

Centurion's Command

By Loki Renard

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Chapter One

One with the forest. One with the dewy air, the rich earth. One with all there was. Breathing deep, I inhaled the soft breeze, the breeze that had sustained my people throughout our great line. This same breath that now flowed through me had flowed through my mother, my father and beyond. We existed in a never ending circle of birth and re-birth, coming from the earth and returning to it again.

By my side, my faithful hound Bran still quivered with the joy of the hunt. In her jaws she held a small woodland creature that had recently been felled by her flashing jaws. In the moments after the kill, I took a moment to give thanks to the spirit of the rabbit.

With my head bowed in a quiet moment of prayer, I felt the world become still around me, I felt...

“Halt!”

I was startled out of my reverential trance by an ugly man wearing a metal suit. He shouted at me from about thirty paces away through the branches and leaves of the forest and I noted that he brandished a long spear in his brawny arm. This was not a good thing.

“Ho there! Halt!”

I had been quite definitely halted when he had come upon me, however now that the shouting had begun, my halting ceased rather quickly and much like a beast of prey, I took to my heels immediately.

Roman soldiers were not to be trusted, they were born to a life of blood and they knew nothing but the bringing of death and pain.

At the time these events took place, Roman armies had been steadily encroaching on our lands in slow centipedes with their shields and spears and wicked gods for many, many years, grinding free men and women under the heel of their tyranny. Maidens who fell into their clutches could hope for a life of slavery at best and unspeakable horrors, like marriage, at worst. There were many tales of pretty young women being snatched up from villages and sent to Rome to perform as slaves and wives for the decadent men who ruled with iron fists. Even I feared the Romans, though I would never have admitted as much to any living soul.

As I fled I glanced around me to make sure that Bran was still by my side. Faithful mutt that she was, she could have outpaced me in a few strides and escaped to safety, but she kept pace beside me, her stringy, shaggy fur flowing in the wind.

Behind us, I heard the clattering of heavily armed soldiers doing their very best to give chase. In the course of our hunt we had obviously strayed too close to a Roman

encampment. It was foolish, but so were many of the things I did those days. There was a scent of change in the air that I did not like at all, I could feel that all I cared about would soon be wiped away and there was little I could do about it.

Even the village I was now rushing towards at top speed had been moved several times due to the movements of the armies. We had once lived in a rather nice, well established little town, but we now lived in hastily constructed houses made of mud and straw and sticks, hoping that the armies would be held at bay long enough for us to plant some crops. Judging by the location of this patrol so close to the village, it seemed that we would soon be moving again.

With my long blonde hair whipping about my shoulders, I quickly turned off the small path that wound through the forest and took to dashing between the trees. The sounds of clattering armor quickly changed to shouted curses when the soldiers got caught up in creeping vines that snagged in their mail, and roots that tripped up their heavy boots. Romans were fine on their paved roads, but in a decent forest, they were entirely helpless.

Even as I smirked with triumph I didn't stop running, stopping would get you dead. I could not forget that they had scouts, scouts that could track for miles. It was unlikely that they would send one after me, but I didn't much feel like finding out I'd been wrong after the fact. I had to get back to the safety of the village, they would not bother me there, behind the safety of the sharpened posts that fortified our little encampment.

Glancing down at Bran, I saw to my great pleasure that she still gripped our prize between her teeth, a very large, very dead rabbit almost as long as my arm. We would eat well tonight.

Finally I saw the fires of the village through the trees, and although my rasping breaths were making my throat hoarse and exhaustion was beginning to set in, I whooped with glee as I drew closer to the safety of the thatched mud houses.

"Greetings savages!" I cried as I came tearing into camp at full speed and skidded to a halt, kicking up mud as I did so. Several of the villagers turned towards me with disdain written across their features, but others laughed at my high spirits. I was something of an exception to the norms of the village and rather a controversial figure. Most women my age were bearing babes and chivvying husbands about the place, but I had chosen a different path, the path of the spirit. Being an apprentice druid had many perks, I was free to roam the forests as much as I pleased, as long as I offered counsel to those that wanted it and brewed herbs for those who needed them.

Gawain, my protector, and chief of our village allowed himself to express a ghost of a smile as Bran trotted up to him and dropped the rabbit at his feet.

"Have you been hunting, Sabrina?"

"I have, m'lord," I draped myself over into an exaggerated bow.

His kind eyes crinkled down at me and I smiled up at him, ignoring the glares from the others. Though Gawain was an old man, and his long white hair now no longer needed to be dyed pale, I thought him the most handsome man I'd ever seen - in a platonic sort of way. If it wasn't for him, I'd have been cast out long ago, I was sure of that.

"We shall eat well tonight, m'lord," I pointed out obviously.

"We shall. How kind of you my dear," Gawain said indulgently, drawing his robes about himself and pointing towards the camp fire. "All the more fortunate as we have a guest this eve, who will now feast on something besides nuts and berries."

I turned and looked in the direction Gawain indicated. Through the leaping flames of the central fire I laid eyes on the Roman for the first time. My impressions of him were that he was the strangest and most dangerous looking man I'd ever seen. He was a mature man at the peak of his masculinity, his head had been shaved bare, and a ragged scar wound its way from the side of his skull down to his craggy jaw line. His shoulders were as broad as an Ox and even through his red tunic it was clear that he was the possessor of an impressive musculature, no doubt wrought from battle and a life harder than I could begin to imagine. Most unsettling of all though was not his physicality, but the keen look in his deep, dark eyes. He was looking at me through the leaping flames of the camp fire with a thoughtful expression that made my toes curl.

"A Roman?" I turned to Gawain with a puzzled expression. We were certainly no friends to the Romans, whose armies continued to cut swathes across our lands and murder those who did not submit to their tyranny.

"Indeed he is."

"What is he here for? Sacrifice?"

Gawain chuckled dryly. "You shall not have your blood today Sabrina, he is an honored guest. He is Centurion Decius Cassius Verres. Treat him with respect."

"Decius Cassius Verres? Is he afraid of perhaps running out of names, and so seeks to hoard them?" I quipped sneeringly as I watched the Roman turn his attention away from me and towards one of the simpering attending maids who were doing their best to ply him with berries and mead.

I understood why they gathered about the man so closely, they would soon be of marriageable age, and a husband such as he would guarantee security for the rest of their lives. Not all felt so vehemently against Rome as I did, indeed Rome was said by many to be the future. A Roman husband could provide many luxuries our own men never could. Many of the younger women had romantic dreams of trading their hard lives in the woods and fields for villas in the Roman Empire.

Personally, I'd long ago given up all hope of finding a husband. I had embraced my destiny, to hunt and to act as the spirit guide Gawain assured me I could be. I was happy in my life as it was and it was difficult not to be scornful of the young, fresh faced wenches that still believed salvation lay in the arms of a man.

"That is not respectful," Gawain chided me gently.

"Right," I agreed, shooting a dire look at the intruder in our midst. "I will see you in the morning."

"Where are you going?"

"Into the woods."

"We need you here tonight. It is a special occasion."

"A special occasion?"

"Yes."

He was being mysterious. I hated it when Gawain was mysterious. He knew that all too well. He rested his hand on my shoulder and leaned down to speak in my ear. "Be patient, Sabrina."

For his sake, I was patient. I hung about the camp awkwardly, waiting for the evening to come and the ceremony Gawain had planned to begin. When the hours drew on too drearily I laid down behind one of the round houses with Bran and caught a nap.

The drums woke me up. The fast thudding beat roused me from sleep and drew me towards the camp fire. I loved the drums, had done since I was a small child. Magic was possible when those drums were played, when the dark night gave way to bright fire and chanting.

To my joy, the food was almost ready as well. The rabbit had been skinned and gutted and now turned slowly above the flames. Potatoes and other root vegetables rested in the coals of the fire and the scent of good food and the low hum of chatter drew me to the flames. As always, Bran was by my side. We were never separate, not even for a moment. We slept together, hunted together, and fed together.

After the food was divided, I retired to the edge of the circle, where I might be hidden in half darkness and ate as Gawain addressed Decius Verres and the tribe.

"Decius Verres comes to us as an envoy of peace," Gawain finally announced the reason for the vile Roman's presence. "These wars have been fought for hundreds of years and many have fallen to the spear. Decius hopes to spare further Britons from this fate."

“Rome is a whore for war, she will never close her legs,” I interjected loudly from the back.

Though heads turned, I was outside the circle of light cast by the flames, and their glares fell on nothing but dark space. A few of the others agreed with me however, their chuckles said that much. We were surrendering at last it seemed, it was galling, but even I had to admit that it was better than death for every man, woman and child. Ours was not a tribe of war, and we could not hope to match the might of the Roman army.

Gawain looked thoroughly displeased, but he should have known better than to demand I stay for such an occasion. He knew very well how vehemently I hated Rome and everything to do with it. As for Decius, his expression remained still like stone, he seemed not to have heard my words at all.

“We welcome you as a brother,” Gawain continued after my interruption.

“Thank you,” Decius replied, in our own tongue.

I instantly became all the more suspicious. A Roman who not only understood our tongue, but spoke it with a smooth fluency? A Roman who claimed to come in peace? I doubted the story. Romans never came in peace. They always came in war.

I was right to be suspicious of these events, for it soon turned out that they were planning to catch me in their tendrils and make a puppet of me. Though I did not yet know it, my days of running free through the woods were coming to a close.

After the ceremonies were done, I was summoned to Gawain's roundhouse where the old druid stalked back and forth in front of me in clear agitation. He was not pleased with me at all.

“This is important, Sabrina, for all of us. For the survival of our people. You jeopardize too much.” He stopped and shot me a dark look. “If I were younger, I would whip you,” he said irritably.

It was rare for Gawain to be seriously angry with me, and I was a little taken aback to see him so disturbed. In the past he had always encouraged my outspoken nature, indeed, he had indulged me far past the point other elders considered acceptable.

Before I could answer the man who had raised me as his own, I was interrupted.

“Perhaps I could oblige you in that.”

The lightly accented tongue grated in my ears. I turned to see that Decius, the Roman infiltrator was at the threshold of Gawain's roundhouse, hovering like a large fly.

“You would not survive the attempt,” I promised the intruder. If this was to be our first

introduction, I was determined that it would be one that left the Roman totally clear where he stood with me.

As I turned to stare him down, he loomed above me, looking all the larger for his proximity. Still, size was not everything, and the sharp dagger sheathed at my waist could make quick work of any man, small, large, or giant. There was a twist of patronizing humor to the set of his mouth as he looked me over with those deep dark eyes that drank me in and found me wanting. I already disliked him sincerely and seeing his aquiline features smirking down at me did not appease my mood.

“Your daughter is fierce,” Decius spoke over my head.

“Sabrina has been spoiled, I apologize for her,” Gawain said with a hard look towards me. I noticed he did not refute the Roman's assumption that I was his daughter, though we bore no relation to one another at all. I was a foundling, an orphan of the wars, as were so many others. Were it not for Gawain and others like him, an entire generation would have been lost to the Romans.

“A spoiled woman is easily corrected,” Decius continued to speak as if I were not there.

“And a fool and his blood are soon parted,” I riposted through clenched teeth. The arrogance of the man was astounding. He did not know me, yet he was casually suggesting that he be allowed to whip me.

“Sabrina!” Gawain glowered at me, and I desisted, lowering my eyes.

“I am sorry, Gawain,” I apologized. I did not wish to make him angry, he did not deserve to be unhappy. The meddlesome Roman was the one who deserved to suffer.

“I will leave you with your guest, my lord,” I said bitterly through clenched teeth. This was the Roman's fault. I had asked to be allowed to leave, but Gawain had insisted I stay, though he knew my hatred for the Romans.

“No, you will stay.”

I fell silent as I became thoroughly uneasy. By my side, Bran shifted nervously. Something was afoot. There was a plan in the works, a plan I was not aware of.

“I wish for you to act as an aide to Decius in his work among our people. He will be traveling from village to village, he will need a guide.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but Decius got in before me. “I appreciate the sentiment, but I will not be needing a girl on my journey. I will need to focus on the matters at hand.”

He thought Gawain was offering me to him as a whore! My blood boiled as Gawain lifted

up a hand to stay me.

“Sabrina is no mere girl, she is an accomplished woodsman and known to many. She bears my seal and she carries with her the authority of our clan.”

It was Decius' turn to look thoroughly incredulous. Though he was far too diplomatic to say what he was quite obviously thinking, the way his lip curled when he looked at me said it all.

“I do not think the Roman approves of my lack of penis,” I said with a wry grin.

“You are not a man,” Decius said, as if that alone were a black mark against me.

“Correct. Did your tutor teach you that?” I mocked him.

“It is not appropriate for a woman to deal in these matters,” he said stiffly.

“Amongst our people, a woman is the equal of a man,” Gawain chided him gently, subtly reminding him of the nature of his alleged mission of peace.

Decius bowed to him. “I apologize. I hope I have not caused undue offense.”

“Oh you've caused plenty of offense,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

His jaw tightened as he looked at me. “Then I shall offer my apologies to you too, Lady Sabrina.”

“But you will not bow to me?” I was beginning to enjoy myself now at the Roman's expense. It was clear that it caused him distress to address me as an equal.

“Sabrina, do not antagonize him,” Gawain said, commanding my attention. “In this mission I put my trust in you. This is important. Do not fail me.”

“I will not fail you,” I promised Gawain. I meant it too. In all my rebellion, in all the pain of the years, Gawain had been my rock, steady and unfailing. Now as he approached his twilight, he wished peace for our people. If I could give him that, I would.

“Good.” He smiled at me and I felt my heart lighten. I had failed in many things in my life, but I would not fail Gawain whilst there was still breath in me.

The details of the mission were vague at best. I was to escort Decius to the major villages and facilitate negotiations with each of the chieftains for a truce with Rome. Though the kings had allied against Rome, it was clear that Rome would crush us before they allowed the resistance to continue. Better a peaceful surrender to Rome than death under our own King.

A weight settled on me as I heard the details of the plan. It was undoubtedly a betrayal of sorts, we owed allegiance to the King and had sworn to battle the Romans with him. But had he protected us when the Romans had first come? He had not. Gawain had determined that it was better to be ruled by Rome than sacrificed by a king we barely knew, and though I had reservations about the matter, I trusted Gawain completely. I would have walked through fire had he so commanded it.

So our mission was laid out. We would not travel with heavily armed men, for such a contingent would connote aggression. We were to rely on the custom of hospitality, my connection with Gawain and Decius' authority with Rome alone. It would be dangerous, but probably no more so than taunting Roman patrols in the forests every day.

“We will leave in the morning. Be ready,” Decius was curt as we left Gawain's roundhouse. His displeasure at being stuck with me as a traveling partner was obvious, but it did not concern me. I was not doing this for him.

I watched with a sneering curl on my lips as he made his way back towards the small hut near the fire that had been set up for him and then I went in the opposite direction entirely. I did not sleep in the roundhouses, or by the fire. It was my custom to create a nest from my cloak in the woods and sleep there with Bran. I needed to be outside, close to the elements.

As I bedded down with my faithful hound and gazed up at the stars that twinkled through the gaps of the forest canopy, I tried to reassure myself that we would be okay. I had never been sent away from Gawain's protection before. This mission represented a milestone in my life. I was no longer a child of the village, I was a representative of the Chief himself and that meant heavy responsibility in a time of war.

What if the Roman betrayed us? The thought wrenched at my gut, and I swore then and there that I would never trust the Roman. I would always be on the look out for treachery. My people were depending on me.

When morning broke, Decius was in a foul mood. Perhaps it was not wise to wake him with a pitcher of icy river water, but he had made his wish to move early quite clear, and we could not go anywhere with him snoring by the embers of the fire like a big pale bear.

“By Mars!” he swore as he came to consciousness swiftly under the deluge. I laughed down at him as he wiped the water out of his eyes.

“Come along, it is morning, we must leave,” I reminded him.

“You are a foul wretch,” he muttered as he got to his feet. I could see in his eyes that he wanted nothing more than to lay hands on me, but out of respect for Gawain I hoped he would not. It was not the done thing to shed the blood of a guest in the village, but I

would if I had to.

“Is that any way to speak to your esteemed guide?” I smirked, enjoying the authority I had been given by Gawain.

“Do not make the mistake of thinking you are above repercussions,” he warned me darkly as he began to prepare his pack.

“Do not make the mistake of thinking you are in any place to determine repercussions.”

He was crouching down on the ground below me, and when he looked up at me, it was with such sudden fierceness that I recoiled.

“Do not continue to test me, girl” he growled.

We were off to a grand start, I thought to myself. I was to escort an angry Roman into the very heart of our territory, resisting the urge to slit his throat whilst he threatened me with vague, but dire threats.

“My name is Sabrina. Use it,” I said coldly. I did not find his habit of calling me 'girl' a pleasing one.

He did not reply and we remained in frosty silence until Gawain arrived to see us off. Most of the village was still in their slumber, so it was a lonely send off.

“Be well,” he said, drawing me into his embrace. He felt frail now when I hugged him. I remembered a time when he seemed to be the biggest, strongest fellow in the world. I used to think nothing could touch him, and nothing could touch me when I was with him. Now I saw all too clearly how vulnerable he was as he approached the final years of his life.

“I will,” I promised, holding back the threat of tears. My journey with Decius would be a long one. I hoped Gawain would survive to see me return.

“May the gods watch over you,” Gawain blessed Decius, diplomatically avoiding the mention of any specific gods that would offend either the Roman tradition or ours.

In a few moments it was all over. I kissed Gawain's cheek one final time and began leading Decius towards the trail that lead out of our village and into the depths of Briton territory. Our trails were not nearly as fine or as wide as the Roman roads, which were built to accommodate legions marching along them, indeed, at some points one would not have known one was on a trail at all unless one knew what to look for. My role as a guide was essential, I hoped that fact would curb any of Decius' unfortunate Roman tendencies to treat a woman as nothing more than a piece of property.

I did not speak to him as we set out, but I could hear him stomping along after me and

that was enough. Bran went slightly ahead of me, her keen nose to the ground, picking up scents of animals and men, if there were any to scent. More than once my life had been saved by Bran's nose and I trusted her senses implicitly.

"How far is it to Ker Deblen?" Decius asked the question as we gained the depths of the forest, where the dawn light was beginning to filter through the canopy and the fine mist of morning dew began to evaporate, making everything smell fresh, and earthy and alive.

"Three or four days," I replied over my shoulder.

"Three or four days at this pace?" His tone was strained.

"Yes." I came to a halt. "Is there a problem?"

"If we go faster, we get there faster."

I rolled my eyes, he was a typical impatient male, determined to go all out towards destiny without any kind of caution at all. He rather reminded me of a young boy who, first learning to hunt, goes crashing madly through the trees, frightening his prey away with his urgency. "If we go faster, we get tired faster."

"Can the lady not keep a quicker pace? I could carry you if you like." As insulting as his words were, they were delivered entirely deadpan, making me think that perhaps Decius considered this a viable option.

"I don't need to be carried," I said severely. "I simply do not intend to run full speed through the forest, drawing attention from every roaming patrol and wild animal. We go at my pace."

Decius folded his hairy arms across his chest and regarded me with a look of disapproval. "Are you intending to be so contrary throughout the entire journey?"

His inference that I was being somehow juvenile irked me. He was the one pushing to rush headlong into unknown territory. "Are you intending on being so patronizing? Are you really so desperate to prove yourself?" I asked derisively, looking him up and down.

"You have a wicked tongue," Decius noted. "It may yet cause you grief."

"Enough with the threats," I declared, taking a step towards him, a move which I intended to be threatening, but which failed miserably when I realized it only served to make me crane my head up at him.

The corners of his wide eyes crinkled as he looked down at me over the bridge of his nose. "They are not threats, they are promises. You are a mouthy, spoiled girl, Sabrina."

"I am a mouthy spoiled girl who holds your life in her hands, keep that in mind, Roman."

“Are you threatening me?” His voice was dangerously soft.

“No, I am promising you,” I rejoined with equal intensity.

“Promising me what?”

“That you will regret patronizing me, and moreover, that you will regret not listening to me. Ker Deblen is in the hills. It is not an easy journey, and moreover it is entirely possible we will meet with unfriendly tribes along the way. If you wish to meet your fate breathless and ill prepared, it is that way.” I pointed in the direction of Ker Deblen and glared at the large Roman whose lips were now quirking with amusement.

“What is so funny?” I demanded. I did not like being laughed at.

“You remind me of an old Optio commander , though you are perhaps a quarter of the size,” Decius confessed.

I was pleased to learn that he was finally according me some measure of authority. That was a point I could capitalize on.

“Are you ready to listen to me, Centurion Decius Cassius Verres?” I used his full title purposely, hoping it carried some weight.

Decius did not answer me for a moment. In his eyes I saw sparks of humor still dancing as I glowered at him. “I am, Lady Sabrina, lead on,” he said finally.

I nodded, momentarily mollified, and returned to the task of guiding the arrogant Roman to whatever destiny awaited him. At that moment, I would not have been surprised if his blood had spilled before the day was out.

Chapter Two

Though he had agreed to follow me without question, tensions continued to bubble between Decius and I. He did manage to keep his mouth shut for several hours which made our journey much smoother. When it came time to break for rations however, our rivalry flared once more.

“Wait here,” I said, turning to the lumbering hulk of a man behind me. “I will return shortly.”

Decius looked at me suspiciously. “Where are you going?”

“To gather food.” Was he a simpleton? Did he not understand the need to eat?

“I have rations, share mine,” he offered, setting his large pack down on the ground before him.

“Save your rations. There may be a time we cannot hunt,” I said pragmatically.

“Relax Sabrina,” Decius said as he sat down to retrieve his rations from his pack. “We can eat now and restock in Ker Deblen. We do not need to waste time in the hunt. Do you always live as if the world might end tomorrow?”

I bristled. “That is what happens when one grows up hunted near to extinction by a tyrant and his armies.”

Decius made a face of frustration. “I am not your enemy, Sabrina.”

“Yes you are. You are merely fortunate that I am merciful,” I bristled at him. “Wait here, I will return shortly.”

“No.”

“No?”

“I will come with you.”

“You can't come lumbering through the forest with that pack and hope to catch anything,” I pointed out derisively.

“Quite right,” he said, uncoiling a length of hemp that had been tied at the bottom of his pack. I watched silently as he tied one end of the rope to a stone, then tossed the stone over a thick branch of a tree. It arced over the branch and fell back to earth, where he tied it to his pack and used the hanging length of rope to hoist his pack into the branches.

“That should stop the animals, if not the human animals,” he winked at me. I was mildly impressed, though his apparent decision to charm me did not win him any favors. He was probably used to fickle Roman women who would swoon if he so much deigned as to turn his dark eyes framed with their long lashes towards them. I was not so easily manipulated. I was a free woman, a woman who needed no man, who would bow to no man.

“Let us hunt,” he said.

It seemed that there would be no shaking him. “Alright, you can come, but don't get in the way,” I muttered.

I did not expect much from the Roman as we departed the trail and entered the deep woods, but I was surprised to discover that he was not only light on his feet, he moved with incredible silence. Even Bran made more noise with her snuffling than he did as he walked.

I cast an appreciative glance over at him by way of thanking him for not destroying our hunt, but he was not looking at me. His eyes were focused some place between the myriad of leaves, his expression was keen, focused intent. He had the gaze of a predator, a quiet, powerful predator that gathers itself in dark places and waits for prey to chance by.

We did not have long to wait. Before long, a hare flashed by in the bushes and Bran was after it like a shot, already stretched out at full speed, leaping tangled roots with an agile grace I envied. With Bran by my side, I rarely had to make a kill myself, she would chase her quarry down, grasp it by the back of the neck and shake it with a quick, violent shake that dispatched it almost instantly. Watching her hunt was one of the great pleasures of my life.

She disappeared into the dense foliage, and a moment later we heard the hare's death scream. She soon came trotting back proudly, her prize held lightly in her jaws. She always brought her kill back to me like that, untouched apart from the killing blow.

“Impressive,” Decius murmured.

“Hounds have many more uses than tearing men apart,” I said snidely, reminding him of the horrors his people visited on the innocent for sport.

The frustrated look was quickly back in his gaze. “Sabrina...”

“Do not tell me I must forget about the horrors of past and accept Rome as a friend. I will not forget,” I snapped fiercely.

“I was not about to tell you to forget. I was merely going to remind you once more that

we are working together, for peace.”

“For peace under Rome,” I shook my head in disgust as we proceeded back towards the clearing where Decius had left his pack.

In spite of himself, he was beginning to lose his cool a little, or so I fancied. “Would you prefer the whole world painted themselves blue and charged about offering blood sacrifices? Rome is the future. Rome is culture.”

“Rome is a bloodied whore,” I growled under my breath.

He took a deep breath. “Sabrina. Your fate is inevitable. It is up to you whether you accept it with good grace and take advantages of the protection of the Empire, or whether you rebel against it, like a spoiled child.”

“How dare you!” My hand was at my side, on my knife. A knife I yearned to plunge into his smug flesh. He was looking down at me from his great height, entirely unconcerned at my display of intended violence. He did not fear me nearly enough for my liking. It was time he learned to do so.

I drew my blade and slashed it towards his broad chest. I intended to cut him shallowly, to teach him that I was not one of his defenseless Roman women who relied on men for their protection, but as my blade slashed towards him, he burst into action. A sudden flash of pain in my wrist was caused by his grip and twist motion that saw the knife I wielded fall helplessly out of my hand.

“Now you have gone too far, girl,” he growled, yanking me forwards. I fancied then that my life was to end as so many of my people's lives had done, at the hands of a Roman. He was far stronger than I, his hands large and brawny enough to snap my neck in twain. In the moment of fear I made peace with my existence. I would become one with the grasses and the birds. I would fly free forever. I would...

“Ow!” I screamed as his large Roman hand slapped me hard across my bottom. Decius had not dispatched me, he had hauled me over his lap and was hitting me with great gusto. What strange Roman torture was this? He pulled aside the simple deer skin I wore as a skirt and wasted no time in thrashing my bare skin. Over and over again his palm slapped against my hindquarters, making them sore and swollen.

“You will not raise a hand against me, you understand?” he lectured me roughly. “Not ever.”

I did not reply, for I was far too busy screaming my rage and pain. Every blow hurt more than the last, and by the time he stopped his assault on my rear, I was sobbing in a way I hadn't since I was a very small child.

“We must work together, Sabrina,” he said more gently as he held me on his lap and ran

his large, hot palm over my punished skin.

"I hate you," I cried angrily. I did hate him. I hated him for everything he was. I hated him for his blood, for the pain his people had wrought upon those I held dear, and I hated him for the tender way he held me now and tempted me to betray everything I had ever known.

"You may hate me if you wish, but you must behave yourself," he said, lifting me easily as he stood up from the fallen trunk he had used as a seat and placing me on the ground. I stood unsteadily like a new fawn and rubbed at my backside with both hands.

A thought came to me suddenly. Bran. Where was she? Had he killed her?

"Bran!" I called her name in a panic.

"Shh, she is over there." Decius pointed to a hollow in the woods and I saw my faithful hound cowering as if she were the one who had been whipped. Seeing my proud hound so scared made me angry once more.

"See what you have done to her!" I glowered at Decius, even though I felt very much as if I had lost a substantial amount of gravitas in his eyes. He had treated me worse than a woman, he had treated me like a child. He would suffer for this, I vowed as Bran skulked over to me and licked my hand apologetically.

"She will recover from the shock, as will her Mistress."

I did not reply. I was thoroughly mortified and yet I could not allow myself to simply become quiet and obedient to this arrogant Roman.

"You may hit me if you wish, but I will not obey you and I will not submit!" I vowed.

Decius merely sighed. "Oh for a few days of quiet and a suitable rod," he murmured to himself before turning his gaze on me. "You truly are the most contrary woman I have ever known, Sabrina."

"Good. Then we know where we stand."

I was satisfied that I had at least made up a little ground in his eyes. He had thrashed me, but it would take more than that to make me cower before him like a dog.

"Yes. Now how about you put that knife to good use and we prepare dinner and make camp."

I was about to argue that we had much further to go that day, but the fading of the light convinced me that Decius was correct. It would be best if we made camp and ate our fill. The hare Bran had caught was a large one and it would feed us both quite well.

Before long we had built a fire and the skinned animal was roasting above the flames on a makeshift spit. The warmth of the flames and the promise of good food raised my spirits, though I found myself tending the food on my knees, for my bottom was still very much in pain from the concerted application of Decius' palm. I was sure he saw the awkward way I sat and my little wincing, but he said nothing about them and we ate in silence. When I gathered my things to sleep in the forest however, trouble began anew.

“Where are you going?”

“To sleep?” The inflection in my voice clearly indicated that he must be the worst kind of moron.

“No. Sleep by the fire.”

“I don't want to sleep by the fire.” I sounded churlish, but I didn't care. Who was he to tell me where to sleep? Even Gawain didn't tell me where to sleep.

There was a rumble from somewhere in Decius' direction. “Sabrina, it is becoming clear that this expedition is suffering for a lack of leadership.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means come and sleep down by the fire.”

“No.”

Another sigh. “Sabrina, should we need to move quickly I will not go blundering about in the bush in the dark looking for you. Come sleep by the fire.”

I considered my options in the dark. I could go and sleep by the fire and not raise Decius' anger against me, sublimate my own rebellion in exchange for peace and security. Or I could reassert my individuality, show Decius that he could hit me, but he could not conquer me.

The choice was obvious. I continued into the forest with Bran at my heels. To my credit, I managed to go several paces before Decius' long strides caught up with me and he swept me up into his arms. Even in the low light, I could see the look of grim annoyance on his face as he carried me back towards the fire.

“Will you lay here, or do I need to bind you?”

This was going too far. We had begun the journey as reluctant equals, but out here in the wilds, Decius was wasting no time in proving his dominion over me.

“Are you mad?” I blustered against his chest as he knelt down and placed me on the ground near the fire.

“No. But you are intensely contrary. I wonder if it would not be easier to send you back to your father.”

That stung me deeply. Not only was he rejecting me, but he also presumed to tell me where to go. “Nobody sends me anywhere. If you do not wish for my company. You need but say the word.” I stood up and began packing away the few belongings I had.

“What on earth are you doing, girl?”

“I am leaving.”

A harsh laugh escaped him. “You think I will allow you to roam about alone in the bush at night?”

I rounded on him angrily. “It is not a matter of what you will and will not allow. I am my own woman.”

Decius shook his head with an expression of amazement on his face. “So willful,” he remarked to nobody in particular.

“Yes, this is how we are. We are willful and we are right to be so. A woman is not a pet for you to keep and coddle,” I lectured him, my hands on my hips.

“I admire your spirit Sabrina, but I must ask that you do not go off into the forest alone.”

“You do not wish for me to be here, and I have no wish to remain,” I said simply, gesturing Bran to my side. She had sensed the tension between us and was already trembling against me. I had trained her long ago that aggression towards a human was entirely unacceptable, but I now found myself rather regretting that decision as it meant I stood against the bulk of Decius alone.

“Go and make your bed by the fire, Sabrina, or I assure you, you will regret it.”

“Do not think to threaten me. You cannot threaten me! I care nothing for your threats!”

“Fire side. Now.”

“I am leaving.”

Decius said nothing. He merely looked at me and I knew that, for this night at least, our conflict had reached its climax. We could go no further. I knew I could go no further. Decius wasn't going to let me go and if I insisted that I was leaving he would simply drag

me back. He might even take me back to Gawain, I realized, and if he did that, I would never live down the disappointment.

Without another word, I turned and went and began to make my bed by the fire as Decius had instructed me to. I hated every moment of it as I spread out my cloak and laid down. Bran came to me with a curious expression on her face and I knew she wondered why we were not in the forest. She liked the warmth of the fire however and she was soon happily stretched out as close to it as she could get without singeing her fur, snoring happy dog snores. I envied her quiet acceptance of the situation. Whilst she slept soundly, I lay tense and awake, thoroughly frustrated.

Decius had made himself comfortable on the other side of the fire. I thanked the gods that he had not insisted I lay near him. That would have been too much. At least with the fire between us and the blanket of night around us, I was not forced to look at him, nor could he see me.

“Go to sleep, Sabrina.”

His voice came to me in the darkness, perplexing me.

“Who is to say I am not asleep?” I replied tersely.

He chuckled. “You will need your sleep. I will take first watch, you can take the second.”

“You trust me to watch over you whilst you sleep? You are trusting indeed, Decius Verres.” For all he knew I had tried to kill him that very day, to trust one such as I seemed to me to be a very poor judgment.

“I have little choice but to trust you. Besides, you may be hot headed and thoroughly disrespectful, but I do not think you a cold blooded killer.”

I snorted, but I did not reply. Instead I curled up with Bran and allowed myself to sleep. I was too tired to continue fighting with the Roman, and it would not do to be found tired and unawares by strangers. We would be heading into the hills in the morning and the hills brought with them bandits.

It was not so unpleasant to sleep by a fire I admitted to myself. The warmth of the flames warded off the chill in my fingers and toes. There was a security too, in knowing that I was watched over whilst I slept, even if I was being watched over by a terrible Roman.

In the glowing dawn of the next day, it became entirely clear that Decius was going to assume control of our little expedition one way or another. He couldn't simply let things be, he had to manage everything. I did not appreciate his need to be constantly over bearing and over organized. I'd grown up learning to survive in the woods, I didn't need a

Roman telling me how to do it. The fact that I now knew he would make good on his threat to strike me tempered my approach to him somewhat though, my bottom had throbbed and ached longer than I thought possible after the application of his hard hand and I was not overly keen to repeat the experience in any kind of hurry.

Walking through the woods with my mind whirring on the question of how to assert myself, I was thoroughly distracted. I noticed that the woods grew a bit heavier than they usually were, but I kept ploughing through them, shoving brush out of my way.

“Sabrina?”

Decius' irritatingly deep voice interrupted my internal raging.

“What?”

“Are you sure this is the right way?”

It was the perfect opportunity to unleash the rage I'd been carrying around since he'd started making all my decisions for me.

“Of course it's the right way! Must you undermine me at every turn!?” I glowered at him, my hands on my hips.

He looked at me with his usual mild expression. “It's just that you said Ker Deblen was in the hills, and we've been heading downhill all morning.”

Gazing around me, I noticed for the first time that the woods weren't only a little heavier than usual, the trees and bushes that grew here were completely different from those that grew on the way to Ker Deblen. We were most certainly not on our way to Ker Deblen. Instead we'd spent the past four hours tramping full speed into lands of a much less friendly tribe lead by one known as Rowan the terrible.

Though I had jested to Gawain about offering the Roman as blood sacrifice, Rowan's tribe would not think twice about cutting both our throats. They were aggressive, insular people who kept to themselves and defended their lands with the utmost lethality. Even Gawain did not trust them, and Roman patrols often gave these lands a wide berth.

Having paused in our walk, I now noticed that the woods were silent. Too silent. No birds sang and even the wind seemed still here. A chill seized my heart. Did Rowan's people know we were here? Were they already preparing an attack? There was no point in waiting or in trying to defend ourselves, they would come in greater numbers and we would surely be overpowered.

“Turn around. Now,” I said to Decius in a deliberately low voice.

Decius raised a brow at me.

“I don't have time to explain. We must go back the way we came, and we must do so immediately.”

Mercifully, Decius did not waste time questioning me, instead he heeded the urgency in my voice and silently began making his way back along the track we had carved out in the forest. I thanked the gods again that he walked with the gait of a born woodsman and barely made a noise as he passed back along the trail we had come down. It was a long walk out of the area and I cursed my foolishness with every step I took.

We'd certainly lost a good day's travel by the time we saw the ashes of the fire we'd lit the previous evening, but we were mercifully safe. Even Rowan's most bloodthirsty warriors would not come this far outside their lands simply to kill us. I breathed a sigh of relief, but the ordeal was not over.

“Now, do you care to tell me what just happened?” Decius spoke with his jaw slightly clenched, and I knew he had not found our little detour a source of amusement.

I sighed. There was nothing for it but to tell him the truth. “We took a wrong turn. The way we were going, we would surely have run into hostiles and be forced to flee or do battle.”

The news that we had been in danger made Decius' eyes darken with anger. “And why did we take a wrong turn? I assure you Sabrina, if you intend to sabotage my assignment, you will only bring pain to your people.”

He was angry at me because he thought I was trying to ruin his plans. I folded my arms over my chest and frowned at him silently.

“Is that what you did? I swear by the gods you will feel my palm, girl!”

He reached for me and I barely had time to dart away. Bran had already scarpered for the cover of some nearby underbrush, she feared the big man more than I did, and I wondered what she knew by merit of canine intuition that I did not.

“I didn't do it on purpose!” I protested from behind the safety of a large oak.

Decius looked even more grim, standing there in the clearing.. “Then you are not the guide your father said you were. Perhaps he chose you as a means to keep me from completing my task.” He said the last part of the sentence quietly to himself, thinking aloud. It was an insult to Gawain and it made me furious.

“Yes I am!” I stepped out from behind the tree and stomped my foot in frustration. “I was just distracted. Do not dare cast aspersions on Gawain!”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “A good guide does not lead one into enemy territory.”

“A good guide ensures that the one she guides does not get dead. Are you dead?”

That seemed to mollify Decius somewhat, he had to admit that he was not dead.

“Besides, it is your fault I was distracted,” I was on the offensive now. If he was going to toss around accusations, then I could do the same in return.

“My fault? How was it my fault?”

“With your hitting me and insisting I do things your way, it distracts me!” I glowered up at him, keenly aware of the fact that my argument sounded quite weak. There really was no excuse for having gone that wildly off course, I knew the way to Ker Deblen like I knew the way to my own nose. Still, I wouldn't tolerate the Roman casting aspersions on my beloved Gawain – or my own skills as a guide. He was lucky to have me.

“I see.” His response was careful and considered. I could see that he was thinking about something, probably wondering whether or not to trust me. “Sabrina, let me make something utterly clear to you.”

“Yes?” I lifted my chin and gazed at him imperiously.

He leaned down towards me and spoke softly and carefully. “You will do as I say, if you do not, you will be punished. You will guide me to Ker Deblen and beyond and if you so much as set foot in the wrong direction again, you will regret it, do you understand?”

Something in his tone made me tremble. His dark eyes were entirely serious as he gazed upon me and I knew that he was not making idle threats, he would do whatever he saw fit to me, and there would be little I could do to stop him. I nodded sullenly at his warning. “Understood.”

Chapter Three

With that matter sorted, Decius turned away from me, dropped his pack and began to collect wood to rebuild the fire. I did nothing, I simply sulked at the corner of the clearing as he set about setting small branches in place and using a flint stone to create a spark that lit the flames.

His every movement was practiced, professional. He had done this many times before, that was obvious. As he gently coaxed a spark into a flame, I was reminded of when I was but a child and Gawain was teaching me the ways of the woods. Though they were very different men, there was something similar about them, a quiet strength. Gawain was the head of our tribe not because he was the most fierce or the loudest, but because when he spoke, people listened, and when he moved, he moved surely in the right direction. He kept our people safe always.

Could Decius also keep our people safe? Gawain had entrusted him with that task, so he must have considered it possible.

“Come and eat, Sabrina,” Decius called me.

I inched over towards the fire, feeling very small and guilty. Even without Decius' threats to whip me if I failed him again, I knew that what I had done earlier was unforgivable. How had I made such an obvious mistake and gone in entirely the wrong direction? I had shamed myself and I had shamed Gawain.

“Thank you,” I mumbled as Decius passed me some dried meat and cheese from his provisions.

“You're welcome.”

We ate in silence, well, Decius ate, I nibbled at the food he'd shared, wondering what was wrong with me. The Roman's attitude certainly seemed to have cooled towards me as a result of my error, and I could tell that he would not be wasting much patience on me in the future.

“Cheer up, it may not happen,” he interrupted my thoughts.

“What?”

“You worry too much, Sabrina.”

For a moment, I considered being insulted, then I realized that he was quite right. I had done nothing but worry since Gawain had pointed him out at the fire. I had been right in

my initial assessment of Decius however, in addition to his brawn, he had a very keen mind and was excellent at reading people.

“There is much to worry about,” I said gloomily.

He shook his head. “A pretty woman like you should not have to spend her life wrapped up in such deep concerns.”

That I did take offense to. Typical Roman, looking down on me because I possessed a uterus.

“I can handle my concerns quite well thank you,” I bristled.

“I did not mean to infer that you could not,” he looked at me with long suffering eyes. “Must you always be so contrary?”

“I’m not contrary,” I objected.

He chuckled to himself and shook his head, then lay out on the ground next to the fire with his hands behind his head. He looked entirely at ease with himself and with his surroundings. I envied him that. I knew what it was to be at ease, but I had not felt that since meeting him. Since he’d been thrust upon me I’d done nothing but worry and make mistakes.

“I am sorry for my mistake today,” I admitted in a small voice.

He turned his head towards me, and I saw his surprise quite plainly. “So it was a mistake, was it?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “An unforgivable one. Gawain would be ashamed to know I had made it.”

Decius frowned at me slightly. “Is that why you have been so quiet this evening? Have you been beating yourself up about that?”

“Yes.”

He sat up and crooked his finger at me, beckoning me closer to him. “Come here.”

I didn’t know what he was going to do, but I went to him anyway, I felt so bad for what I had done. I had betrayed Gawain’s trust entirely, I had almost lead us into danger and death.

Gently, Decius took me by the arm and guided me over his lap. I felt his strong muscled thighs under my belly and I could not help but squirm. The position was so juvenile, and though I had never been put in it before, I had certainly seen others taken to task over the

laps of mothers or fathers in the same fashion. Gawain had never laid a finger on me when I was growing up and I had been grateful for that.

“Let me worry about your behavior,” Decius growled somewhere above me. His deep voice sank into my very bones as his large palm settled over my bottom.

“What are you doing?” My voice came out in a soft whimper.

“You worry too much Sabrina, you carry the weight of the world on your shoulders and you are afraid. Let me worry about what happens next, all you need do is what you are told to do, understood?”

I frowned at the grass I was face down towards. What was he really saying? That I was supposed to abdicate all responsibility to him? Instinctively I rebelled against the idea, but I had to admit that being held by him was deeply relaxing. Feeling his strength did allow me to forget about my cares for the moment. If he was strong, I could be weak. But could I really be weak? Could I trust him? He was Roman, was he not?

A sudden cracking of pain across my bottom set me yowling indignantly. “What was that for?” I craned my neck around and frowned at him whilst simultaneously trying to reach back and rub the sting out of my bottom. He caught my hand easily in his and prevented me from rubbing as he shook his head at me.

“You were thinking again. You get so caught up in that head of yours you forget to just simply be.”

“And thinking is a crime to the Romans? That explains a great deal.” I tried to sneer as I usually would, but instead the words came out teasingly.

He laughed, and I felt the rumble of his laughter. “You truly do have a wicked tongue,” he noted, slapping my bottom lightly this time. I wriggled in response to his touch, finding myself giggling along with his laughter.

He lowered his voice as he spoke to me again, firmly laying down the law. “For the rest of this expedition, you answer to me, Sabrina. You may not like following my rules, but they are there to keep us both safe. If you disobey me, I will spank you. But mistakes will happen, and I will not have you tearing yourself apart because of them and becoming all the more distracted as a result. You are yet young and you have been given a great responsibility, allow yourself to learn from your mistakes, do not be crucified by them.”

What he said made a great deal of sense, and I felt relief to hear him say it. I was not particularly young, though in comparison to him, perhaps I was. He was certainly past the first bloom of youth. It was thoroughly tempting to give up my fight for control and let him lead, at least that way I did not have to worry so much about making mistakes and letting my people down.

Another sharp smack broke into my thoughts. “No thinking, Sabrina, this isn't negotiable. You will do as you are told and you will stop worrying about petty little mistakes.”

“So eight hours lost in a day is a petty little mistake?” I teased him and he frowned back at me, though he did so playfully and he soon could not stop himself smiling.

“In the greater scheme of things, yes.”

“I will keep that in mind,” I grinned, then yelped as he slapped my bottom one more time and then gently slid me off his lap.

The new relationship I found myself in with the Roman was a strange one, and not at all one I would have submitted to at the outset of the journey. He required obedience and he expected me to provide it, no questions asked. If someone had informed me that I would one day permit him to strike me and find it comforting, I would have called the person a fool. Yet here I was with a tingling bottom and still I suffered the Roman to live.

What surprised me was the way his tyranny made me feel. He was not awful to me, nor was he cruel, indeed he was actually quite friendly and warm towards me, and rather protective. It seemed that in my submission to his draconian rule, I had found an entirely new way of relating to the man.

As we drew closer to Ker Deblen, I began to pay more mind to the nature of our mission. In a very real sense, I had become a traitor. To go about suggesting that we not fight the Romans was to betray the King, to betray our very people. But I knew all too well what the cost of war with Rome would be. For many of the villages we were visiting, it would be death. Rome was coming under Caesar, and they were coming in greater numbers than we could hope to repel. Though we had fought long and hard against the Romans, the human cost of resisting their rule was rising with every passing year.

Ker Deblen was a rich town, they made much from the trading of ores, which they mined out of the rich earth and sent about the country, often for the purpose of making weapons. Decius would certainly have his work cut out for him if he hoped to convince them that surrender was better for business than war.

We caused some consternation as we approached the town on a fine afternoon. I did not know if Gawain had sent a runner to warn of our approach, by the way women gasped and shuffled their children indoors at the sight of Decius, it seemed that he had not.

As Decius squared his shoulders and made his way towards the carved wooden entrance, I realized for the first time just how brave he truly was. He was a Roman traveling alone in decidedly hostile territory with only a woman for protection. There were plenty who viewed the Romans with ill will, plenty who had lost family and friends to the invaders. Every moment he spent in our towns he was in mortal danger yet he somehow shrugged

off the risk entirely and went forward with courage.

I found myself feeling protective of him, and my hand was on the knife at my side as we waited for Chief Gwydian to be informed of our presence. Even Bran appeared to be more protective than usual, circling around us both with a watchful gaze.

Gwydian eventually appeared with several heavily armed warriors. He was a tall, brawny man who also happened to be Gawain's younger cousin. Unlike Gawain, who preferred a quiet life and who was always restrained in his expression, Gwydian preferred great shows of wealth and power. I had known him for most of my life, indeed, at one time there had been some talk of my marrying his son, before it became wildly apparent that I would take no man as husband. He approached us with a wide, cheerful smile, wearing a shining breastplate that would have done any Roman legionnaire proud.

I was smugly pleased to note that he looked at me first, not Decius. "Sabrina, what brings you here?"

"Gawain has asked me to conduct our guest to you." I spoke carefully, ensuring that all within earshot knew that Decius was a guest of our tribe, a guest of Gawain's no less. I hoped it would keep Decius safe and I hoped that he did not abuse its protection.

"It is an honor," Decius bowed and spoke in our tongue.

Gwydian looked at him as if he were something thoroughly unexpected, like a talking fish, but he did not command his men to kill him where he stood, so I judged the introduction a success. We were ushered into the town with our armed escort and I was proud of our achievements as Britons as Decius looked upon them.

The town was an impressive sight. Unlike our encampment with Gawain which was simple due to our propensity to up stakes and wander, Ker Deblen was an established town of industry, and there were many vendors selling cloth and metal goods and food. I had been here many times before, but each time I found myself wandering about the place with wide eyes. As a woman most at home in the woods, towns like Ker Deblen seemed to me to be another world.

Decius was not nearly as distracted as I, indeed, when I attempted to wander off towards some pretty cloth that caught my eye, I found myself drawn back by the scruff of my neck by his strong hand. Some of the warriors laughed and I growled at Decius.

"Unhand me!" I whispered loudly.

He cast his gaze down at me for just a moment, but a moment was all it took for him to impart one single message, 'Behave'.

We were escorted into Gwydian's fine house and made most welcome. After the initial introductions were completed, the men fell into deep conversation. I noted that Gwydian

treated Decius with the utmost courtesy, just as Gawain had. I wondered if perhaps there was something about the Roman that made other men respect him.

“Have you finally tamed Sabrina? I did not think it possible without a nose ring and a cart load of whips,” Gwydian made a joke at my expense at one point. He had been looking at me with curiosity since we'd arrived, and I did not blame him. In the past I had been thoroughly wild and unruly during my visits to Ker Deblen. To see me sitting quietly and waiting patiently for the meeting to be over with must have been strange indeed.

My eyes narrowed and I made to answer him, but a glance from Decius made me hold my tongue. Unlike Gawain, who had only threatened to whip me after speaking out, I was sure that Decius would not hesitate to thrash me if I made him look bad in front of Gwydian.

“Sabrina has been an excellent guide,” Decius said diplomatically before returning to matters of greater importance.

The meeting itself proceeded without much fuss. Decius had brought with him offers for a treaty, a treaty that would allow Ker Deblen not only to survive, but to have greater markets in which to sell their goods. As I sat on the floor and played with Bran's silky fur, I saw the way Gwydian's eyes lit up at the idea. Gwydian loved riches above all else, Decius had made a solid choice in trying to appeal to him on an economic level. The Chief had his reservations though, in spite of Gawain's support of the Roman plan, and in spite of my own presence, he hesitated to surrender to Rome.

“Think of it not as surrender. Think of it as an alliance, an alliance that will make Ker Deblen more powerful than ever before,” Decius said, framing the entire proposition in a new light.

Decius certainly had the gift of the diplomat. Though he was very much behind enemy lines, he conducted himself with a cool, calm demeanor that made those around him also much calmer. When he spoke, men listened.

My admiration for the bold Roman grew considerably through the course of that meeting, though I was keenly aware that one as charming as he could quite possibly be using his talents for evil as well as good.

Finally, after many hours of talks and no real resolution, we were asked to spend the night in the town. I was quite excited by the prospect. I always ate well at Ker Deblen, and there was much to see and do in the way of entertainment. They brewed a delightful drink that warmed the body and the soul, though it also made one thoroughly giddy and unsteady on one's feet.

To my surprise, Decius refused. “We must be getting on to our next destination,” he informed Gwydian in a voice laced with regret. “Every second is precious.”

Gwydian nodded, a shrewd look in his gaze. “And where will you be heading next?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but Decius stayed me. “We will head north.”

It was a lie. We were not heading north at all, we were heading east towards the coast to convince the small fishing villages there that Rome could provide much better protection than the King. I did not know why Decius was lying to Gwydian, it made me uneasy.

I gave him a questioning look, and again he seemed to speak to me with only the merest flicker of his eyes. 'Trust me,' he seemed to be saying.

I was reminded of when I had made that misstep and lead us into enemy territory, at that time I had asked Decius to trust me and he had. I would now return the favor, though I did not see what was worrying him so. I had known Gwydian all my life, he was a good man. Gawain had sent us here first to make our task easier. With Gwydian and Gawain behind Decius, other chiefs would be much more likely to agree to the plan to succumb quietly to Rome.

Sulking a little, I allowed Decius to lead me out of Ker Deblen, and even refused the gifts of candies that Gwydian's wife offered us as we were leaving. I loved the candies that they made by boiling sugar water into hard little treats, but Decius shook his head and I was forced to refuse both their hospitality and their kindness.

We walked away from the town in a northerly direction. I tried to speak, but every time I opened my mouth, Decius pressed a finger to my lips. I had no idea what was going on, but it seemed that it was something serious. We headed north at significant speed, then dipped down into a valley, where Decius insisted that we travel along the river bed, dipping our feet in the water of the river that ran there as we went.

Finally, several hours after our hurried departure from Ker Deblen, Decius finally allowed me to ask my question.

“Why did we leave so quickly? Why did you lie?”

“Many times have I looked into the eyes of a man who wanted nothing more than my death. There is an look a man gets when he decides to kill you. I saw that look in the eyes of Gwydian,” Decius said grimly.

I laughed. “You are paranoid, Roman.”

“No. Did you notice that his men left during the meeting?”

I thought back. I had not been paying overly much attention to the other men in the house, but thinking on it, I realized that the warriors that had been guarding Gwydian at the outset had crept away, slowly but surely during the passing of the hours.

“Perhaps they had better things to do than listen to old men jaw,” I said teasingly.

“Perhaps they were setting out to make a trap for us. Let us see if I was correct, shall we?”

We were quite a way downstream now, and we had moved in a decidedly eastern direction. As the light faded over the hills, Ker Deblen became visible as a series of lights along the hilly ridge.

“Watch the northern gate,” Decius said quietly.

Surely enough, a few minutes after he made his prediction, we saw men in the distance, armed to the hilt and making their way along the northern path.

“Do you need more proof?”

I was shocked. “It doesn't make sense. Gwydian is Gawain's cousin. I have known him all my life. Why would he try to kill us?”

“It would appear that your father has rather overestimated his cousin's capacity for support,” Decius murmured grimly.

“What do we do now? Gawain will be in danger, if Gwydian informs the King, the King may act against him.” I was panicked, worried about Gawain, worried about my people. Was this to be Gawain's first and last serious mistake as our leader? Was this to be the downfall of us all?

“Calm down Sabrina, we are ahead of them,” Decius reassured me. “We will return and give the order to move south.”

“How far south?”

Decius smiled at me. “Far enough south that your King cannot catch them.”

I frowned deeply. “So my people are to become exiles in Rome.”

“Better exiles in Rome than at the mercy of a capricious king and betrayed by an untrustworthy cousin,” Decius noted. “Come, we must make haste.”

With one last bitter look towards Ker Deblen, I turned and began the long trek back towards our village. Setting a fast pace, we walked all the night long, stopping only briefly for one of us to nap whilst the other kept watch, then moving on again.

We repeated the pattern through the next day, and the next. It was grueling, but I did not complain, we were doing this to assure the safety of Gawain and the others who had put their faith in him. It was going to destroy him to know that Gwydian preferred to betray

his blood than his king.

We were caught in a race against time. If Gwydian had sent runners to the King whilst we were still in Ker Deblen, then they had a few hours head start. It was even possible that Gwydian had sent men against Gawain immediately. I found myself wishing I had killed Gwydian on sight. It would have saved a great deal of trouble in the long run.

In our fast trek back home, I discovered that Decius was not only as broad as an Ox, but he had the strength of one too, both physically and mentally. On more than one occasion, he picked me up and carried me forward, though he did so more in an attempt to lift morale than because I needed carrying.

“I hope Gawain is alright,” I said as we made our way homewards. Then I yelped promptly as Decius' large hand slapped my backside.

“What did I tell you about worrying?”

“Sorry, oh great Roman warrior,” I laughed, forgetting my cares for a moment as I skipped out of the way of another smack aimed at my bottom.

We completed the trip back to the village in just two and a half days, a record time considering we had to take several detours to avoid possible runners from Gwydian.

“Sabrina!” Gawain was as pleased to see me as I was pleased to see him, though he looked worried too. I ran into his outstretched arms. “What are you doing back so soon, child?”

“Everything has gone wrong, Gawain. I am sorry,” I said apologetically.

Gawain's eyebrows rose. “Let us all discuss this in private,” he suggested.

It did not take long for the story to come out in Gawain's house, and as each fact came to light, I saw Gawain's old shoulders stoop lower and lower.

“This is terrible,” he said eventually.

“We must move south now,” Decius said in firm tones he'd henceforth reserved for me.

Gawain nodded. “Yes, I suppose you are right.”

He was not keen to leave, I knew that. Our heritage, our history, our spirits were here in the woods of the Britons. To abandon our lands was to abandon ourselves. But it was necessary. We had chosen an alliance with Rome in order to save lives, and now we had to leave Briton to save lives too.

“How will we cross the Southern channel? We are not boat builders,” Gawain pointed

out.

“I believe I still have the means by which to arrange transport,” Decius said with dashing reassurance.

“Then we are saved, and by your grace alone,” Gawain intoned.

I could not believe that the day had come that our blood had betrayed us and that we now sought the protection of Rome, but as I looked between Gawain's defeated old body and Decius' proud strength, it was obvious where our future lay.

Chapter Four

Since the fateful meeting with Chief Gwydian, I had thought of nothing but returning and ensuring that Gawain and my people were safe, but now, as the village began to pack their things away and prepare for an entirely new life, I felt a pang in my chest for entirely selfish reasons, reasons that had nothing to do with war and betrayal and everything to do with a silly giddy feeling that I got when I looked at the Roman or heard his voice. What would Decius do next? Would he need me at all?

He was a popular figure now, the savior of us all and the young women of the village thronged him more than ever, giggling up at him and presenting him with small handwoven gifts. I found myself retreating back to the forest with only Bran by my side for company, watching as he politely dealt with his adoring fans.

I heard a few of the youngsters making up little songs about him, songs that spoke of his strength and bravery in saving us all. I did not get the merest mention of course, all the hero worship and adoration was focused on the Roman.

Perhaps he noticed my dark looks, for eventually he found time in his very busy schedule to come and talk to me.

“Sabrina,” he began. I cut him off immediately.

“Yes? Come to get my tribute too?” I spoke curtly and he looked immediately taken aback.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m surprised you remember who I am at all,” I sniffed, immediately wishing that I hadn’t said the words, for a look of comprehension went sprawling over his features and he smiled in a most amused fashion.

“Sabrina, dear Sabrina, are you jealous?”

“Of course not.” My denial sounded lame to my ears. What did I have to be jealous of, we were not an item. He was not my betrothed. He was merely some Roman who I had acted as a guide to for a few days. It was silly to feel so attached to him. It was wrong to be irritated by the sight of other women laying their hands on him.

He was grinning widely at me now and I felt thoroughly stupid. I looked down at the ground, feeling my face flame and blood rush in my ears.

“Well do not fear, little druid, you and I are not done yet,” Decius said eventually.

I looked up hopefully. “What do you mean?”

“After we escort these people south, we will return in hopes of converting other chieftains. Gwydian may not have approved of our proposition, but there are others who may yet agree. There are more lives to be saved. I will need a decent guide to help me in that task.”

I found myself smiling with happiness. Though what he proposed was wildly dangerous, the knowledge that he wanted me by his side cheered me considerably.

He reached out and pinched my cheek lightly. “So do not pout, you shall have me to yourself soon enough.”

As I gasped in outrage at his nerve, Decius turned and strolled off quite casually to direct some of the men who were constructing carts for the move. I decided then to stop mooning over him from afar like some love sick teenager and do what I could to make the journey safer.

Our people worked for a day and a night before we were ready to leave, fortunately the temporary nature of our encampment made it easy to break down. Although it was a pity to leave the small tilled fields that had been carved out of the woods to go to seed, we had no choice. It seemed that we were destined to be nomads of fate.

When we finally began the move, it was in utter silence. Even the smallest children seemed to sense that there was danger in their future and they did not make a peep as we began the trek south to safer Roman territory.

Though I had initially thought myself thoroughly useless and incidental to the move, I found myself being called forward by Gawain and Decius to lead our people back towards the Roman occupied territory. I did not know if they needed a guide, we had fled in the opposite direction not all that long ago, but the people seemed pleased to have me at their head.

“A week should have us at the port,” Decius mused as we marched.

“Agreed,” I nodded.

Gawain's eyes twinkled over towards us. “Agreement between the Roman and the Briton, who would have thought such a thing possible?”

I wrinkled my nose at him. I knew precisely what he was implying with his apparently innocent statement. Though he had never forced me to take a husband, I knew that he wished for me to have a man in my life. He was entirely misguided if he thought there could be romance between Decius and I, but I did not like to disabuse an old man of his harmless notions.

“We will argue later, when there is less danger,” I informed my protector stiffly.

Decius laughed. “Of that I have no doubt. I fancy that she will take me to task on the blueness of the sky.”

Gawain chuckled along with him and I got the definite sense that I was being ganged up on, in a rather gentle way.

“I am going to check the rear,” I announced.

“Yes, perhaps I will do the same later,” Decius said in a voice laden with intent. He was not talking about the rear of our little group, I could tell that by the way his eyes lingered on my rump. I shot him a glaring look for daring to be so obvious in front of Gawain and took myself off to ensure that all was well. These journeys were difficult, especially for the small children who became upset at being removed from all they knew.

After a day of hard travel, the silence of the initial hours of the journey was wearing off quite considerably. One small girl was whimpering almost constantly, and her tired mother who was also dealing with an infant was fast losing patience with her.

“Enough, Brietta!” the woman snapped as I approached, causing the child to embark on a series of howls that would surely have brought a patrol down on us had there been any nearby.

“Do you have anything I could give her to help her sleep?” The woman would have given the child anything to make her quiet, and I could empathize entirely.

“Allow me,” I said, taking the child by the hand. Her mother gave me a thoroughly grateful look as the child stopped crying immediately and looked up at me with wide eyes.

“Are you ready to go on an adventure?” I asked, crouching down next to her.

She shook her head vehemently. Obviously her mother had already tried the 'adventure' angle, and it was not sitting well with the child at all. I tried to think of something else that would entertain her and lift her spirits and an idea sparked into my mind that made me smile very wide indeed.

“Would you like to see a druid battle a great Roman warrior?” That got a much more favorable response, she nodded enthusiastically. “Then you shall see it,” I promised her. “But first we shall find a small crowd to cheer the druid on.”

I went about the group asking parents and children if they wanted to see a little circus battle. Most of the parents were more than happy to have their children entertained for a short while, tensions were running high amongst the people, and a little light entertainment was more than needed.

Eventually, with a gaggle of children and a small following of other adults, I marched up to the front, where Decius and Gawain still set the pace and planted myself several feet in front of Decius with my hand out, palm facing towards him.

“Halt, foul Roman!” I said in exaggerated tones. Some of the children began to giggle immediately and to his credit, Decius came to an immediate halt, looking at me quizzically.

“You have gone too far! I challenge you to a battle!”

Looking around him, Decius realized quickly that he was caught up in some kind of impromptu theater.

“Sabrina...”

“Do not call me Sabrina! I am the Druid! I will strike thee down with the powers of the forest!” I cried, brandishing a twig in his direction.

“Get him! Get him!” Several of the children began chanting. Decius and Gawain exchanged looks. Gawain could only shake his head, and though Decius gave me a rather dubious look, he soon decided that there was nothing for it but to join in with the games.

“Very well. I see you have brought minions to do your bidding, Druid, what terrible little monsters!” He feigned horror as he looked at the children who thronged about my legs.

“Forward minions! Get the Roman!” I cried. Having been whipped into a near frenzy first at the prospect of a battle between a Druid and a Roman and then by Decius and I hurling bold threats at one another, the children needed no further encouragement to set upon the Roman.

Immediately, Decius was thronged by several small children who rushed at him with squeals of glee, tugging at his tunic and battering their little fists against his legs and arms. Even Bran joined in the game. Standing up on her hind legs, she was almost as tall as he was and he grasped her forelegs and pretended to do battle with her as if she was a ferocious lion.

As the laughter of the children pealed around us, much of the tension was broken. Yes, we were leaving all we had known, but we were leaving for a safer, more secure future. We were leaving so that these very children might not know the horrors of war or losing their parents.

The circus battle marked the end of the traveling day and the beginning of a night's rest, and as the womenfolk began to prepare food and the men circled around to guard their families, a pleasant air of contentment hung over our little camp. Eventually, when the last child had been prized away from Decius, the Roman shook his head at me as he lead

me away from the camp, into the bushes.

"I need to talk to you, young lady," he said as he made sure that we were out of earshot of the others. I looked at him in confusion, wondering if this was more play, or if he was serious. "I warned you not to attack me ever again, didn't I?" He spoke with mock severity.

"You did not tell me not to send an army against you," I smiled.

"And a fearsome army it was too," he admitted, taking me by the hand.

For a moment I thought he was about to turn me over his knee, but instead he did something quite unexpected. He drew me to him and lowered his head to claim my mouth in a kiss. I stood stock still, thoroughly shocked as his warm lips pressed against my own and sought entrance. As his tongue entered my mouth and began to plunder my soft flesh, I found myself feeling suddenly weak. I swooned against him as he held me in strong arms.

"What... what was that?" I asked when he broke away.

"That was a kiss," he grinned down at me.

"Why are you kissing me?"

"Because you're a beautiful woman and I want you."

"You... want me?" I didn't know what that meant. He wanted me as what? A guide? A whore? A hat?

"Yes, don't act so surprised Sabrina," he chuckled down at me. "I'm sure you have been wanted before." As he spoke, his hand crept down to cup my bottom, and I felt a certain growing hardness against my belly that made his meaning clear.

"I am not that kind of woman," I said stiffly, pulling away.

"Not what kind of woman?"

"The kind of woman who allows herself to be used for a man's pleasure."

At my words, Decius growled a low, primal growl. "You might find the experience quite enjoyable."

"I might. Or I might find myself pregnant and pining for a man who no longer has any use for me," I said tartly.

A shadow passed over Decius' handsome face. "Is that the sort of man you take me for?"

If I wished to merely use a woman, I could have had any of your village girls.”

That was true enough, I supposed, but it was no reason to go canoodling in the woods whilst death chased our rear.

“These are dangerous times,” I said.

Decius was silent for a moment. “Times are always dangerous. I think it is not the danger that scares you, Sabrina.”

Arrogant as always, Decius thought he knew best. “What is it then?”

“The notion that you might need someone. The notion that you might care about someone you might lose. So you are prickly and you push away every chance at happiness.”

He released me and immediately I missed the feeling of his arms around me. He leaned down and brushed a kiss against my lips. “I am not deterred by your little prickles, Lady Sabrina,” he said in a devilishly low growl.

“And I am not afraid of your little prick,” I joked to cover how uncomfortable I felt.

“Really? Are you choosing to taunt me?” Decius grinned, putting his arms back around me and squeezing my bottom so that I was pulled tight against him in such a way as to be left in no doubt as to the fact that there was nothing little about his manhood. “That is not wise. Perhaps I will ignore your protestations and make you a woman here.”

“Make me a woman? Out of rocks and sticks and dirt?” The joke was lame, but it was better than simply gasping and moaning against him as I was otherwise inclined to do. He had broken down my defenses so simply and seen through the reason why I pushed all other men away. It seemed that I was as an open book to him, and that made me vulnerable to him in a way I'd never been vulnerable before. His desire for me only complicated matters, though it seemed that Decius did not find the issue complicated at all. He wanted me, and he was going to have me.

His hand slid up under my skirt, his rough skin slipping between my thighs and touching me where no other man had ever touched. I gasped and tried to move away but he held me firmly in place as he gently explored the folds of my sex. Soon I was grinding against him, consumed with a wanton need I couldn't explain. He was barely doing anything at all, simply holding me and gently caressing me and I was going wild for him.

“Still think you're not the kind of woman who needs a man?” he breathed against my ear.

I growled at him, even in this delicate position he seemed to take glee in proving his dominance over me.

Things might have gone a lot further had we not been interrupted by the sounds of a

small scuffle breaking out in the camp. We righted our clothing and rushed back to discover that two of the younger men had decided to settle an old score with their fists. When we arrived, they were both bruised and bloody after having slugged each other in the face hard enough to blacken eyes and create bloody noses.

“Enough!” Decius boomed.

The sheer authority in his voice cut through the fog of their anger, and both men ceased in their battle. I was reminded then that Decius was a Centurion, a commander of men. It seemed that he had not forgotten the skills of command as he glowered at the pair.

“How dare you jeopardize the safety of the entire tribe with this senseless brawling,” he lectured them with dire intensity. “You two will be on half rations for the duration of the journey.”

I frowned. That seemed unduly harsh, and I was not sure that he had the authority to impose such a punishment. He was not our chief, Gawain was. I could see these thoughts in the eyes of the two men who had been caught fighting, but neither of them dared say so to Decius, who undoubtedly intimidated them.

“Arlan, Kayne – to your posts.” Gawain had come upon the scene and he looked no more pleased to see what had been taking place than Decius was.

The two men slunk off to opposite sides of the camp with expressions like naughty puppies. I turned to Decius then to plead their case. I did not want to see them going hungry, they would need their energy for the road ahead.

“Isn't that harsh? We need them to be at their fighting best,” I pointed out.

“It would seem that they are more than at their fighting best,” Decius said grimly. “They are fortunate that they are not under my command, I should whip them for that.”

I winced at the idea, for I knew that he was not speaking of a whipping on the buttocks such as he had given me with his palm, but a beating with a whip or a stick across their backs.

“Just as well they are not under your command,” I said, frowning in displeasure. “I thought Rome was culture.”

“Rome is also discipline,” Decius said, turning his stern gaze on me now. “I thought you had learned that lesson.”

I glared at him. How dare he speak to me like a child for defending my people.

“Lay a finger on any of these men, women or children without Gawain's express permission, and you will regret the day you were born,” I vowed. Whatever my feelings

for him were, I would not allow the harsh punishments of Rome to become part of our way of life.

“Please Sabrina, cease your bickering with the man.”

Gawain's tired words were fuel to the fire of my newly kindled rebellion. Had he entirely abdicated his place as chief of our people? Were we all to be bossed around by Decius now?

“We chose you to lead us, not him,” I reminded Gawain. My tone was strained with an attempt to be polite. “Are we to abdicate to Rome entirely? Is Decius Verres now our chief?”

The crowd of onlookers that had gathered to watch the fight between Kayne and Arlan were now all staring at us, and I realized that I had unwittingly pushed a point that had been coming for some time now. As Gawain aged, our respect for him had not diminished, but his ability to lead us effectively had. Now his decision had put us all in mortal danger, and for all the loyalty that our people had to Gawain, there were questions as to how fit he was to lead.

Silence reigned for a moment or two, and I saw in Gawain's old eyes that my words pained him. Immediately, I felt guilty. “I am sorry,” I said, bowing my head.

“No,” Gawain replied. “You are correct. I cannot lead you all forever. I grow ever more weary and the threats facing our people grow ever larger and more numerous. It is time I named my successor.”

A hushed gasp rippled through the people watching, which seemed to be most everyone. Even Arlan and Kayne had sneaked back to see what was taking place. I panicked and did my best to back peddle. This moment could not be coming now. We needed Gawain, I needed Gawain. I had never known a life without his leadership. Was he really going to hand us all over to Decius?

“You cannot name a Roman as your successor,” I interjected, earning myself a look of irritation from Gawain.

“Indeed, and I would not do so. For I have raised my successor from childhood to be strong, to be forthright, to make decisions that are in the best interests of all our people.” He turned his milky gaze to me, and finally I understood what he meant, who he was talking about. “Sabrina, your life has not been an easy one. You have lost much, have suffered much. At times you have been difficult.” A few snickers from the crowd confirmed that many agreed with that particular statement. “But always you have acted with the best interests of our people, and you have been fearless in risking your own life and in setting aside your own desires to serve them. It is you who I have chosen to lead the tribe.”

A rising rumble in of approval from the throats of my people choked me with emotion. I had never thought of succeeding Gawain, indeed, I had thought that he would always be there, and even when I realized that he would not live forever, I had pushed aside all thoughts of anyone replacing him.

“You honor me too much,” I said humbly.

“No my child,” Gawain said, taking my hands in his own. “From the moment I laid eyes on you as a fierce little orphan, I knew that you had the spirit of our people within you. You will do well. Our people will thrive under you. There is but one condition you must agree to, and I shall discuss it with you in private. Decius, please come with us. ”

“Congratulations,” Decius said as we followed Gawain to a more private spot.

“This must strike you as very strange,” I said, with a triumphant note in my voice. This would show him how valued I was as a woman. This would show him that I did not need a man.

“Not at all. I see no other suited to it better,” he said mildly.

I was surprised to hear him say that. Had he not been the one who told me a woman should not have to worry about such things?

“I thought we women were too pretty to be concerned with matters of life and death,” I reminded him.

“But you are a special woman, Sabrina,” Decius smiled at me. “And besides, you will not be leading alone, you will have a husband by your side.”

I frowned at him. “Excuse me?”

We had come to a halt now, and I looked between Decius and Gawain for an explanation.

“Sabrina, my dear child,” Gawain said, taking my hands once more. “I do not wish for you to rule alone. Decius has asked me for your hand in marriage, and I have given my blessing. Indeed, your appointment as my successor rather rests on your union.”

“So if I want to rule my own people, I must do it with Decius?” I pulled my hands away from Gawain and folded them over my chest. I was pouting like a child, I knew that, but it struck me as unfair. If it wasn't for Decius, we wouldn't be in this mess at all.

“He brings a different kind of strength to the union, and he will offer a unique protection to our people when they join the Roman Empire,” Gawain said evenly.

“He brings harsh brutality,” I complained.

Decius simply laughed. "I have not been harsh, nor brutal, and I do not intend to start being so."

"You trust me, do you not, Sabrina?" Gawain spoke again.

I nodded. I trusted him implicitly.

"Then can you trust me in this match?"

I thought about that quietly for a few moments. In many respects, Gawain was giving me what I wanted. My fondness for Decius had grown in spite of our differences and my attraction to him was also growing ever stronger. I had little doubt that he would have bedded me in the woods had we not been interrupted earlier.

When I looked over at Decius, I saw his strength, his intelligence and also a spark of affection in his eyes. I had seen by the way that he treated our youths that he could indeed be a fearsome and harsh man if he wished to be, but he had always treated me with patience and even a certain amount of indulgence, even when he had spanked me like a child.

I would have been a fool to turn him down, and I would have been a traitor to my people to refuse to lead them. My choice had been made for me, I saw that clearly.

"I cannot believe you are marrying me off, Gawain," I said with a wry twist of my lips. It was impossible to pretend to be angry when I knew in my heart that I had met a man who knew me inside and out and still wanted me. Though I would never have thought the prospect of marriage to be a joyful one, the knowledge that I would never have to be without my Centurion again filled me with happiness.

"Is that a yes then?" Decius asked. I could sense that he was nervous, and I found it endearing that the strongest man I had ever known still trembled in the face of possible rejection.

"Is that the way you ask me to marry you?" I said imperiously.

"I do apologize," he replied, recovering some of his native charm as he took my hands in his own and addressed me with more formality.

"Sabrina, you are the most beautiful, contrary, wicked little wench I have ever known. Will you do me the honor of marrying me?"

I turned my head to the side consideringly and stretched out the moment, letting Decius dangle a little longer. "I will," I said finally with a smile.

Grinning widely, Decius swept me up into his arms in a tight hug and from the way cheers erupted in the forest, it was obvious that many of the villagers had sneaked up to

listen whilst we negotiated the terms of my leadership.

“You disobedient wretches! I shall have my new husband whip you all!” I declared. Their laughter faded into the distance as Decius claimed me in a deep kiss.

Chapter Five

“Sabrina!” Decius hollered at me from the steps of our little villa. I ignored him. I was attending to one of the many issues that were arising for our new little village which had been settled on the banks of the river Rheno.

“Sabrina!” He was striding towards me now, looking thoroughly displeased. I waved him away as I directed the men who were boring a second well that would provide much needed water to irrigate our fields. I knew why he was so grumpy, he had told me not to leave the house, but when a runner had come with messages from his superiors, he had gotten so wrapped up in his work that it had been easy for me to slip away and spend some time bossing people about the place.

As he reached me, his hand descended on my bottom, which was barely protected by the silly toga he made me wear, and got my attention sharply.

“Sabrina, you are pregnant,” he reminded me uselessly, as if the large belly that bulged in front of me and the repeated kicking of a child that seemed determined to tunnel its way out of my belly button was not reminder enough.

“And yet still you whip me, you cruel man,” I teased him, rubbing my posterior.

“You have lessons inside, please come and take them, or your tutor will be forced to impart yet more discipline to that charming bottom,” he purred in my ear.

“My tutor should be fired, he barely teaches me anything at all in between attempts to grope me.”

Decius grinned as he led me back towards our house and sat me down in the room he had set aside for lessons. “Well I can hardly blame him. Now back to your studies, young lady.”

I groaned and scratched at the wax tablet in front of me as Decius began instructing me in Latin conjugation once more.

Since marrying my Centurion, I had learned a great deal. I had learned that my stubbornness was only outweighed by his. I learned that Roman culture was not entirely about making war, that there was literature and song and legend, not to mention mathematics and science and many wonders I had never been exposed to in my simple life amongst the trees and beasts.

I still yearned for the forest, but I was excited about the new world that I had found too. Our future seemed bright indeed. Decius had called in favors to arrange a large swathe of land for our people, and already houses were being built, small houses with running

water, a luxury we never had in our old lands. Many of the children received tutoring, and arrangements were being made to officially make our people citizens of the Roman Empire. In surrender, we had found greater peace and prosperity than we could ever have hoped to have had living free under a disinterested king.

My own personal surrender to the bonds of marriage was equally rewarding. Decius was proving to be a kind and fair husband, though he thought nothing of taking me over his knee when I transgressed against him.

The only blemish on the otherwise golden horizon of our love was the knowledge that he was still a Centurion in Caesar's army, and that his mission to subdue the Britons remained active. Though he had been given leave to settle us as an example to other tribes, eventually he would be called to war again.

To make matters worse, now that I was with child, he had changed his mind about allowing me to act as his guide. It was too dangerous, he said. I said that it was too dangerous to allow him to go alone, or with some other guide. I had come to love my husband with a fierce passion that could not withstand being separated. I feared that the day would come that he would be compelled to go out amongst the Britons once more more than I feared anything else.

We were both slaves to our stations in life. A chief could not leave her people and a mother could not leave her child, that was what they told me. Responsibility chained me to this new home, so it seemed, so it was with something of a heavy heart that I scratched my lessons out dutifully under Decius' watchful eye.

"Read it to me," he prompted.

"Agricola nautas vocat," I formed the strange words, feeling thoroughly self conscious as I did so.

He nodded. "Good. What did you just say?"

"My husband is an overbearing brute," I grinned.

He shook his head at me. "If you will not be a good student for me, I will find you a lady to tutor you, a lady who will waste no time in striping your behind if you give her such cheek," he warned me.

"Can you not handle me, husband?" I arched a brow at him. "Will you palm me off to some stuffy Roman matron?"

"I will certainly be using my palm on you in some context," he promised me with a note of grim certainty.

I rolled my eyes. "I want to go hunting," I pouted.

“Those days are over,” he said firmly. The idea of me running about in the woods whilst heavily pregnant did not please him at all. Even leaving the house met with resistance from my burly Master, who seemed to have forgotten that I was once a lithe young creature at one with nature.

“For me, but not for you,” I pointed out the injustice. “You will return to the woods without me.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” he said, piquing my interest.

“What's that mean?” I asked, poking my stylus at him interrogatively.

“It means that the strategy of undermining Briton loyalties has been revised and I may be called to offer my services in an advisory position to the Tribune, in Rome. That was the content of the missives I received earlier, when my errant wife decided to disregard my orders,” he gave me a dire look as he reminded me that he had not overlooked my latest misbehavior.

My heart leaped at the news that he might not be sent into dangerous lands after all. “So you will not be going back to Briton?”

“Unlikely,” he said, smiling at my pleasure. “But I will be required to undertake frequent trips to Rome. It is likely that I will have to take one very soon, in fact.”

I clapped my hands together with glee. “I can come to Rome though, Rome is safe, is it not?”

He smiled indulgently at me. “In your current condition, you are not going anywhere my dear.”

“But...”

“No buts,” he said firmly. “Do not worry, I will ensure that you are not lonely and that you do not suffer from lack of mental stimulation.”

“What does that mean?” I asked suspiciously.

Decius leaned over the desk and kissed the tip of my nose. “Do not worry your pretty head about it, dear wife.”

“I know what that means,” I grumbled at him.

“And what does that mean?” Decius asked laughingly.

“It means you're not telling me what you're up to so I don't have time to sabotage your

evil plans. I am on to you, Roman!”

Decius laughed heartily. “Perhaps so, my dear, perhaps so.”

I was so wrapped up in the joy of knowing that my husband would not be going off to die in the woods whilst I gave birth to our child that for a time, I forgot entirely about the latter part of our conversation. I was reminded of it rather sharply however, less than a week later, when a chariot arrived at our little village carrying what appeared to be a most esteemed guest.

At first I paid the event no mind. Guests were continuously coming and going, in fact Decius had commissioned a guest house that adjoined our own months earlier for the purpose of housing them. I was taking a light stroll with Gawain and Bran when I laid eyes on the guest, who was rather distinguished in the mere fact of being female.

She appeared to be past middle age, but rather well preserved in simple, yet elegant finery. She had an imperious eye that she cast around our little village and I took an instant dislike to her as I saw a look of disapproval appear on her patrician features.

Gawain noted my interest in the woman. “And who might that be?”

“I do not know. I was not informed,” I replied.

“A chief who does not know who walks in her village?” Gawain tutted with disapproval. Though he had handed over the reins of power to me, he had not abandoned me entirely. I often asked for his counsel in matters in which I thought I needed instruction, and he quite often offered it even when it was not asked for.

“Quite,” I agreed. Without making undue haste, Gawain and I made our way over towards the woman, who was directing servants struggling under heavy bags. Whoever she was, she certainly planned to stay for some time. It seemed she had brought everything but a personal aqueduct with her.

“Hello there,” I said, interrupting her chivvying with a friendly greeting, which was significantly more than she deserved, or so I thought. I was glad that Decius had been tutoring me in Latin since our nuptials, I was passably conversant in the language now, which allowed me to question the intruder.

The woman turned towards me and I noted that under her head scarf she had lovely raven dark hair that complimented her smooth olive skin. She was not as old as I had first thought her to be, but she was still undoubtedly closer to Decius in age than I.

“Hello,” she said in haughty tones, looking me up and down. “Should a woman in your condition not be resting?”

I glanced over at Gawain, who looked thoroughly amused at the woman's direct language. I did not know if he truly understood her words, but her body language spoke volumes, and she was looking at me as if I were some unruly urchin who had waylaid her hoping for a copper coin or two.

"I should be doing whatever it is I wish to be doing," I informed her evenly.

Her lips thinned in disapproval. "Really."

"Really." I was not pleased to find myself explaining my actions to this total stranger.

"Who might you be?" I demanded.

"I really do not think that is any concern of yours, young lady," the woman said sternly, drawing her robes about her. "I suggest you run along and rest – and do find some shoes before you cut your feet."

To say that I was taken aback would be to make a grievous understatement. I opened my mouth a few times before I spluttered out a choked. "How dare you!"

Who knows how far the situation would have escalated if Decius had not at that moment been making his way towards us with a broad smile on his face.

"Domitia!" he said, reaching out and clasping the woman on her shoulders before pressing kisses on her cheeks.

"Decius!" she replied with a brilliant smile that made her look much more pretty than she had looked scowling a moment before.

"I see you have met my lovely wife," Decius said.

"I have?" For a moment, Domitia looked thoroughly confused, then she came to the only conclusion that was possible to come to. The barefoot, pregnant wench with the scraggly mutt was none other than Centurion Decius' wife. "Well I never," she said to herself.

"How lovely to make your acquaintance," I said in acid tones, whilst glaring daggers at Decius.

"Madame Domitia has agreed to come and stay with us for a time to assist in your continued education," Decius informed me smoothly.

"Has she? What a surprise," I said through gritted teeth. So he had made good on his threat to find me a lady tutor, had he? Decius was thoroughly unrepentant in his treachery, as I scowled he merely continued to welcome Domitia most profusely. He ushered her into our home with expansive gestures, entirely ignoring the dire stares I was giving him.

“What an interesting development,” Gawain murmured next to me.

I slipped into our native tongue easily in my outrage. “Interesting development, my foot.”

Keeping my distance, I followed Decius and Domitia into our home and heard a few scraps of conversation. They were speaking rather fast and in a high form of Latin that I had some trouble understanding entirely. I did catch a few familiar phrases however, more than enough to piece together the gist of their conversation.

“She is still quite undisciplined, having grown up in the wilds,” Decius was explaining.

“Indeed. I quite thought she was a simple village girl, the way she wanders around in that scrappy robe,” Domitia replied with no small measure of laughter. I could not tell if she was mocking me or if she was amused by me, but either way I was not at all pleased.

“Due to her condition, it is important that you are gentle with her, Domitia. None of your fierce vine branch beatings please. Sabrina requires consistent, caring direction whilst I am unable to be here. She is quite intelligent and does well in her studies. You should have no trouble instructing her.”

“I am glad to hear that, however her attitude will have to be addressed. It does not befit the wife of a Tribune,” Domitia replied.

“Sabrina does not do deferential well, this is true,” Decius chuckled. I smiled a little to myself. Perhaps my husband was not such a raving fool after all, even if he had made a dire mistake in bringing in this woman to order me around.

He may have succeeded in seducing me and in quelling our tribe's rebellion against the Empire, but as I listened to them talk I knew one thing. A second rebellion had just begun, and this time, I would not submit.