeply the calming scent of the evening mist settling over the fertile fields. She attempted to concoct a story to explain her arriving before dawn, when most *cena* feasts were just finishing. Her father was a man of many concerns, the least of which was to have a daughter that caused difficulties with his master.

Alyson hugged her arms to her, sending still the power in his mere touch. There was no doubt that he carried a deep magic within him. And it was clear that he was not aware of the intense connection to her spirit. A shiver raced up her arms as she thought of being held in his embrace. What she felt was desire, Alyson couldn’t lie to herself about that, but there was more here than she could explain. For whatever the reason, the gods had chosen to make manifest this connection. She paused on

the crest of the hill overlooking her village. Hundreds of Celtic villagers, escaping the terror of the Saxon horde, had found their way here, to a retired Roman general, who had a conscience about Rome abandoning Britannia in their time of need.

Below, lights flickered within the simple huts of a fragile new beginning. Alyson raised her arms toward the star-sprinkled sky, embracing the energy flowing from the land, its ancient wisdom bestowing to her a balance to her confused spirit, clearing her thoughts, emptying her mind.

Go to him.

She held her eyes closed, focusing harder. Laughter and music from inside the villa filtered out into the night.

Go to him.

The voice, crystal clear, issued its command. She opened her eyes and scanned the darkness, expecting to see someone emerge from the shadows. Her spirit reverberated with her connection to the Goddess Mother Earth. She began to see not with human eyes, but with her spirit sight. Gooseflesh rose on her arms, her ears became aware of the tiniest sound. Breathless, she waited in awe-inspired wonder. Urged to do so, she turned to look at the gardens outside of the rooms that were prepared for the Roman guests. A soft wind lifted the hair from her neck and she debated the origin of this voice. Was it born of her own desires?

Go to him. He must believe.

She fought the voice in her head with her fists clenched at her sides. *Why must it be me who is your messenger? Such a request will serve to place my family in danger. What shall I say to him? Why would he believe what I say to him?* Alyson knew that once the gods spoke, her spirit would not be at rest until sheâ€™d completed the task, but that did not mean that she did not question the wisdom of it or the dangerous consequences if she was caught sneaking around the Roman quarters. She wished there was time to create a spell to reveal what she was to say to him. Instead she had only this nudging, and the brief, but powerful vision. Her best hope was that when she encountered him, the gods would give her the words to say. As though prodded by a ghostly phantom she stumbled over a stone as she turned to pick her way over the uneven ground in the darkness.

Alyson paused, ducking behind a hedge and waited until the servants lighting the garden torches had passed. She hurried along the path toward the room designated for the guests, the coarse rock pressing against the thin soles of her slippers. As she neared the room, the thought occurred to her that she may well find Tulia in his bed, if her plan had succeeded. She glanced up again at the ethereal moon, challenging the gods. She hesitated, unsure whether to continue. At the far end of the villa, she could hear the music, punctuated by applause and cheering. Not a soul, it seemed, stirred within the guest rooms. Her heart raced and rather than take the risk, Alyson pushed from the wall, determined that sheâ€™d imagined the voices, in lieu of her own emotional entanglements about the Roman.

A firm hand over her mouth squelched the scream bubbling from her throat. Alyson

froze, the size of the man's body pressed against her that it was useless to struggle. Her brain fought to find a reasonable excuse to relay to her master.

"Sssh, I mean you no harm. Promise that you will not scream and I will remove my hand."

His voice spawned a shiver across her shoulders. She nodded, tears prickling at the corners of her eyes. Alyson waited as he eased his hand away. His other, however, still held her firm around her waist.

"First, I must ask you. Are you a spy for the Saxon?" His voice was firm.

Alyson's throat grew parched from fear. "Nay," she managed to squeak. The warmth of his embrace was not like any she'd known, her insides quivered with familiarity. Though she'd yet to see the face of her captor, she knew already it was the man she was sent to speak to.

"If you try to run, I will call my men. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she whispered and as he dropped his hand, she turned to face him. "Do you think I would work for the general and spy for the enemy?" The sting of his words wounded her honor.

"My apologies, milady. Then with any luck, perhaps your coming to my room is for more personal reasons?" He slid the back of his knuckles down her cheek.

She was almost bewitched by his swaggering confidence, but not impressed with his assumptions. She batted his hand away. "On the contrary, milord, you are lucky that I did not draw my blade thinking that *you* were a Saxon invader. What purposes have you for sneaking around in the dark?" she demanded.

He chuckled low. "Good lady, these are my quarters, are they not?" He waited a heartbeat before he spoke again. "Do you carry a blade in truth?"

She stepped into a swathe of clear moonlight and hiked up her skirts to show him the blade tied to her leg. "Rarely do I say what I do not mean, milord."

He lifted his hands in defense, but his white smile showed in the shadows. "You have no further need to convince me. Now, if you are not a spy, nor here for well, reasons that I must say I am saddened by, then why do you sneak into my chambers at such great risk?"

"I was instructed to speak with you." She saw his smile vanish, his expression bathed by the moon, turned serious.

"From whom do you receive your instruction?" he asked, searching her face.

Alyson averted her eyes from his steady gaze and searched what to say to him. "Come, sit here beside me and let me see your hand." She drew him to a stone bench just outside his room.

"You want to see my hands?" the Roman asked, his eyes alert to the garden around them. "You are becoming a more curious woman, with each passing moment."

"You must believe me. Back there in the garden, when you grabbed my arm. There was great magic in your touch." There was barely enough room for the two of

them on the small bench. She took his hand, palm up, and placed it on her lap.

“I think you would find greater pleasure were my hand turned over,” he stated, leaning close, providing her with a charming grin.

“Assuming that you think you know what gives me pleasure, milord?” she asked, guarding herself to his bewitching advances. He bore a magnetism that was hard to ignore, no doubt part of his skillful leadership capabilities. That thought reminded her of why she’d been sent. He was far too easy to fantasize about and seated here at his side made the temptation even greater.

“Forgive me, milady. But do I detect a challenge in your response?”

“Did you not believe me when I told you I’ve been sent to speak with you?”

“To be truthful, when a beautiful woman appears in the middle of the night in my bedroom, my thoughts do not turn speaking.” He squeezed her hand.

“Listen to me well. This is about you, your future. It has nothing at all to do with me, other than to be the messenger for the gods.”

His fingers touched her chin, lifting her face to his. “And what if I do not believe in your gods or this Celtic magic?”

Her eyes narrowed, studying his expression. “You do not really believe your unbelief, do you? It is only that it is buried deep inside you for some reason that you do not embrace it,” she countered.

He gave a short laugh. “In my world, you rely only on yourself, not on something you cannot see or touch.”

“But you have Celtic blood within you, isn’t it so?”

He shifted, resting his hand comfortably in her lap. “I was raised in Britannia, my brother and I were taken away when we were young and trained in the Roman army.”

Alyson lifted his hand closer to look at the lines on his palm. “He is not your brother by blood.” It was not a question, but a statement. She’d seen that much in his lifeline.

He leaned his head near hers, looking at his hand. “How do you know this?”

Alyson thought for a man so fearless and bold, he seemed to have little understanding of the beliefs of the Celtic people he came from. “Everyone has a story, milord. Our paths in life are destined. The gods direct us. They guide us to the tasks that have been selected for us.”

He chuckled. “Even if I chose to believe that, circumstances force us to make choices. What if they steer us away from this so-called *path*?”

She brushed her fingers lightly over his rough flesh. Calloused and scared from battle, she sensed there was more to him. More that he was hiding from others—from himself. “Destiny is patient. She will wait for you as does a loyal mistress. If the wrong path is taken, she will allow you to walk it until it eventually intersects with the one you should be on.” An owl in the trees startled Alyson and she clasped his hand tight.

“œt would not seem, milady, that you are entirely comfortable in the task your gods have assigned you.”

Alyson darted him a look. “œl question why the gods have chosen me as their messenger, to that I will admit.”

“œSo you do believe that it is in part your destiny that you should be sitting here with me?”

Alyson looked at him, his hand still clasped between hers. “œSo it would seem, milord.”

À

Torin stared down at her beautiful face, her hands so small, so delicate, holding his. The softness of her grasp moved him in ways he’d not felt in a very long time “if ever. As much as he’d have preferred to sample her tempting lips, she had indeed risked her life to come to him tonight. He pushed his lustful thoughts aside. “œTell me. What message is it that you bring from your gods?” He turned his palm up, offering her his hand. With a quick sweep, she pushed her hair over her shoulders and leaned down to look at his hand.

“œYour lifeline is odd, but though broken, you somehow manage to have a fearless heart and are stubborn to a fault.”

Her fingertips trailed the crease of his skin, the sensation doing more for him than he dared reveal. Though soft-spoken, she was direct and he suspected that if challenged she would not back down. The thought did little for quelling the smoky tendrils of desire in his gut. “œTell me, milady, can you truly read all of that by looking at the creases of my flesh?”

She looked up, her bright eyes steady on his, and for the first time, she gifted him with a smile “one potent enough that he shifted as though he’d taken a fist to his gut.

“œThen you do not deny my magic?” She tipped her head in curiosity.

He smiled. To agree with her would validate that he believed in magic. Yet he could not deny the powerful connection he’d had to her from the moment he first saw her.

“œPerhaps, there is a measure of truth in what you say.”

Her smile widened in a teasing manner that he found mesmerizing. “œYou are wise then to be cautious for I knew that much about you even before I looked at your palm.”

Torin stared at her, caught between wanting to kiss her and wanting to dismiss her all together for these silly notions. The latter would have been the better part, but not nearly as enjoyable. He leaned forward, hesitant that he might frighten her, but she held his gaze, unflinching at his amorous advance. There was no fear in her dark eyes. “œYou have said then what you came to tell me?”

“œI cannot say what purposes the gods have for you, milord, only that you must one day embrace the magic you hide inside of you “do not fear it. It is part of your destiny.”

Her breath smelled of sweet mead and night air. “œAnd you will not use that

blade if I was to be a kiss from you?" he asked, inching closer, carefully gauging her reaction.

"For a kiss? Nay, milord. Would I not be a fool to try to stop you?"

He hesitated. "Because you fear me?" A stab of concern halted his conscience.

Her hand came to rest on his cheek. "Because I might be pushing away my destiny."

He brushed his lips softly over hers, the taste of her igniting a smoldering heat deep inside of him. Her hands fisted into his shirt, matching his fervor kiss for kiss, not holding back"just as he suspected she would be. Perhaps she was right in saying there was a magic he ignored inside of him, for it yearned now to join with hers.

She offered the gentle curve of her neck to his hungry mouth. Her flesh, sweet with evening dew, pervaded his senses. He drew her gown over her shoulder without protest, baring her skin, her sighs urging him, driven blindly to the soft swell of her breast beneath her thin gown. He wanted to taste her, to bring stiff the tender rose tips of her breasts between his teeth. He wanted to fill her, watch her writhing beneath him, caught up in her pleasure. Torin lifted her in his arms, feasting once more on her mouth. He did not want to think of battles or Saxon tonight. He wanted only to be in the warmth of this woman's embrace, in the sweet bliss of being nestled between her thighs.

"Do not be afraid," he said against her temple as he slid her down his body. His hands grasped her gown, drawing it over her hips, and she struggled, unashamedly loosening his belt, letting it slither to the floor. She looked at him and lifted her arms, allowing him to peel the gown over her head, her lush hair falling free over her shoulders. Torin's cock, already aroused, grew hard as he brought her mouth to his, his tongue delving to mate with her, the need inside him rising at an alarming rate.

With a shy smile, she tugged his tunic over his arms, rendering him as naked as she. Her eyes cast a look at his erection and she smiled.

"You have done this, milady, with but your kiss. Surely, you bewitch me with a magic that I do not fully understand."

She reached for his hand, drawing him to the edge of the bed. "Milord, sometimes destiny calls us to action, rather than understanding, don't you agree?"

She stroked him, delicately, seductively, teasingly. Torin balled his fists at his sides. "Woman. Your skills are magical. I no longer deny it." He closed his eyes, turning his face to the heavens, and let out a quiet sigh of praise. Lust clawed at him, but he wanted to savor this moment, languidly enjoying her small hands caressing his ass.

"What message have you given to you, milord, has nothing to do with what I choose now to do. This I do freely."

Her moist lips closed around his smooth tip, her tongue challenging his sanity. He

lifted her chin, raising her face to look at him. "I am tight with need, milady, I pray you have mercy."

She reached between his legs, gently massaged his warm sacs. Torin opened his mouth to speak, but the words caught his body blind with need.

"Does this give you the pleasure?" she asked, her expression soft, alluring.

The cunning seductress had turned the tables on him, making him a quivering mass in her hands. Torin grabbed her shoulders and yanked her up to face him. "More pleasure than I can barely contain, though I think you prefer to torture me, don't you?"

She simply smiled and he brought his mouth down hard on her lips, easing her to the bed, tasting himself on her tongue. He wasted no time finding what drew a sigh from her, sampling her firm, round breasts, sweet as he'd imagined. Her hands urging him, he left a trail of warm, wet kisses, parting her thighs to sample her delicate womanhood. She was fire, spreading a raging lust in his blood, yet like a gentle rain washing over his soul. He needed more time with her, but his need was too great and her passion far too strong to deny. Shifting over her, he pushed into her warmth, blinded by her tight sheath. The sensation of her immediate release, pulsating around him, caused him to drive his cock deeper, the heat of her welcoming him, calling to him to a place where his soul was safe.

"Milord," she sighed, lifting her legs to his hips.

"My name is Torin." He looked down at her radiant face bathed in the moonlight. "I want to hear you say it."

Her head thrust back, her body pressing against his as another climax tore through her. "Torin," she said, her voice laced with ecstasy.

He ground his teeth to keep from yelling his praise to the gods for her as he gave in to his own release. His body shuddered, quaking with an intensity he'd never known. Torin reached for her face and kissed the shimmer of tears from her cheek. "You did not tell me your name, but I swear to you, I thanked your gods that they sent you to me."

She searched his face as he lifted his weight and lay down facing her. He imagined a life with her, home, children—but in the next moment reality snuffed out the idea. What right had he to ruin her life, to make her a widow for a man who only knew battle? He stared at her, not knowing what to say, instead brushing her red hair from her pale shoulder.

"My name is Alyson." She hesitated as though debating her next words. "I have no need of promises, milord, that can be broken," she said, backing cautiously from his bed. She searched the floor and found her gown, quickly tossing it over her head.

"A woman like you deserves more," he said, though he felt nauseous in thinking he was not the man to offer her what she deserved.

"You are kind to say such things, milord." She pushed her feet into her slippers.

"Wait," he called quietly. "When can I see you again?"

The sound of approaching footsteps echoed in the hallway. Torin sat up, drawing the sheet over his midsection. They both stay frozen, waiting for the person or persons to pass, when a voice, distinctive and cruel, sounded on the other side of the door.

“Hold the light higher, I need to see so I won’t stumble, you fool.”

Alyson hurried outside to the gardens and Torin leapt to follow in an attempt to stop her, but she’d already disappeared into the darkness. He turned, seeing a bright light illuminate his room, and met the glittering eyes of Tulia, and behind her a cowering servant holding her torch. Her startled gaze at seeing him naked drifted lower, and her expression turned to glee.

“My apologies, milord. I came only to see that you have everything you need.”

What Torin needed had just escaped out the garden gate. “I was preparing for bed.” He reached down, grabbed his tunic and drew it over him, covering his hips.

“Please do not let me detain you. Perhaps I can offer my help in settling you in for the night?”

She came to him, her gait like that of a tiger in heat, and pushed at his chest, causing him to stumble and land on the bed. Torin began to rise and she placed her foot in his crotch.

“I imagine it has been some time since you’ve had the pleasure of a beautiful woman.” She held her arms out as the servant scurried to scone the torch and aid in removing the dozens of gold bracelets on her arms.

Torin cleared his throat as he debated how to put off this woman, niece of his gracious host. “I must confess, good lady, though you are indeed beautiful, the reason I left the celebration early was because I was feeling ill. I think it is exhaustion from my long journey.”

She paused, her arms outstretched as she was being undressed of her adornments. Her expression was not a happy one. “Do you reject my offer, milord?”

Torin sat up, easing her away so he could stand. “Your offer, given at any other time, Tulia, would be an intriguing one. I am sorry.”

She paused a moment more, but Torin knew he’d given her every option to keep her pride intact. She clapped once and the servant gathered her discarded bangles and grabbed the torch.

“Then, we shall resume our discussion when you are feeling better, milord. You won’t forget?” She kissed his cheek and a nauseating wave of heavy perfume whirled around him, masking her true scent as much as her kind façade.

He bowed to her and waited until she’d departed before he rushed out into the garden, searching to see if she’d remained, hidden in the shadows. But despite his wishes, she was gone.

The bright white luminescent moon caught his attention and he stood transfixed at his gargantuan size.

There is a magic deep inside you.

Torin dropped to his knees by the small pool in the garden, scooping handfuls of cool water over his face and neck. His mind was a haze, filled with thoughts again of needing her. Perhaps she was a druid witch and she had cast this spell on him, blinding him to all else. He looked up at the moon, trying to shake the strange pull of something inside of him. Then again there was the explanation of an exhausting trip and countless strategies of the best way to outsmart the bloodthirsty Saxon lord. That was why he was summoned to the general's villa, not to consort with one of the servant girls, no matter how bewitchingly beautiful.

Destiny is patient. If the wrong path is taken, she will allow you to walk it until eventually it intersects with the path you should be on.

Was she part of that destiny or simply a diversion from the right path? He had to find a way to see her again. And this time, not swayed by her beauty or magic, find out more what these gods of hers knew about his future. His body in a state of desperate need, Torin thought of the red-haired beauty with beautiful green eyes, fearing that she had already captured his heart.

Chapter Three

Alyson's cheeks burned with the memory of his head between her thighs. He was careful with her, that she'd not expected. She thought that as a Roman warrior he would be rough, taking more thought to his pleasure than of hers. She'd often over the years heard of Rome's lavishness and decadence. Prone to acquiring wealth and bathing in their riches, it was rumored, though by those who had seen it firsthand, that no Roman, male or female, was denied whatever they desired—no pleasure, no treasures, no kingdom. Romans believed it was theirs for the taking. That's how the Roman-Britannia culture evolved. From the time when they took over Britannia from the Celts, integrating their ways into that of the ancient Celts. They took their children and trained them to be great Roman warriors. Many died in battle, others—like Torin and Dryston—having served their time and duty, now returned to find Britannia at the mercy of another horde of warriors, bent on keeping Britannia for their own.

As much as Alyson fought the comparisons, the truth was that her people were again in danger of losing all that was once theirs. True, it was that eventually Rome rebuilt the cities destroyed and created ports and transportation systems, and even married the native peoples. It seemed though that the intent of this particular Saxon army was to eradicate Britannia of every remaining Celt. She could not see the Roman soldier in the same light as the stories she'd heard and Alyson had to be careful of losing her heart too readily to his handsome looks and gentle ways.

She busied herself with cleaning the dining hall from the *cena* that had gone well into the night. She wondered whether Tulia had stayed with him, appeasing him in bed, with her beautiful body. Alyson looked at her nails, yellow from scrubbing the laundry, and her dried and cracked skin. What man, other than one used to hard labor of the field, would be interested in her? It was but a trick of the moonlight and no doubt the wine that had driven him to lusting for her in the way he had. With that resolved in her mind, she hoped that he would not remember at all last evening and, once finished here, she would be able to sneak away home, far enough away from the villa that she could try to forget his touch.

“The general has asked that you perform tonight with your reading of hands.” The head servant stopped her as she entered the kitchen. She grappled with the stack of bowls in her hands. Alyson wanted to refuse, but to do so would alert that she was not comfortable serving the general's guests and that might raise more questions. Further, the gods had urged her to speak with the Roman directly, not in front of a room full of people. Tulia would no doubt be at her father's side, watching the handsome guest like a hawk, and to interfere with Tulia's quest would be foolish to say the least. Still, her master had bid her presence in using her skills as entertainment and there was little she could do but comply. “Yes,

milord.â€ She bent her knees slightly, offering him homage as she balanced the dishes and continued to the washtub, imploring the gods to give her wisdom in her readings.

Hours later, Alyson hid behind a potted palm tree, checking the seating arrangement of the male guests, who were propped casually on their sides. A trio of musicians provided a peaceful backdrop to their meal. There was less frivolity and more discussion this evening. Her bored expression giving away her state, Tulia popped grapes into her mouth and tossed one or two teasingly at Commander Torin. Alyson hoped that with the discussion taking a turn toward more serious matters, Tulia would be asked to leave and so, too, the entertainment, meaning that she, too, may yet be freed of her masterâ€™s request.

She watched as Tulia took great glee in taunting the new servant girl this evening, snatching the wine pitcher from her and, though it was forbidden for women to partake in drinking wine, she made sure the object of her lustâ€™s goblet was never dry. Tuliaâ€™sâ€™ presence was important, of that Alyson was not naive. The influence she had on her father could prove to be a benefit to the militia being created to face the Saxon. Sheâ€™d overheard Tulia and her uncle in heated conversations, discussing the matter. Tulia would often offer her fatherâ€™s opinion to her uncle, stating that the wise men of Rome viewed Britannia as insignificant. Moreover, his brotherâ€™s insistence to help the Britannia people against the Saxon was a waste of good Roman ingenuity and blood.

â€œBring me the reader,â€ General Ambrosius ordered to the servant waiting at his side. The master clapped his hands twice and Alyson pushed forward, her eyes focused on her feet.

â€œThis one comes from a long line of seers. Her druid mother and two generations before her were all skilled in being able to read palms and perform other tasks of the magical ancient arts. She has been very loyal, as has her family. I trust what she says, implicitly. Who shall go first?â€ General Ambrosius stated.

Alyson, not familiar with being praised, kept her gaze cast down, her pride intact, and prayed that she would not have to reveal more than one of them wanted to hear. The room was silent and she dared not look up. Already she sensed the Romanâ€™s penetrating eyes on her.

â€œI will see what the good woman has in store.â€ The other Roman soldier spoke. Alyson turned to look at him and caught his soft, gray-green eyes glittering with mischief. He sat upright and patted the place next to him. His smile was friendly and Alyson could see he was fearless of heart. She knelt at his side, her body acting as a divining rod, trembling at the few inches of table that divided her from her secret lover. She accepted his comradeâ€™s hand, trying to control the shaking of her own. Alyson focused dutifully, concentrating her thoughts on this man and pushing away the torrid thoughts of the other in her yearning spirit. She studied his hand carefully, assessing his life, and what the fates had in store for him.

â€œDo you need to know my name?â€ he asked.

She liked the sound of his voice. There was a calm authority in it and she sensed

he was loyal to the man he called his commander. Alyson looked up, meeting his kind gaze. An immediate vision stopped her from answering as she stared at him, the sequence of immense passion turning to gut-wrenching pain playing through her head. She blinked, averting her eyes from his, sorting her thoughts back to the present, not fully aware yet what the vision meant.

“It is Dryston.” He smiled, but curiosity flickered in his light green eyes.

Alyson nodded. “Yes, I can see you have a strong lifeline. This is good. But it is not without challenge.” She closed her eyes, letting his energy flow through her, trying to understand the vision better. But the images were misty, undefined, meaning the gods did not want this man to understand fully what was ahead for him.

“Well, that’s been proven enough times, hasn’t it, Torin?” the amiable man said, looking across at his comrade.

Torin. Alyson moistened her lips, nearly repeating her lover’s name out loud.

“It appears you are on a journey. The way is not an easy one.”

The room grew silent as did the man whose hand she held. It seemed she now had his full attention.

“What else do you see?” he asked.

Alyson swallowed and leaned in close, running her fingertip along the deep crease of his palm representing his fate. “The fate shows that you are used to being in control, but these lines that intersect, indicating that you will or may yet have to relinquish that control and surrender your interests to that of another.”

The man known as Dryston, already having had a copious amount of wine, chuckled quietly. He leaned in close, the scent of sweet wine wafting past her nose.

“I am not certain that I like this reading, good woman, though it is not a result of unbelief in your skills. My own mother practiced the ancient magic.”

Alyson looked across the table and met Torin’s steady gaze. Perhaps this was where his magic was derived. But if Dryston admitted to this in his upbringing, then why wouldn’t Torin?

“Perhaps you would care to do my hand next?” Torin asked, lifting the corner of his tempting mouth in a smug grin. He was teasing her, of course, about the night before, when speaking to him became a matter of irrepressible lust. She’d debated what happened until the sun peeked through the window of her room. As much as she could pretend it meant little, the truth was that she’d never felt what she did for Torin.

Alyson glanced at her mistress, seeing a cloud of fury pass over her expression.

“I wish for my reading to be next. Why is it that you have possessed this skill and never once offered the use of it for my enjoyment? There have been times I would have welcomed the amusement in this dreadfully barren place.” Tulia’s smile was as deadly as her heart. Alyson stood dutifully and knelt before her mistress.

Tulia’s skin was pale, perfumed with lavender and herbs, and her flesh glimmered with a fine dusting of ground quartz powder. Alyson had treated Tulia’s

firm body more than once since her arrival, slathering it with earthen clay masks, followed by massages with precious oils until it glowed with seductive luster. Her nails were trimmed perfectly, polished and well buffed. She wore opulent jewels, blue as a twilight sunset, and several strands of gold braid with a matching stone that lay in the valley between her ample breasts. When she leaned forward, as she had often, for benefit of the males in the room, the jewel would disappear and she would smile as she dug it from its hiding place.

Beside her, Alyson was aware of every tear, every worn place on her old gown, the dirt caked beneath her nails from cleaning. Determined, however, to maintain her pride, Alyson took Tulia's hand and studied it. She frowned, spreading her palm wide so as not to mistake what she thought she saw.

"Ouch, fool!" Tulia's hand came down hard across Alyson's cheek, knocking her to the side. Alyson held her hand to her face, not caring that she'd been slapped, and hoping that she would be dismissed in lieu of having to reveal the truth of what she saw.

"The striking of a servant is not necessary. These are people who have been very good, very loyal to me," Tulia, the general scolded his niece. Her cold gaze turned to her uncle and the thought to refute him crossed her face as sure as the sun rose. Instead she smiled, and pretended to regain her composure, holding out her palm to Alyson.

"Please finish."

Alyson knew that in the privacy of her quarters, Tulia would be sure to exact her revenge for the reprimand on Alyson's bare back. In hope of quelling her anger, Alyson took her mistress's hand and bowed before her. "My apologies, milady. I could not read well the lines in your hand. Your skin is so smooth and supple." She kept her eyes lowered as she spoke, knowing how it would appeal to Tulia's superiority over her. "Tell me what I may do to please you, milady."

Tulia was silent. "You may finish my reading. I want to hear what the fates say." She smiled coyly, her gaze flickering to the bevy of handsome men seated around the table, their attention directed solely on her.

Alyson cleared her throat. Not once in her entire life had she uttered an untruth, but she was about to and she asked the gods not to punish her for doing so. She picked up Tulia's hand, stroking her palm to first soothe away the tension she sensed. She then laid her palm against her mistress's, uttering a silent spell—one that would help Tulia to accept her fate when it was her time to do so. "Your journey will not be easy. An obstacle that I cannot determine at this time awaits you and you will have to defeat it in order to continue."

Her brows pressed together in frustration and she yanked her hand from Alyson. "No, tell me who my future husband will be. What do the fates have to say about that?"

Alyson shook her head. "My sight does not allow me to see such details. There is no way for me to answer your question."

"Then what possible good is there in these trivial readings?" she huffed, her

lower lip pouting with a frown.

Her uncle patted her hand. "When you return to Rome, your mother and father will have dozens of suitors lined up asking for your hand."

Tulia's face blushed as she leaned over and kissed her uncle's cheek. "You flatter me, uncle, but I suspect you are right. There are any number of fine-looking, well-to-do men in Rome, are there not?" Her gaze skipped over the handsome dinner guests. "Until then, I suppose I will have to make due." She looked down at Alyson, impatience stamped on her beautiful face. "Is there anything else worth noting?" she demanded.

"No, milady, your uncle speaks the truth." True it was if Tulia did make it back to Rome, she would no doubt have several suitors to choose from—the key factor being that she managed to return to Rome. Tulia jerked her hand from Alyson and nodded to dismiss her.

"And what about my reading?" Torin sat up and held out his palm. "Will you not do my reading as well?"

There was a glint in his dark eyes, challenging her. Alyson stood to face him, catching her foot on the edge of her gown, sending her toward the floor. He caught her around the waist, his eyes showing his concern as he helped her to her feet. Her face burned with embarrassment. Better to feign weariness than to admit to being clumsy. His hands rested on her hips.

"My apologies, milord, milady." Alyson looked at the faces staring at her. "My head is feeling light. I beg to be relieved of my duties, master. At least until I am well enough to return."

"Perhaps I should see you home. The way is dark. You might stumble again," Torin offered.

"We can send one of the servants to see her home, milord. There is no need for you to trouble yourself," Tulia interjected with an unmistakable annoyance in her voice.

"She speaks the truth." Alyson slowly backed from his grasp until she was out of sight of the guests and then she hurried to the kitchen to retrieve her cloak. The kitchen servants paid her no mind as they continued with their duties. No one followed her as she stepped into the darkness. A hand reached out, grabbing her arm. Torin had left by another route and met her on the garden path.

"It is only me." His gaze skipped over her, but she sensed his thorough assessment. "You seem to have recovered well."

"Please return to *cena*. I am fine."

"But I need to speak with you. You are the one who came sneaking into my chambers, if you'll recall, telling me that the gods had sent you. Now if all they had in mind was for you to present yourself to me—"

"I did not present myself, milord," she responded with a defiant thrust of her chin. "That is not how I recall the events of last evening."

"While I am very interested to hear your thoughts on what you do remember

from last night and if you lost sleep the same that I did, I am still left unsettled with understanding more of what the gods wish to tell me.â€

â€œNot here. Not now. It is too dangerous.â€

His dark eyes searched hers.

â€œVery well then. Where? When?â€

Alysonâ€™s mind raced as she tried to think of a safe place where they could meet without Tulia finding out. â€œTonight, when you are certain that everyone is asleep, meet me at the sacred pool in the north woods. There, just over the ridge. A path winds through the trees and will bring you to the spring. You will see it by the moonâ€™s light.â€

He squeezed her arm with gentle reassurance. â€œYou are certain you are well enough to go on alone?â€

â€œYes, milord.â€

â€œThen I shall see you tonight in the wood.â€

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Torin found himself pacing his chamber floor, waiting until every last sound in the villa had ceased and he was as certain as he could be that all were asleep. Thankfully, Tulia had retired with her head aching. She claimed that perhaps one of the servants had slipped her bad wine. The moon, nearly full again, hung high in the sky and illuminated the winding path just as Alyson said it would. Torin could not deny the thrill he felt in being alone with her again. Though this time, he had to be cautious of her seductive charms. He had to find out more of why sheâ€™d been sent to him. Perhaps it was about his past, the pain that was buried so deep inside of him that he could not bear to think on it. Or perhaps it was concerning his future, about the battle he, his men and the generalâ€™s men were about to embark on. He stood in the thick forest, searching the dark shadows on the path ahead. There was no reason to believe her request was designed as a trap, but these were times when it was better to be cautious than foolish.

A splash pricked his ears and he hurried on faster, hoping that with a stroke of luck, he might find her bathing in the moonlight. It was not a wise image to conjure in his already roused state. She seemed to have that power over him. The forest spilled out into a yawning cove, so wide Torin could not see across the small lake. Cupped at one end by a high cliff, a waterfall splashed down over the vine and moss-covered jagged rocks, emptying into the placid water below. He saw nothing at first, and he held still, relying on his other senses. It was then that he heard another faint splash of water and he squinted into the inky blackness, catching a glimpse of something moving through the sparkling moonlit waters. A few feet away lay a pile of clothes. Torin scooped them up, his eye on the water, and held the garment for a moment against his face, remembering the soft scent of her body, the way she responded to him with quiet sighs, her hands urging his exploration.

â€œI do not believe it will fit, milord, though you are most welcome to try it on if you fancy it.â€

â€œI did not know we would be bathing this evening.â€ He dropped his scabbard

to the ground and undid his sandals.

“We are not, Milord. I found waiting for you tiresome, and felt a swim would revive my spirit.”

“I admit the thought of swimming with you does much to revive my spirit.” He peeled off his tunic and pondered stripping down further.

“I agreed to meet with you so that I might reveal what more the gods might have to say to you.”

“So you did.” His grand ideas of a sensual precursor to her explanation dissipated with her authoritative reminder. “So come out then and tell me.” At least he would have that much to remember about this night.

“You are in danger, milord,” she said, emerging from the water, her red hair plastered against her wet, naked body. She had no idea of how much danger *she* was in. Her skin glistened in the moonlight. Torin dropped his tunic to the ground, unable to keep from staring at her.

“Why do you stare, milord, you have seen my body before?” She lifted her hands through her hair, smoothing it back from her face. Her eyes, luminous and wide, were fixed on him. “Druids worship all of nature, milord, including the human body. We have no shame in our nakedness. We believe that it is wickedness that causes shame.”

Torin could not speak, his tongue, normally loose and able to flatter a woman at the drop of a feather, seemed affixed to the roof of his mouth. Other parts of him, however, responded with justifiable interest. “You do not seem to remember how it was between us, milady.”

Bent on her haunches, she tossed a handful of twigs in to the embers of a smoldering fire. The fire caught, igniting a small but bright blaze that revealed her sumptuous body. “You are quite beautiful. Surely, you know what a temptation you are.” He did not move, fearful that in getting too close he might lose control again.

“Your charm is welcome, milord, but I do not deceive myself that my mistress, Lady Tulia, is by far more enticing and pleasing in all ways to a man.” She pulled a small sack from beneath her garments. “Sit there, on the grass.”

“Here?” Torin asked as he made himself as comfortable as he could. His erection, hard and painful, jutted between his thighs. He was grateful he wore still his leather thong to hide the fact. “My name is Torin, in case you do not remember that as well.”

“That is not why we are here.”

“Still, I would like to know that we know each other’s names, after spending a night of intimacy.”

“Names are of no importance, milord. What happened was not fate. It was nothing more than carnal desire.”

“Desire that we both felt, true?” Torin folded his arms over his chest, unyielding to her insistence that the unforgettable night was but a whim.

She closed her eyes, heaving an impatient sigh. “Very well, then, you

performed most admirably.â€

â€œAdmirably?â€ he repeated. â€œI would have to say, milady, in humble recollection that I performed much more than admirably.â€

She held his gaze, her sweet lips poised in a firm line. â€œPlease, we havenâ€™t much time.â€

â€œSo it seems the way of things when we meet. Is this to be our fate, then? Secret liaisons of *admirable* sex?â€

â€œI am here tonight to place a protective spell over you.â€

â€œMore instructions from your gods?â€ he asked with a wry grin. When she did not respond in kind, he sobered. â€œFrom what or whom do I need protection from?â€

A bag in her hands, she knelt on the ground in front of him and lifted her arms skyward, her lips moving silently.

Torin continued, â€œFor matter of discussion, the generalâ€™s niece is not more beautiful in my opinion, in the event that you might be interested in my thoughts.â€

She gave him a pointed look. â€œI am not.â€

â€œMore beautiful or interested?â€ he asked easily.

â€œNeither at the moment, now hush before you wake the dead.â€

Torin scanned the perimeter, as far as the small fire reached into the woods around them. â€œIs this a sacred burial ground?â€

â€œAll springs are sacred to the druids, milord. Water is part of the earthâ€™s life-force.â€

Torin was focused currently on how she stirred the life in his blood. He tried to focus on what she was saying. â€œWhy do the gods feel I am in danger? Why do I need this blessing of protection?â€ Torin watched her from eye level, as she spread the powdery substance around him. His fingers itched to caress the soft, supple flesh within his reach.

Forbidden fruit.

She circled him, her breasts, which fit his hands perfectly as he remembered, swayed gently as she set to her task.

â€œThere are dark spirits at work, milord. I have sensed them around you. The gods spoke to me in a vision.â€

â€œAnd why would I have not noticed these spirits myself?â€ he asked, trying valiantly to keep his mind focused on what she was saying and not the fact that he wanted to be buried deep inside of her.

She paused in front of him, having completed the circle.

â€œYou do not sense them, because you insist on blocking the magic inside of you.â€

Torin shook his head. *More magic.* The only magic that he wanted was to feel her arms around his neck, to hear her whisper his name when he drove into her. â€œHow can your magic help one who does not believe in it?â€

She knelt in front of him, her hands placed on the top of her knees, her full breasts

rosy and taut. There was more between them than she admitted. Either that or she was cold. But based on the heat surging in his system, he doubted she could be far removed from what he sensed happening. It was the same quick flash of fire that had occurred between them the night before.

“Promise you will not interfere?” she asked, her red hair now drying, spilled over her shoulders in a luxurious cape. She held his gaze until he swore he could feel her hands on his face.

“How do you do that?” he asked. “Surely you cannot deny the connection between you and me.” Her tongue darted out, swiping across her lip, and his body twitched.

“There is something—I cannot say what it is between us, milord. That is not why I have come. I have come to bring you a message and to make certain that you believe the truth of what I am about to tell you.”

“The truth?”

“Aye, milord. The truth of your destiny. But first, I will summon the spirits to protect you.”

Torin studied her face. Absurd as it sounded to his logical mind, there was innocence in her wisdom that made it difficult to refute. Certainly, it was true that in the days ahead as he faced the Saxon on the field of battle, he would have use of this protection. What could it hurt?

“What would you have me do?” he asked his curiosity as roused now as the rest of him.

“Be still and be open to the magic.”

She closed her eyes and began to sway gently back and forth. A low hum, barely discernable, emitted from her throat. She spoke no words, only hummed a tune, moving with greater rhythm to the song, as though it was controlling her movement. Torin watched transfixed, drawn into the peaceful repose of her face turned to the dark night sky, as she stretched her arms wide. She was oblivious to him now, her body being guided by the thrum in her throat. She bent forward, her red hair dragging across the grass, and then rose to her knees, arms outstretched, her soft breasts bouncing with each subtle jerk of her body.

Torin’s body tingled with what he could label only as arousal. The rush of going into battle, what it felt like to teeter on the edge of fear, the exhilaration, the anticipation of what was to come. The sound of his breathing seemed at one with the hum of her voice. Her hands caressed her body now, caught in the frenzy of the chant. Her palms cradled her breasts, her face turned upward in total blissful elation, doing what Torin desired to do himself. Whatever this magic, it embodied the potency of making love. His flesh grew warm, sensing her back against his chest. Her womanly scent was powerful in his nostrils. He reached between his legs, needing relief from the fire rising inside of him. There was no pain, no discomfort any longer, no mindless yearning—only a certainty of what was to be.

He needed her as he needed air to breathe, and what was more—she needed him. Though he did not yet know why. The tune she hummed now played in his brain,

over and over, stroking him. She opened her eyes, gazing on him with shimmering eyes that cut into his marrow. Without a word, he lifted his hands to her.

She rose to her feet and took his hands, stepping into the circle. Torin brushed his cheek against her thigh, his fingers gently kneading the tender flesh of her thighs, taking in her musky, womanly scent. He pulled her forward, causing her to straddle his crossed legs, her sweet flower poised before his face. A gasp tore from her throat, her hands resting on the top of his head as he tasted her, delving into her moist heat, until her honey juices touched his tongue.

Torin drew her down, squatting before him, lost in how she held his face when she kissed him. He pressed his forehead to hers, touching her lips to his, her breath hot against his mouth as she dropped to her knees and emitted an audible sigh, eased down on his rigid staff. He drew in a sharp gasp as her warmth wrapped around him, taking him deep inside her tight core.

“What is this magic you bewitch me with?” he whispered against her cheek, content to rest inside of her for a moment, relishing the tight perfection.

She lolled back her head, a quiet purring sound coming from her throat. Torin found the warm curve of her throat, his lips moving across the soft underside of her jaw. Her thighs pressed against his ribs, the movement stirring the fire inside him. He cupped her bottom, tracing his fingers over the soft, moist valley between her thighs, exhilaration coursing through him as he touched where their bodies joined. This time, there was no need of a frenzied hurry to finish, no frantic, heated rush. This was divine—sacred.

The pungent scent of burning sweet grass wafted around them. Her legs locked around his back, holding her steady gaze to his. She traced the curve of his face, following each spot she touched with a gentle kiss. Tears pricked at the back of his eyes. He sensed his soul laid open to her. She cupped his face and met his questioning look.

“Be well, Torin. You have all you need to do what you must. Remember the magic of this moment, when the dawn of tomorrow comes. You must accept the magic you were born with. Embrace the past. It is your key to the future. You no longer need fear the darkness in your mind. I am here to guide you through it with a power greater than us both.”

She kissed him then, her soft mouth soothing, healing the pain he’d seen, the guilt of the blood he’d spilled. He held her as she moved her hips, coaxing, rolling gently, causing Torin’s body to tighten. His fingers dug into her flesh as he teetered on a shattering climax. With a quiet moan, her body milked his release and Torin squeezed his eyes shut at their explosive joining. His mouth dropped open in a silent primal scream. In the distance the screech of a great owl echoed in the night.

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Torin shot up in his bed with a start, frightening the servant who was waiting by his bed, his morning meal prepared. Sweat dripped down Torin’s face, his body shining with perspiration. Had it been a dream, a magnificent incredible dream? He

searched the blanket covering his naked legs, scanning the room for evidence that she had been there, that it was no dream.

Only the curious servant shared the room with him at present. Torin was ravenous and took the tray from the young man. He gulped down the wine with a single swallow and pushed it into the servant's hands.

“More, I am famished.” He wolfed down nearly a stack of wheat cakes before he swallowed another glass of wine and then savored the sweet grapes and succulent berries. His body thrummed with anticipation and energy. He needed to find out if it was real. Torin brushed his hand through his hair and a small twig with a single leaf fell to the bedclothes.

Remember the magic of this moment.

Torin twisted the twig between his fingers and grinned. Indeed he did and forever would. He grabbed another cake from the plate and stuffed it in his mouth as if he hadn't eaten for days.

“Milord, this was on your tray.” He handed Torin a scrolled piece of parchment. Curious and hoping it was from Alyson, he quickly opened it, reading the lines carefully.

Milord, last night was more than I could have hoped for. I have more to tell you. But we must be discreet. Meet me at the midnight hour at the Baddon pool. I will wait for you there.

Chapter Four

Alyson reread the note that the servant had stuffed in her hand earlier in the day. Sheâ€™d read it ten times, but wanted to be certain it was from Torin. Who else would leave her such a cryptic message, especially after what theyâ€™d shared? Heâ€™d asked that she meet him in the sacred pool in Baddon. There they could speak in private, safe from prying eyes. She crumpled the paper and tossed it into the flames of the hearth.

â€œWhat is that?â€ her mother asked. Seated at the nearby table, she was busy braiding sweet grass for rituals.

â€œIt was nothing.â€ The white lie escaped Alysonâ€™s mouth before she could stop it. If her family knew she was sneaking off with a Roman warrior there would be hell to pay. â€œMore orders from my mistress,â€ Alyson responded as an afterthought.

â€œMark my word, since that girl has arrived, there has been more tension among the workers. She carries a bad aura about her, that one. If sheâ€™s not careful someone is bound to put a curse on her.â€

Alyson wrapped her thin shawl around her shoulders and stared into the fire. â€œSometimes we curse ourselves by the choices we make.â€ She looked up and met her motherâ€™s steady eyes.

â€œYou are certain that all is well with you, daughter?â€

Alyson nodded. Sheâ€™d not seen or heard from Torin all day, assuming that heâ€™d had time to consider the grave mistake theyâ€™d made and did not wish to see her again. But this note changed everything. After tonight, she would know what part she was to play in this strange dance with the gods and perhaps at least, where Torin fit into their plan.

Later that night when her family was sleeping soundly, she snuck from the house, drawing the hood of her cloak up to hide her face. The walk to Baddon was not far, but she did not tarry as she hurried toward the near empty city. Once the center of Roman social life, it was a meeting place for discussions of political and military importance as well as a belief that the sacred pool was the entrance to the gods of the Underworld. Here jilted lovers and recipients of theft and scorn made known their curses, placing them on lead tablets and cast them into the depths of the pool in hope that the gods would honor their curseâ€”and they usually didâ€”for a price. Roman guards no longer patrolled the perimeter, but the streets of Baddon were not a safe place, especially for a woman alone.

The stone was warm beneath Alysonâ€™s feet. In each of the four corners, a small perpetual flame flickered on each of the stone shrines built for the goddess Minerva and though built by Romans, the Celtic people regarded the place as sacred, careful not to spurn the gods of the Underworld. A thick steam hovered over the

bubbling, dark green waters and it took a moment for her to detect a movement at the far end of the pool. Alyson ducked behind a pillar, hiding herself from view. Her heart racing, she peeked around the column just in time to see the chiseled torso of a man rise up from the water and dive back into the water. She caught only a glimpse of his long dark hair slicked away from his face and sighed with relief. She knew the contours of his body, his strength, and the scars on his flesh.

Alyson watched as he glided with lightning speed through the water. She remembered the hunger in his eyes when he looked at her, the way he touched her as though she was an exquisite gift from the gods. With a quick glance to be sure they were alone, she stepped from her hiding place, where she saw better his form beneath the waters, his broad shoulders rolling each time his arms pulled him forward, slicing through the water. Her mind had been on little else these days, thinking of his body joined to hers, his gentleness and desire to please her. She let her cloak slide to the stone floor, greeting the man as he emerged from the steps leading out of the pool. In the murky shadows his silhouette was breathtaking, water dripped from his body and heat pooled between Alyson's thighs at the thought of his hands on her.

"I am glad you came. I have been waiting for you."

He stepped toward her, and her gaze followed the light traveling upward from his feet to his thighs. Her knees grew weak, unable to get past the prize between his legs. The ethereal steam seemed to thicken, lulling her senses, her mind drifting into a sensual haze.

"I can see you appreciate this form. I want to please you."

Alyson registered the voice, fixated on the man's swagger, the shape of his muscular thighs. Ghostly hands touched the hem of her gown. Deft fingers caressed her calves, her thighs, shifting the gown over her hips. The heavy scent of perfumed oil and sulfur clogged the air, making it difficult to breathe. Held captive by a carnal lust, her body became aroused by his mesmerizing touch. His dark eyes stared into hers, a small gasp escaping her mouth as his fingers parted her womanly folds and stroked her.

"You like that, my pet. I will show you much pleasure. I will take you places you have only dreamt of in your passion." In her dreamlike state, he lifted her face to his and she saw Torin just before his mouth came down hard on hers. He pressed her back against the cool stone of the column, his fingers coaxing, sinking deeper into her moist heat. His tongue mated with hers, persistent, seeking, demanding. Too lost in her passion, Alyson could not hold on to the flashes of caution that this roughness was not like Torin. He had control of her, body and soul, and she was powerless to resist. Her fingers dug in to the sinewy flesh of his firm shoulders, his muscles bunching, flexing, as he pressed his body against her. "I feared you did not wish to see me again," she managed to whisper through her parched throat. Alyson sighed, shutting her eyes as his mouth closed over one breast, his hand kneading the other.

"I want you always like this," he stated, sliding his hands over her hips, cupping her from behind as he nibbled between her thighs.

The roughness of his beard scraped her sensitive flesh, need clawed at her, making her dizzy. "Milord," she pleaded, grasping the soft hairs on his head. Alyson opened her eyes and blinked, seeing Tulia walking toward them. Perched on the edge of release, Alyson opened her mouth to speak, but the ministrations of her lover were far too insistent, far too intoxicating to stop.

"Give in to him, little rabbit. Do not hold back the passion you deny yourself. Think of an eternity of such bliss."

Alyson shook her head, her gaze locked with Tulia. Something was wrong. She felt sick, her bones had turned liquid, she wanted him, wanted his cock buried deep inside her. Her flesh turned cold, her teeth began to chatter, even though her body was on fire with need.

"Give yourself to him. Release your heart, your *soul* to him." Tulia's voice grew loud. She stood watching as Torin pleased Alyson with his tongue, her gaze wild with delight, her grin making her appear like an evil gargoyle poised, ready to pounce.

"What manner of blackness is this? What have you done, Tulia?"

A stern voice came from far away in Alyson's mind.

Tulia straightened and faced the intruder. "See how your precious lover defies your trust? Did you think she is worthy of you? Look at her, nothing but a common whore!"

Alyson jerked her head toward the male voice. Though muted, it sounded very much like Torin's.

But if that was Torin, then who?

She looked down and the dark magic that had veiled her sight lifted, revealing the true form of the creature that pleased her. His scale-covered hands held her flesh, his serpentine tongue flicked between her thighs. She pushed against his serpentine-like head, screaming as she fought with all her might to free herself from the beast. In her blind fury, she felt a strong arm slip around her waist and she continued to fight, her arms and legs flailing. She was being dragged away from the creature, away from Tulia. Fully in control of her senses, she looked into the face of her rescuer. "Is it really you?"

Torin's dark eyes held hers. "It is me, Alyson. Stay here." He turned and lifted his sword over his head and faced the creature. It snarled, angry to have had its prize taken from it, and rose to its knees. Its dark body wavered, shimmering in the firelight until its torso and legs became one long dragon's tail. He balanced on his coiled tail, half-man, half-serpent, opening his mouth to reveal razor-sharp elongated teeth.

Alyson stared at the beast and realized then that Tulia had summoned him from the Underworld to remove any competition for Torin, offering the beast Alyson's soul in return for his trouble.

Tulia's face contorted with anger. She raised her fist, shouting at the creature. "We had an agreement. I summoned you to take her away. Now do as I bid, or

return to your watery prison with nothing and I will finish this task where you have failed.â€

Her insolence toward the god placed her in grave danger, though her stubborn greed prevented her from realizing that. Alyson searched for a way to save Tulia, to get her a safe distance from the beast, but before she could move, the creature turned on Tulia, his jaws snapping, his voice thundering in the still night. â€œYou promised me a human soul,â€ he growled menacingly.

Torinâ€™s blade came down on the serpentâ€™s tail and the beast raised its head, emitting an unearthly screech. It leveled a look at Torin and he lifted his blade again, poised to strike. Alyson drew a breath and in one fluid movement, the creature grabbed Tulia around the waist and leapt into the water, slithering deep into the pool. Sheâ€™d not even had time to scream.

Torin ran to the edge of the pool, pausing when Alyson ran to his side, grabbing his arm.

She watched with him, seeing the ripple of rings where the two had disappeared. Feeling ill, Alyson turned into his embrace and wept for Tulia. She was trembling from head to foot. Strong fingers lifted her chin, meeting the concern in his eyes. She buried her face in his cloak.

â€œIt is over. There is nothing more we can do.â€

â€œBut Tuliaâ€¦what will we tell her uncle?â€ An array of possible punishments crowded her mind.

â€œWe will tell him the truth. He will listen and make up his own mind. He is a fair man and just. He will have to believe us both. I will not leave your side.â€

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There was enormous sadness in the generalâ€™s eyes. There was nothing that could be done to alleviate his pain. In truth, Tuliaâ€™s selfishness and pride had been her downfall and no one could have prevented that.

Still, Torin needed to know that this tragedy would not fall back on Alyson or her family because of him, because of what he and Alyson shared. That, too, was another matter yet to be broached. â€œThe creature moved too fast, milord. There was nothing that anyone could have done.â€ Torin stayed on one knee, bowed before the general out of respect. He wondered how this might affect the generalâ€™s desire to help the people of Britannia.

â€œRise, Torin.â€ The generalâ€™s troubled gaze met his. â€œYou could not know what trouble my niece devised. She saw a means to her problem, and tried to master it. The sad truth is that you cannot master the dark heart of jealousy. It will destroy you, even as it took Tulia.â€

Torin glanced at Alyson, still on her knees in homage to her master. Tulia had set her sights on Torin and, seeing his interest in another woman, was willing to tamper with evil, cursing herself instead. How could Torin leave this place without Alyson? There was so much yet to learn about her and his brief moments with her, the connection they had to one another, was greater than Torin understood. She had been brought into his life for a purpose. He knew that now. â€œMilord, I am deeply

sorry that Tulia's feelings for me were not returned.

"My son, how can you feel for one, when you have feelings for another? My niece was spoiled, that much is truth. She was good in many ways, but spiteful when she did not get her preference. She has had been that way even as a young child."

Grateful for the older man's understanding, Torin searched his heart, debating the request he was about to make. If Alyson refused him, then he would have to accept it as part of his fate. "Milord, I have an unusual request, before I take my leave to return to my camp."

General Ambrosius lifted a weary gaze to Torin. "What is it, Commander?"

"I would like permission to allow this servant and her family to accompany us back to our camp, milord. This woman's skills have proven invaluable to me. She would act as my guide as we prepare for our day on the field of battle."

The old man looked from Alyson to Torin, a brief smile lifting on his lips. "Rise, woman and meet the man who shall be your new master, if you so choose. I give you the choice, but you must know also that I cannot allow your family to accompany you. Your father is one of my best men overseeing the workers. If you choose to go with him, you do this on your own, though I do believe the commander will prove to be a kind and just. What say you?"

Alyson stared at her feet, and Torin knew well that she debated being thought of as his servant. "Milord, I would not regard her as my servant. She would be my equal, at my side."

The quirk of the general's eyebrow prompted Alyson to speak.

"Milord, you have been most kind to me and my family. I have been chosen by the gods as messenger to help this man to follow the path of his destiny. I do not know yet what that entails, but I know that when it is time, my part will be revealed."

Torin smiled at her and together they faced General Ambrosius.

"If this is your decision, then I give her over to your care, Commander. See to it that you treat her well. I have to see her father every day."

Together they bowed. "You have my word, milord," Torin replied.

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Alyson said her goodbyes, not knowing when she would see her family again. But her heart was full as she hurried back to the villa where Torin and Dryston awaited on horseback. She tossed her meager bag of belongings to Torin, who fastened it to his saddle and then reached down to help her up behind him.

"The journey is long, are you sure you will be comfortable back there?" he asked, twisting to look at her.

She snaked her arms around his midsection, not knowing what the future would bring. Would he feel the same about her if she had to force him to see the truth of his past? She glanced at his comrade, Dryston, and received an ornery grin.

"The woman looks plenty comfortable, brother."

"You know, you have yet to read my palm," he said over his shoulder as they

started on across the valley to the mountains beyond.

Alyson wondered why it was that with each attempt, sheâ€™d been distracted by the very man whose destiny she guarded. â€œIt seems, milord, that you enjoy distracting me from my appointed duty.â€

â€œI admit that it true. Does the lady dislike my distractions?â€ he asked, grinning back at her.

She smiled, her body tingling with the thought of his distraction methods. No, she decided, she could wait for some time for the gods to decide when she should offer him a reading. â€œNay, milord, your distractions please me very much. But I am no more aware now than I was when the gods will choose to reveal your path.â€

They rode in silence for a few moments and she sensed him digesting what sheâ€™d said. Sheâ€™d been told by one of Ambrosiusâ€™s servants that heâ€™d been sent to gather information of the commander, to find out more about his past. But the information was still too vague. Whether this information was directly related to Torinâ€™s destiny remained to be seen and the gods would only reveal it at the proper time.

Be his guide. He will need you.

Alyson raised her cheek from Torinâ€™s back and listened. A warm summer breeze brushed over her face as she searched the green valley stretched before them. The change of seasons would one day be upon them and then she would be called upon to be at his side. For what purpose she did not know.

â€œAre you well?â€ Torin asked. His hand reached down and covered hers protectively, squeezing it.

â€œAye, milord. All is well. So may it be.â€

About this Story

The time of the Dark Ages is largely very difficult to research. What few records have been found are written by one or two monks of the day and from a very narrow point of view. The rest is largely speculation based on archeological finds, assumptions, theories and of course, legends.

This story then is a prequel to my Dark Ages Spice novel, *Tortured*. With many readers asking to know what happened to my heroine's younger brother in that book, this story's story was thus born. But, as, in the novel, any similarities of places, names, or events are used only for fictional purposes, not as historical documentation. Writers live by the words, "What if" when they tell a story. This story is no different in that aspect.

~

Enjoy!

Amanda

If you liked *Forbidden Pleasures*, pick up where the story left off in *Tortured* by Amanda McIntyre, available now from Spice wherever books and ebooks are sold.



Ensnared in the war-torn, untamed Dark Ages of North England, Sierra understands all too well what it takes to survive: the ability to numb the soul. She has learned this lesson the hard way, watching her mother die at the hands of the king's henchmen, her brother cast out into the cold to perish, and discovering the treacherous, leering king holds a crucial secret about her past.

But when he grants Sierra her life, she discovers the pardon is perhaps worse than death. Sierra is made executioner's apprentice, forced to witness unspeakable suffering while encouraged to explore her own sexual power.

Brainwashed and exhausted, Sierra's heart slowly grows cold until Dryston of Hereford is brought to the dungeon as traitor and spy. Using her sexual allure to extract the warrior's secrets, Sierra finds herself torn between duty and desire. Soon, Sierra is craving the only man who can help set her battered soul free and give her a chance for revenge.

Plus, look for these other sexy reads by Amanda McIntyre, always available in ebook format:

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Forbidden Pleasures

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