Virgin Slave, Barbarian King
Louise Allen
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Virgin Slave, Barbarian King

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Julia Livia Rufa is horrified when barbarians invade Rome and steal everything in sight.But she doesn't expect to be among the taken! As Wulfric's woman, she's ordered to keep house for the uncivilized marauders. Soon, though, Julia realizes that she's more free as a slave than she ever was as a sheltered Roman virgin.It would be all too easy to succumb to Wulfric's quiet strength, and Julia wants him more than she's ever wanted anything. But Wulfric could one day be king, and Julia is a Roman slave. What future can there be for two people from such different worlds?

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Virgin Slave, Barbarian King
Louise Allen

To Keith Emsall for his constant encouragement
with this book

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Chapter One

Rome

24th day of August, AD 410

The sound was terror made real. It was heard through the ears, and felt through the bones. It was the sound that her ancestors had heard thousands of years before as they huddled in the dubious safety of a shallow cave with only the protection of the fire between them and the things that prowled in the dark. The things that growled.

Julia stopped struggling against the rough hands that held her. The three of them, assailants and victim, turned as one, eyes squinting against the smoke that billowed from the burning shop. A pillar fell and smashed across the roadway, sparks showering. In the distance, from the direction of the Forum, screams could be heard. Here, now, after that low threatening rumble, there was only the sound of fire eating wood.

Julia sagged in the grip of the two men. In her terror had she imagined it? But the men had heard it too. It had cut through her frantic cries, through their threats and curses and coarse laughter. In a world gone mad, when barbarians sacked the greatest city on earth and respectable tradesmen tried to rape the daughter of a senator, it was no stretch of credulity to believe a wolf was stalking the streets.

Out of the corner of her eye she could see the crumpled body of the slave girl her mother had sent with her on this insane errand. The men had thrown her against the wall with brutal indifference as she clung to Julia's arm. She had not moved since. I do not even know her name…

'Nothing there,' the taller of the men grunted. 'Imagination.'

'She heard it too, didn't you, rich bitch?' It was the one whose face she had clawed, futilely.

'Yes. Yes—a wolf. It will be dangerous. You should run.' Even a wolf was better than these two. Fearful to run from the besieging Goths, fearful to fight, they had snatched at the chance to take what they had only been able to covet from afar. So often she, and ladies like her, had been carried past them in the street in litters, had browsed amongst the trinkets on their stalls and never noticed them. Now one of these pampered, elegant creatures had fallen into their hands. Amidst chaos they could take their pleasure and dull the terror of what was happening to their world.

But this sheltered virgin had fought back, ripping at their hands and faces, kicking at their shins, biting where she could. And the other girl, the little slave, was likely dead, and no fun at all.

The man with the bleeding tracks of four exquisitely manicured nails down his right cheek sneered back at her. 'Just some dog, chained behind the portico. No help for you there, sweetheart.' His fingers grasped the neck of her tunic and yanked downwards, his sweaty hand sliding over the bared flesh.

'Hades.' The taller man's voice shook, even as the second, long growl froze his friend's hand on her breast. The smoke swirled and the animal padded out less than a dozen feet in front of them. It stopped, head lowered, watching them.

The slanting green eyes set close over the long grey muzzle studied them with an aloof indifference that was more chilling than overt aggression. The curled lip revealed one long white fang. There was a low whistle and the animal walked off to the side and round the back of them. The men scrabbled to turn, dragging Julia, squinting into the drifting smoke as they tried to keep the animal in sight.

'Gone.' The tall man wiped a hand over his damp brow. 'Let's get out of here before that fire gets worse, find somewhere more comfortable to enjoy ourselves.' His falsely confident voice trailed off as they faced the burning building again and the smoke billowed, parting in rags around another figure.

A man. Tall, broad, bare-armed, golden. Light glinted off chain mail and helmet, wrist bands and belt buckle as he stood there watching them, as the wolf had done, with utter composure. There was no expression on the bearded face and there was no weapon in his hand, but a long sword hung

from the wide belt that cinched his waist and for all his stillness he exuded the promise of force poised to strike.

Julia swallowed, trying to force her spinning head to think. Trousers, long blond hair, bearded. A barbarian. A Visigoth, one of the enemy. But her immediate enemies were beside her, her own kind. Was she in more danger now, or less?

Hands tightened on her arms, half lifting her off her feet as the tradesmen began to edge backwards. She made a decision, forced herself to hang limp, making her weight a burden they must drag.

'Drop.' The big man spoke as though to a dog with a game bird and achieved the same unthinking obedience. Julia landed hard on her heels and staggered, turned and hit the bleeding man in the ear with her clenched fist, the sheer relief of being free of their hands lending her anger force.

The man slapped back wildly at her, knocking her against his friend. Then, as she scrabbled for balance, he grunted abruptly and keeled over to the ground. She stared down at him sprawled at her feet, the hilt of a dagger sticking out of his throat, a thin trickle of blood curling down to his collarbone. Dead. She had not seen the barbarian move. The other man took to his heels, then stopped, cowering, as the wolf padded out of cover in front of him.

The barbarian ignored him, his eyes locking with Julia's. There was no reassurance there, only the same chilling aura of power she had seen in the wolf's eyes. He gestured towards the tumbled figure of the slave. 'They did that?'

Julia nodded dumbly, falling to her knees beside the girl. The barbarian took a long stride past her, she heard the scrape as he drew his sword, then a scream, cut off on a choking sob. A thud. Silence. She kept her head averted, searching with her fingers for a pulse in the girl's neck. Nothing.

'Is she dead?' Julia half turned, saw him stoop to wipe the long blade clean on the fallen tradesman's tunic and, shuddering, looked away.

'I think she must be. I can find no pulse. They threw her against the wall when they first caught us. She was so frightened.' She didn't want to come with me, poor little thing. She wouldn't say boo to a goose and Mother sent her out with me into this nightmare and I did nothing to protest. She won't be frightened any more now…

The Goth hunkered down beside her and she was aware of the size of him, the smell of sweat and blood, metal and leather. Alien, utterly male. He reached out a broad hand and touched the girl's neck, then, with a gentleness that surprised Julia, closed the staring brown eyes.

'What is her name?'

'I do not know what she was called.' Julia gazed at the small body helplessly. There was a hot burning in her chest, her eyes prickled. I must not cry, I must not show weakness in front of a barbarian, an inferior. 'She was one of my mother's slaves. She sent her with me…'

…sent us both on this insane errand. And I did not insist on an escort of male slaves. I just did as I was told while she stayed behind high walls, directing the family treasures to be buried beneath the paving slabs in the peristyle. Mother always knows what her priorities are.

'I was trying to reach my father and another senator at the Basilica.' What did Mother expect they could do about it? Stand on the threshold looking pompous in their togas and tell thousands of men like this one, this hunting wolf, to go away and stop being a nuisance?

Two hours ago she had obeyed without question—the men would know best what to do. Her father, Julius Livius Rufus, a man in his Emperor's confidence for many years; her betrothed, Antonius Justus Celsus, the coming man in the Senate, a man who never put a foot wrong politically, who judged each opportunity with coolness and then acted correctly. Only they had been gone for over twelve hours and had sent no word. What should the women do? There were too many options. To stay or to flee? To hide or to rely on high walls and heavy doors?

The barbarian cut across her thoughts. 'But she was one of your family.' He turned, with a litheness that seemed unimpeded by his crouched position, and stared at Julia as though he had trouble

understanding what she was saying. His beard was a golden brown, cut close in contrast to the paler hair that escaped from under the metal helmet and flowed over his shoulders. His eyes, intent on hers, were green, the clear green of snow-melt river water over pebbles.

'She was one of the household,' Julia corrected. His Latin was good, but obviously not good enough to understand the niceties. She found to her shame that she was trembling and stiffened her limbs. To show fear, to lose her dignity—what she had left of it—was unacceptable. 'A slave.'

'Your responsibility, then.' The green eyes chilled. He stood up, dismissing her with the turn of his shoulder, scooped the girl's body up as though she were a child and walked into the burning building.

'Stop! It is on fire!' It was a foolish statement of the obvious and he ignored her. Julia scrambled to her feet, aghast. Another beam crashed down inside the shop, which was burning fiercely now. She ran forward and saw him, in a nimbus of flame, lay the girl down on what must have been a stone counter. He smoothed down her tunic, crossed her hands over her breast and touched her head. Julia thought his lips moved. Then he swung round and strode out of the building just as the roof collapsed with a roar of uprushing flame and sparks.

'Better than leaving her in the dust for the dogs,' he said curtly, pulling Julia further up the alleyway and around a corner. It was blissfully cool there, in the shade, away from the flames and out of sight of the two sprawled bodies.

'The fire will spread,' she said, wishing she could uncurl her fingers from around his forearm and finding she could not.

'But not this way, the wind is against it.' His head was up, his nostrils flared as though scenting the breeze. A hunter, aware.

She made herself release her grip and looked up. 'Look out!' A large lump of smouldering wood, as big as her fist, had lodged on his shoulder and was sliding down onto the bare skin of his upper arm. She reached out and knocked it aside, feeling the sharp sting of the burn on her palm, the tight muscle, the warmth of his arm.

'Thank you.' He caught her hand and turned it palm up, studying it. 'That will stop stinging in a minute. What is your name?'

'Julia Livia Rufa.' He did not appear ready to release her hand; tugging was undignified and might display fear. 'I am the daughter of the Senator Julius Livius Rufus. What is your name?'

'Wulfric, son of Athanagild, son of Thorismund.' He said it without emphasis, yet she was left with the clear impression that his name was known amongst his people, that he was used to command and to recognition. He thought for a moment, then said, 'You would say King of the Wolves, perhaps.' For the first time, searching for a translation, his Latin seemed less assured, the alien rhythms of his own language surfacing.

Wolf King? What else, she thought, sensing her own desire to laugh hysterically, and biting it back with hard-won discipline. 'Thank you, Wulfric, son of Athan…Athanagild.' Julia managed to get over the cumbersome syllables. 'I would be grateful if you could escort me to the Basilica where I hope to find my father. Naturally, we will not be ungrateful for your assistance.'

The wolf padded back down the alley from wherever it had been exploring and sat down beside its master, tongue lolling in the heat. Two pairs of green eyes regarded her; she could have sworn there was amusement in both.

'So, you would be grateful for my escort, would you, Julia?'

'Julia Livia,' she corrected. He was a barbarian, she could not expect him to understand how to address the daughter of a patrician Roman family correctly.

Now Wulfric was openly amused. His beard was clipped close enough for her to see the lines of his mouth, which just now were curling unmistakeably. 'How grateful, Julia?'

'I am sure they will reward you suitably with gold,' she said stiffly. 'My family, that is, and also my betrothed, the Senator Antonius Justus Celsus.'

‘But I can take all the gold I want,’ he said softly. ‘I can take anything I desire from this city. Why do you think we are here, if not for the wealth within these walls?’

‘For your king, Alaric, to speak with the Emperor Honorius. I know there has been some misunderstanding over a promise of land…’ Half-heard discussions between the men over dinner, debates she had only partly understood or ignored. The Visigoths had entered Rome before, demanded a vast bribe in gold, then they had gone away, leaving political turmoil. But that was all settled now. Honorius was back in control in Ravenna…

‘No misunderstanding. Treachery. We fight for your emperor for many years, we hold back the Hun hordes from the east from your lands, even as they overrun ours, and he promises us land, grain, security. And gives us lies. Now we have come to take what is owing. Two years ago we entered Rome, but it seems you Romans do not learn from the past.’

He stood there, as solid as the stone pillar behind him, as alien as the wolf that walked by his side, and she could believe that he would take anything he wanted. And there were thousands like him pouring into her city while frightened, overcivilised men in togas or silk tried to talk away the danger. Two years ago it had seemed they had placated Alaric. They had been wrong.

‘Honorius is not here; he is in Ravenna.’ Behind impregnable walls, equipped for the longest siege, while here the food was already running out. The invaders would find gold and silver, but they would find precious little to eat.

‘We know. The time for talking is past. Come.’ He turned on his heel and began to walk down the alleyway. Julia stood watching his back. Broad shoulders carrying a chain-mail shirt as easily as though it was linen, bare arms, tanned to a golden colour so different from her own olive skin, long legs in cloth trousers tucked into leather boots like a legionary’s. The broad belt cinched around his waist was legionary kit too, but the tall figure was anything but reassuringly familiar. Everywhere about him was the living glow of gold and the sullen blood red of garnets. His sword hilt, the scabbard, the buckle on his belt, the gold bands that strapped his biceps and wrists, all gleamed.

He was bigger than any man she had ever been close to—as big as the emperor’s German guard—and he moved with the predatory grace of a gladiator in the arena.

Behind her the burning shop collapsed across the alley with a crash. There was nowhere to go but to follow him. ‘You will take me to the Basilica?’ She had to run to catch him up.

‘We may go there.’ Wulfric stopped at the end of the passageway and surveyed the cross-street. A man peered out from a doorway, saw him and slammed the door to. Julia heard the thud of a falling bar. A woman, a child in her arms, ran past, shied away with a shrill scream and hurried on. At both ends, where the street opened out onto wider thoroughfares, there was a chaos of carts and mules and people shouting and shoving.

‘What do you mean? We may go there?’ She put her hand on his forearm and shook it when he did not immediately reply. Wulfric looked down at her, one corner of his mouth lifting, and she saw that the green eyes had lost their chill. Julia lifted her hand off his arm with elaborate care and stepped back, her heart thudding in response to the heat in that look. ‘No. No…you wouldn’t…’

‘Wouldn’t…’ He searched for a word. ‘Wouldn’t ravish you? I do not approve of ravishing women, as you saw just now. You need not fear that. Now, come.’

Relief made her snap at him. ‘Come where? I want to go to the Basilica.’

‘But what you want is no longer important. Come with me. I told you we had come to take what is owing. And we need it to be portable. Grain, horses, gold, silver and slaves—we take all of those.’

‘But…you want me as a hostage?’ Incomprehension turned to cold fear. She had leapt from the skillet into the fire.

‘No.’ She had amused him again. It was perversely insulting. ‘We already have the best hostage after the emperor. We have his sister. We do not need any more; hostages are hard work. They need looking after.’

‘You have Galla Placidia?’ A gracious lady, one who lived closer to the people than her brother. She had stayed in Rome, not fled to the thick walls and high towers of Ravenna at the first hint of danger.

‘Yes. Now come.’

‘Where? Why?’

Wulfric turned on his heel and studied her with the air of a tutor confronted by a dense pupil. ‘With me. You are now mine. I need a household slave. You will do very nicely.’

‘A slave? Me? You are jesting.’ There was no hint of teasing in the calm regard. ‘A…’ He meant it. ‘No!’ Julia took to her heels. Ahead the turmoil of the street, once so terrifying, now seemed to offer sanctuary. The breath tearing in her throat, she yanked up her skirts and ran. Only a few more yards, a few more steps.

A blur passed her and then stopped in front in a scrabble of claws on stone. The wolf. Julia juddered to a halt. It wasn’t showing its teeth. ‘Good boy, there’s a nice wolf. Stay! Sit?’ It regarded her impassively then padded forwards. She spun on her heel. Wulfric hadn’t moved. If she could just make it to the door that stood ajar…

Something hard and wet and hot closed gently round her right wrist. She looked down. The animal had her arm between its jaws. It was not biting, just holding with a pressure that would not crack an egg, yet which had all the potential to rip her flesh from her bones.

Wulfric whistled loudly. There was a disturbance in the milling crowd and a horseman pushed his way through and into the side road, another horse on a leading rein behind him. No, not a man, a youth, she realised, sixteen at most. He had a leather jerkin over a linen shirt, no helm on his head, but a long dagger hung from his belt and he controlled the horses with ease.

He spoke to Wulfric in a tongue she did not know.

‘Speak Latin, else how will you ever have it perfect? This is Julia, she comes with us. Take her up behind you.’

The boy turned interested blue eyes on her. ‘The new slave? The one you said you would find to cook for us? That is good, I am tired of cooking, it is women’s work.’

‘I am not a slave, I am not going with you! I am a noblewoman!’

‘You do not appear to be in any position to argue.’ The infuriating man strolled towards her.

‘You mean you would let your wolf savage me if I try to escape?’ Julia enquired sarcastically. ‘I wouldn’t be much use as a slave then.’

‘True.’ He picked her up with startling suddenness and tossed her up behind the boy, whipping a leather thong out of his belt and lashing her hands to a ring in the youth’s broad belt. ‘Don’t forget she is there, Berig,’ he advised. ‘You do not want her landing on top of you when you dismount. Oh, no!’ He grabbed Julia who was trying to slide off the far side. ‘Berig is not very big yet, but he is heavy enough. I advise you to sit still.’

He swung up onto the other horse, a rangy, ugly grey. ‘Now, we go and find ourselves some more gold.’

With the wolf trotting at his heels, he forced his way out into the crowded street, the very sight of him sending terrified citizens diving into side alleys. The boy Berig followed. Julia slid, gasped and tightened her hands on to his belt in an effort not to fall off. Sooner or later they have to untie me. That wolf can’t be everywhere, sooner or later I can run…

‘Hwa namo thein? Er…What is your name? Are you a good cook?’ Berig tossed back over his shoulder as he steered his mount in his master’s wake.

‘Julia Livia. And, no, I am not,’ Julia snapped back. ‘I cannot cook. I do not need to cook. I have slaves to do that.’

The boy gave a snort of amusement. ‘Then you had best learn fast, because you have no slaves now and my lord has a good appetite and no patience if kept hungry. This is good. Now we have you,

I do not need to kill chickens, or cook anything, or fetch hot water, or wash clothes or even scrub my lord's back. You can do all that.'

Scrub his back? Julia stared furiously at the broad figure in front of them. Oh, I'll scrub his back all right—with an axe in my hands!

As though he felt her thoughts, Wulfric turned in the saddle and looked at her steadily. She felt her flimsy defiance shrivelling. This was real. He was a savage, uncaring, immovable force and she was in deadly serious trouble. For the first time in her life her position in society, her connections, her status meant nothing. All she had to fight this man with was her courage and her strength and she very much feared that they would count for nothing against those muscles and that cool green-eyed intelligence.

Chapter Two

Courage and strength, Julia mocked herself bitterly as she gripped Berig's belt and fought for balance on the horse's rump. And what opportunities do you ever have for exercising those, Julia Livia? Do you even possess them? When had she ever had to stand up for herself and use her own initiative?

Shop here, wear this, go to this party, not to that one. Be friends with those girls, that one is unsuitable…Marry Antonius Justus Celsus. Yes, Father, yes, Mother. Whatever you say. He is boring and smug and he'll have two chins in five years, but it is the right thing to do to marry him. So suitable.

Being carried off as a slave by a golden giant with a wolf and a boy at his heels was not suitable. But how do you learn to fight if you have never had to before?

'This one?' Berig's voice snapped her out of her whirling thoughts. They had halted in front of the plain high wall and closed doors of what she guessed must be a prosperous merchant's house. 'It looks a poor place.'

'With these walls and those locks?' Wulfric leaned over and hammered on the unyielding planks. 'I don't think they want to let us in. Why do you think that is?' Julia smiled inwardly; her own home had doors and walls that were even better than these.

Wulfric edged the ugly grey horse up to the wall, and stood up on its back with a smoothness that had her gaping. He reached high, grasped the top of the wall and hauled himself up, muscles bulging with effort. With a grunt he straddled the wall, then vanished.

'You are thieves, all of you,' Julia spat at Berig's back, fury at her own reaction to that display of brute strength lending venom to her words.

The boy shifted in the saddle and half turned. Focusing on him, she saw he had a snub nose, blonder hair than Wulfric, vivid blue eyes. 'We keep our word, all of us. Your emperor is an oath-breaker.' He put loathing into the words. 'There is nothing worse. If you cannot trust a man's word, what can you trust? He is less than a man, he is not fit to lead.'

'It is politics. Honorius must do what is right for the state,' Julia protested. What am I doing, debating politics with a barbarian youth while the city burns around us?

The boy stared at her as though she had sprouted two heads. 'Do Roman women understand nothing of honour? Your emperor gave his word. He broke it, now he must pay.'

She was saved from answering him by the doors swinging open and Wulfric appearing on the threshold. 'They have fled and abandoned their slaves, let's see what else they left behind.' He whistled and the grey followed him, Berig's mount behind. Hooves cracked sharply on the expensive mosaics of the entrance.

'Where would you hide the family treasure, Julia?' Wulfric enquired, his eyes scanning the empty peristyle. There was a muted scuffle from the shadows; the whites of wide eyes were just visible.

'You! Come out, I will not hurt you.' To Julia's amazement the slaves shuffled out of hiding, their eyes fixed on the big man like mice in front of a fox. 'Your master does not treat you well.' It was a statement, not a question. The group were thin, bruises showed. 'Perhaps you saw where he hid his gold before he ran and left you.'

They shook their heads, silent. Then their gazes slid furtively towards the big urn standing in the open space. A drooping laurel bush stuck out of the top.

'Not a good time of year to be transplanting shrubs,' Wulfric observed, strolling over and giving the urn a push. It was rock solid, taller than he was. 'Fetch me a rope, a long, strong one.'

The oldest slave, the steward perhaps, grinned suddenly and hurried off, returning with a hefty coil of hemp in his hands. Wulfric tied it round the urn, fed it round the nearest pillar, then tossed the end up to Berig before remounting. The two riders looped the rope on their pommels and began to

back the horses. Craning round Berig's shoulder, Julia saw the urn rock. The grey's hooves slithered on the mosaic, there was a lurch and the marble vessel toppled over to smash on the paving.

No wonder the shrub had been drooping! It was planted in pure gold, a mass of coins that spun and flashed on the paving. The slaves hurried forward and began to scoop up the money, stuffing it into the saddle-bags that Wulfric gave them with an enthusiasm that said everything about their feelings for their master.

When the bags were full, one woman ran off and found more. 'Keep the rest.' Wulfric secured the gold behind his saddle. 'And run.'

'One of them is sure to be able to cook better than I can and they are slaves already,' Julia protested.

'Yes, but I want you.' Wulfric smiled. It was not an indication of weakness—even in her desperate state she was all too aware of that—but it held a touch more warmth again.

Something cold settled in Julia's stomach. She tried to tell herself he had meant it when he said he did not believe in ravishing women. Surely he did not think he would not have to? That she would willingly…Oh, no, my arrogant barbarian, if you think that broad shoulders and big muscles are going to seduce Julia Livia Rufa, you are in for a major disappointment.

They stopped again further down the street in front of an arched doorway. 'No!' she protested. 'Don't you dare, you thieving pagans! That is a church, it is sacred…'

'Yes, I know.' Wulfric swung down from the saddle. 'I want to check they have had no trouble.' He disappeared inside, leaving Julia gaping after him.

'We are Christians,' Berig said angrily. 'Don't you Romans know anything about anyone else?'

'I…I didn't think. But you haven't been Christians very long, have you? Some of you still worship the old gods?'

'A few, perhaps,' the lad conceded. 'It doesn't mean we would smash up a church. And I will wager some Romans still worship your old gods as well.'

Grandmother for one. Julia knew her father's mother kept the shrine to the household gods tended, despite her son's displeasure. She bit her lip. What else did she not know about these people? She recalled seeing Wulfric's lips move as he had laid the slave girl down in the burning shop. Had he been praying over her? And she, Julia, had not even thought to do so. Ashamed, she tried to fashion the words, but her mind was too muddled to find them.

Wulfric emerged. 'They are all right, Theofrid passed this way two hours ago and gave them a password.'

Julia looked about her, puzzled. This was not at all what she had expected the sacking of a city to be like. True, there was panic and confusion, smoke was rising everywhere she looked and she was with two men whose saddle-bags bulged with looted gold. But she had expected blood to be running in the street, churches and palaces to be burning, savage men, painted with strange symbols, to be dragging women off by their hair for unspeakable purposes. This was more like a particularly forceful form of tax collecting. With human coin.

'We will go to the Forum, see who else is there.' Julia's spirits rose—surely there would be soldiers, surely some resistance to this invasion was being organised? By going to the Forum they would be walking right into the hands of the emperor's men and she would be saved.

But they were moving against the tide of people streaming away from the heart of the city and her confidence began to ebb. Why were people fleeing, unless the Goths had overrun the Forum itself? Other riders, dressed like Wulfric, their hair long on their shoulders, fell in beside them.

Greetings were exchanged in the tongue she could not understand, snatches of news tossed from rider to rider. A knot of men on foot were herding a group in tunics before them. From the resigned expressions on the captives' faces, Julia guessed they must already be slaves.

Berig was calling to another group who appeared to be teasing him about his captive. Julia turned her head away from their curious stares with a haughty lift of her chin and found herself looking into the startled face of a man she knew, half-hidden in a doorway.

'Marcus! Marcus Atilius! Help me!' The young man, her neighbour, started from his concealment, then began to back away as the riders closed up around Berig's horse. 'Tell my father,' she shouted as he took to his heels. 'Tell Antonius Justus! I have been kidnapped!

'Let me go!' Seeing someone she knew galvanised her, gave her hope. She jerked at the bonds linking her to Berig, then tried to score her fingernails into his back.

'Ouch, you cat, stop that!' He twisted round, furious, hissing with pain as Wulfric wheeled his mount alongside them.

'Stop it.' He reached out one hand and jerked back her clawing fingers. 'If you do that again, I'll sling you over the front of my saddle like a sack of grain, which won't do much for your dignity, my lady.'

Julia subsided, more shaken than she was willing to admit to herself. Somewhere, in the back of her mind, had been the thought that she would be rescued just as soon as someone in authority realised her predicament. She had expected to find all the young men of patrician birth had taken up arms and were defending Rome, while their elders met to form strategy in the Basilica.

But if men like Marcus Atilius were skulking in doorways, togas or silk tunics hidden under dark cloaks, then who was rallying the troops?

No one was the answer, she saw as soon as they reached the Forum. The heart of Rome, its pride, was overrun by the besiegers. Groups of mounted men shouted news to each other, others mustered carts laden with chests, sacks of food, barrels. Anxious huddles of slaves waited the pleasure of their new masters—and there was not a sign of resistance.

Wulfric reined in under the circular wall of the ancient Temple of Vesta. It seemed it was a prearranged meeting point, for the men already there crowded forward, clenched fists raised in salute.

Thirsty, stiff, hungry, almost beyond fear with sheer discomfort, Julia let herself lean against Berig's back, let the noise wash over her, and sank into a half faint, half doze.

'Here.' Someone was shaking her shoulder. Wearily she raised her head. Wulfric was holding out a flask. 'Drink, you must be thirsty.'

'How can I? My hands are tied.' The thought of water made her dry throat tighten with longing, but she refused to thank him.

Wulfric leaned forward and released one wrist. Julia took the flask and drank. It was watered wine, a poor thin red probably snatched from a tavern, but it went down like the finest vintage from the family vineyards. She handed it back with a stiff nod. He did not try and secure her wrist again and she realised as she steadied herself that the pommel of Berig's knife was now within reach. She could snatch it, hold it to his ribs until they agreed to take her back, or…She let her free hand drift further round the boy's side as though to secure her position.

'Berig, move your knife.' The boy shifted it round, out of her reach, and she glared furiously at the big man.

'Do you have eyes in the back of your head?'

He grinned, the green eyes crinkling with amusement. 'Of course, that is how I stay alive. That, and being able to read my enemy's mind.'

Is that what I am? His enemy? What have I done to him to deserve this?

One of the groups of slaves trudged past and she looked down at them, seeing for the first time just what a mixture they were, the people who made life in the Empire run with the smooth efficiency of a water clock. Tall, sandy-haired, light-skinned Northerners, a few black faces, the wiry stature and deep olive skins of men from the Eastern Empire, all caught up and brought back here. What have they done to deserve it? These barbarians have learned from us and now we reap what we have sown.

‘Come.’ Wulfric raised his voice and heads turned. ‘Back to camp, we have done enough today. Alaric has called a council for tomorrow.’

It seemed Wulfric’s word carried weight. That had been an order, not a suggestion, and Julia watched to see who followed him. Fifty or so men, at a rough count, and many older than him by years, grizzled old veterans.

‘Who is he?’ she asked Berig, once they were away from the hubbub of the Forum. The wine, thin though it was, had revived her; to escape she needed knowledge, needed to understand her captor. ‘Who are all these men?’

‘Our kin and some of those who would ally with us. There are many more than this, of course.’ More? A private army, then.

‘Are you his…no, he is not old enough for you to be his son.’

‘I do not know the word.’ Berig wrestled with it. ‘My mother’s sister married the brother of his mother.’

‘A distant cousin?’ Julia suggested. ‘Why do you serve him?’

‘Cousin.’ The boy practised the word. ‘It is the custom. I serve him, he teaches me how to be a man, how to fight. In two years he will give me my sword.’

‘I see. But why do all these men follow him? They are older than he is, many of them.’

‘Because he is—ah, I do not know the word in Latin! King-worthy? Do you understand? He has the way of it, to lead.’

‘But you have a king. Alaric.’

‘He will not live for ever.’ The boy shrugged. ‘Wulfric is loyal, says Alaric is a good king, but many mutter against him. We have been wandering for years, fighting, waiting for your emperor to honour his word. There are some who say Alaric should have struck harder, sooner.’

Julia stared at the tall figure riding in front of them. Kingworthy. Just what sort of man was she now the chattel of? ‘What must a man do to be king-worthy?’

‘Be wise in Council, fierce in battle, kill the enemy, be cunning in strategy, a law-giver and judge. Be generous to his people and lead them to much gold.’

‘And Wulfric is all that?’

‘And more.’ The boy nodded fiercely, passionate in defence of his lord. ‘He is high in Alaric’s Council.’

‘But so are others?’ she suggested. ‘He is not the heir?’

‘No,’ Berig conceded. ‘It does not work like that. When Alaric dies there will be a fight, perhaps.’ The thought did not seem to alarm him. ‘Look, we are almost there.’

They had passed out of the Salarian Gate without her noticing. Now, in the distance, she could see the smoke from camp-fires, see the low lines of tents, more than the biggest legionary camp she had ever seen. As they came closer she saw that while the shelters might resemble Roman army tents, though in a wild mixture of sizes and colours, the camp seemed to be more a vast village than a military emplacement.

Women were everywhere, bustling amidst the tents, bent over fires, chasing errant children. Hurdles kept horses, oxen, pigs and sheep corralled, the tents were arranged in orderly blocks with streets between them, great wagons were drawn up in rows, banners flapped lazily overhead and mounted men circled the area, their eyes on the horizon.

‘There are thousands,’ she murmured, then started as Wulfric answered her. He must have hearing like his wolf.

‘This is a people, a nation, in search of a homeland. And now you are part of it.’

‘Never,’ she said, as he turned away and began to make his way down one of the wide streets between the tents. ‘Never.’

‘You are very stubborn,’ Berig observed. ‘I thought Roman women stayed at home and did as they were told.’

‘Do Goth women?’

‘Oh, no!’ Berig chuckled. ‘I think you will be quite at home here.’

I very much doubt it, Julia thought grimly. There were the big things to worry about—how to escape, how to survive living with an arrogant, musclebound barbarian until she did. And then there were the trivial things. The things that made life survivable—a proper bathhouse, a proper latrine with running water, civilised food, and someone else to cook it, clean clothes. These were all the things she was not going to find in the midst of these barbarians.

Wulfric dismounted outside the largest tent she had yet seen. Women from neighbouring tents looked up from cooking pots, smiled and waved. A small child, sturdy legs pumping as he ran, skidded to a halt in front of him, tugged at the hem of his tunic and began to pelt him with questions.

Wulfric answered him patiently in his own language, then scooped the child up and deposited him, squealing with delight, on his horse’s saddle and handed him the reins. Julia stared. This was the man Berig said was a possible future king, a ruthless warrior. She tried to imagine any of the senators of her acquaintance stopping to talk to a grubby child, trusting them with their horses.

He hauled down the loaded saddle-bags and untied a bundle of fur and feather that Julia had not noticed before.

‘Dinner.’ He handed it to her. Two rabbits and a game bird of some kind. Even as she held them away from her skirts, grimacing in distaste, the wolf trotted up and dropped another rabbit at her feet, then sat back, panting.

‘I suppose you expect me to be grateful, do you?’ she demanded, glaring at the animal. It lolled its tongue out. She could swear it was grinning.

‘We will eat well tonight,’ Wulfric said. ‘And his name is Smoke.’ The creature lifted its great head at the sound of its name.

‘Does he speak Latin, then?’

‘Of course.’

‘Well, is Smoke going to skin these, or pluck them or whatever one does with whatever they are?’ She knew perfectly well what needed doing to them in theory, but she had not the slightest intention of doing it. Let him think her completely pampered, it would put him off his guard.

She expected a show of temper at her defiance, but all Wulfric said was, ‘Berig will do it tonight. And tomorrow I will find someone to show you how to cook.’

Julia looked down her nose at him. ‘We will see about that. And now I want to wash.’

‘We all do.’ Hades, was it impossible to provoke the man? ‘If you go and ask Una there…’he nodded at a young woman who was feeding wood under a vast cauldron ‘…she will give you hot water.’ He slapped the grey horse on its rump and it walked off, its tiny rider crowing with delight and followed by a watchful Berig. Wulfric flipped open the tent flap and vanished inside.

What would happen if she just strolled away, vanished into this city of tents? At her feet Smoke got to his feet, shook himself vigorously and stood waiting. Of course, her hairy bodyguard would bring her back to its hairy master.

Julia grimaced and went over to Una. The other woman smiled. She was fair haired, taller than Julia and, it was apparent, despite her long tunic and swathing cloak, pregnant. ‘Hello. Are you Una? Do you speak Latin?’

‘Some. Better if I practise it.’ Una straightened and rubbed the small of her back, smiling. ‘You are Wulfric’s woman now?’

‘No! He thinks I am his slave.’ They stood looking at each other. Una was obviously working out what Julia’s position was. ‘I need hot water. And I need the latrine.’ And how was she going to mime that, if Una’s Latin was not up to it? Her faintly desperate air must have communicated her meaning. Una smiled and pointed to a square of wattle standing alone in the middle of a clear space.

Julia approached with caution, fearing the worst. The wattle, just the height of her head, had an opening with a baffle screen set inside it, a deep hole with a plank, a bucket of ash with a scoop

and a box of large leaves. In the absence of running water, it was remarkably civilised, although how one indicated that it was occupied was a problem. There was nothing for it: Julia sang.

She emerged to find Una scooping hot water into a pair of buckets. She hooked chains on them and lifted a yoke for Julia to step under. 'Enough?'

'Yes. Yes, thank you.' Julia took the weight and straightened up. It was not that it was too heavy, although she certainly had to concentrate to keep the buckets steady, it was the symbolism of the thing. She was under Wulfric's yoke now. She had accepted the first task set her—was there any going back from that?

'My name is Julia,' she said abruptly. 'Julia Livia.' Una smiled and nodded and went back to making up the fire.

Julia walked slowly to the tent, stooped through the flap and set down the buckets without spilling a drop.

'Over here.' Wulfric's voice was muffled. In the shadows at the back of the tent she could see that he had discarded helmet and sword belt and was pulling the chain-mail shirt over his head.

Doubtless he expected her to rush over and help him. Julia straightened up under the yoke, brought the buckets over and stood and waited while he untangled himself.

The chain mail rattled to the ground, pooling into a heavy mass. It had dragged his linen tunic with it, leaving him bare chested. Julia swallowed.

It was expected of Roman men of good family that they exercised, that they cultivated fitness. They were not bashful about showing off their bodies at the baths or in sport. And the city was littered with statues of naked men, in gleaming white marble or painted in lifelike colours.

But this man was bronze. A bronze god come to life. Every muscle stood out, defined, developed, powerful. His skin was golden and she had a sudden, powerful impulse to put out her hand and feel it, feel the heat, the texture, the pulse beating beneath it. He was more alive than any person she had ever seen and he terrified her.

She realised her mouth was open and snapped it shut.

'Don't you ever smile, Julia?' He was watching her, apparently quite unconscious of the effect his half-naked body was having on her.

'Yes. All the time—when I have something to smile about,' she retorted. 'I shall smile when I am rescued.'

Wulfric lifted his right hand and cupped her chin, his thumb gently pushing up the corner of her stubbornly straight mouth. 'Smile for me now, Julia.'

Chapter Three

Julia bared her teeth at Wulfric. Will she bite? 'Smile for me,' he said again, intrigued to see what she would do. It was like having an exotic animal, half-tame, half-wild. He had been mad to take her, he knew that. She was so far from what he needed—neither the wife he should acquire, nor the domesticated slave who would make life comfortable—that he wondered at himself for the impulse.

But how could he delude himself that it was an impulse? He could have let her go at any time. Something about this dark-haired, dark-eyed, olive-skinned creature called to him. It was going to be hell to teach her their ways, with her patrician arrogance and her stubborn defiance. He knew perfectly well that she had brought the water only because she wanted to use it herself.

'I would sooner smile at your wolf.' She jerked her chin, but he refused to let her go and she was too proud to continue struggling. There was fear at the back of those brown eyes, fear that he would force her to do more than carry water, despite his pledge, and that angered him.

These Romans had no concept of honour, no respect for a man's word. Alaric, and all his people, had experienced it, year after weary year. They had fought for the emperor, learned his language, kept his enemies at bay, waiting for their reward while they were lied to and deceived. And now, what would they do? They had taken the greatest city on earth, they held the sister of the emperor, they could strip Rome of gold and slaves and treasures. But were they any closer to what they needed, their safe homeland?

Loyalty to his king told him to trust Alaric's judgement. Experience and his own imagination told him to doubt the outcome. And yet to doubt his king was not honourable.

Frustrated, he released her. 'That is your space, take some water.' He jerked his chin towards a length of striped cloth that shielded one corner of the tent.

She stepped away from him, and he watched as she wiped her hand across her chin where he had held her, as though to rub away his contaminating touch. 'This is a large tent,' she observed, as if nothing had passed between them, hefting one of the buckets and making her way over to the corner. She was stronger than she looked.

'We copied the design of the legionary tents, but bigger than the standard eight-man model. We have spent years living in them, now they are as close to a home as we can make them.' He watched her poking about in her space, amused by the feminine instinct to build a nest in the most unpromising circumstances. 'I will give you rugs for a bed and Berig will fill some sacks with straw for a mattress.'

'Luxury indeed,' she said drily, letting the curtain fall between them.

Wulfric whistled to Smoke and, when the wolf trotted in, nodded towards the corner. The animal padded behind the curtain and must have sat down. Wulfric could see its tail protruding underneath. Julia murmured something and the tail began to wag. Smoke liked her, it seemed.

Berig, it was obvious, did not. 'Where is she?' he demanded, marching in.

'Washing.' Wulfric jerked his head towards the curtain. 'Here, take some of this and make yourself decent. You stink of horse and smoke.'

'So do you.' Berig began to ladle hot water into a bowl.

'I'm washing, aren't I?' Wulfric aimed a cuff at the lad's head, watching him critically as he ducked smoothly away. He was growing up fast, too fast yet for his lanky frame to catch up with. He had a quick tongue, fierce loyalty and worked magic with horses. He was also beginning to flirt with the girls of his own age.

Wulfric cast a thoughtful eye in the direction of Julia's corner. There was splashing, but no other sound. Was he asking for trouble, introducing an attractive young woman into the tent with the youth? Probably not, not while they were squabbling like brother and sister, but it would bear watching. Berig deserved better than to fall into puppy love with a haughty Roman girl like this one.

He fished another soap ball out of the earthenware jar and went to hold it round the edge of the curtain. 'Here.'

There was a pause, then wet fingers brushed against his hand as she took it. 'Thank you.'

As though struck by an adder's bite his body went rigid with desire. Wulfric shook his head, trying to clear it. Why that fleeting touch should affect him so, he had no idea. One moment he was worrying, with the corner of his mind that wasn't thinking of Council tomorrow, about Berig's adolescent fancies, the next he found himself as aroused as though Julia had emerged naked and wrapped herself around him. The touch of those damp fingers fired his imagination with images of her wet and bare behind the flimsy curtain and he strode to the shadowed back recesses of the tent to give himself a chance to recover. This was not why he had taken her. He just wished he did know why.

'There's a towel here somewhere.'

'No, they are all here,' Berig called. 'Una washed things for us, and they're with the tunics.'

'Una has been your skivvy up until now, I presume?' The cool voice effectively dampened his fantasies. Wulfric went back to the hot water with a grimace.

'Una's my sister, so she looks after us when there isn't anyone else,' Berig snapped. 'And she's expecting a baby, so she shouldn't be looking after two households now.'

'Then you had better kidnap her a slave too, hadn't you? Or give her some help yourself.'

Damn it, the woman had a tongue on her like an adder, as well as its fangs. 'An excellent idea, although once you find out the way of things, I am sure you can help her—she'll appreciate a woman's company,' Wulfric said smoothly. 'She will be busy when the baby's born.'

Silence. Then, 'Exactly what do you expect me to do?'

'Cook for the three of us. Keep this tent clean and tidy. Wash and mend our clothes. Fetch water, heat it for when we return.'

'Nurse you when you are sick, I suppose?'

'Of course. Or wounded.'

He could almost read her thoughts. The sooner the better…

'Are you both decent?'

Wulfric cast a hasty glance downwards, but the frosty exchange had cooled that ridiculous flash of lust. He was still shaken by his momentary loss of control.

Was it time to think seriously about a wife now? There were plenty who would advise him that he should do just that. A man in his position, a leader, needed strong sons about him. Hilderic was hinting about his daughter Sunilda. It was a good alliance, it would bring many spears to his side and she was a strong woman, in mind as well as body. A woman who understood what was needed and what must be done so that all the children had a homeland to grow up in.

He realised that he must have been lost in thought when Berig replied, 'We've got our trousers on, if that's what you mean.'

Wulfric smothered a snort of amusement. 'Then put a shirt on as well,' he ordered. 'And go and do something about our evening meal.'

'I skinned and plucked the game,' Berig said, his voice muffled as he pulled the clean linen over his head. 'Una's taken them to add to a hot pot of vegetables. They'll be enough for us and for her brood. Sichar's going to be late, she said, something about horses.'

Wulfric grunted. Berig's brother-in-law had been sent by Alaric to take a count of all the available animals and their condition. They would be breaking camp soon, that was no secret—sitting outside a starving city, once they had stripped its wealth, was foolishness—but where they would go—north or south—that was what disturbed his sleep at night.

'Then stuff the straw sacks for Julia's bed.'

'She's supposed to be our slave,' the boy began to protest. Wulfric raised one eyebrow and he subsided. 'Sorry. Yes, my lord.'

Wulfric waited until he had let the tent flap drop, then smiled wryly at Julia as she emerged into the main space. ‘A difficult age.’ Perhaps she had experience with brothers, some link he could make to allow her to see Berig as a young man, not an enemy. Having them bickering—or sulking if he exerted his will—would not make for a comfortable existence.

‘I wouldn’t know,’ she said stiffly, her attention apparently fixed on tying her long plait. ‘I have no brothers.’

So much for that idea. ‘But you must have gone through a stage of wanting to rebel, to go your own way.’ It suited her, the simple style, unlike the elaborate pleats it had been in before. It made her seem older, less of a girl, more of a woman. He was aware of the clean bones of her face. ‘It is good that Berig chafes at authority, tries the limits of my patience. If he doesn’t try and get his own way, he will never learn the discipline of subduing his will to orders. And one day I will let go of the reins and give him his head. By then, he’ll have learned self-discipline for himself.’

‘I would never dream of disobeying my parents.’ She looked at him down her nose. ‘Roman children are not encouraged to have their head, as you put it. Their duty is quite clear, their training and career set out.’

‘Possibly that is why we have defeated Rome and not the other way about,’ he suggested mildly, earning a look of disdain as Berig came in, tugging two bulging sacks behind him.

‘I’ll go and get a frame off the cart.’ He went out again, hooking up the tent flap.

Through the open doorway Julia could see the bustle of camp life as the sun began to set. Men were beginning to come back to their home fires, children running out to met them, womenfolk standing up from tending their cooking pots to wave, or to exchange a kiss with the big, long-haired warriors. So fierce, so savage looking, and yet, apparently, so domestic. There seemed real affection there. Julia could not recall the last time she had seen her father kiss her mother, other than with a cool salute on the cheek on formal occasions. She shivered.

‘Are you cold?’ Wulfric came up close behind her. He moved very quietly for such a big man and she felt her body stiffen as though ready to run.

‘No.’ She must not yield to gratitude for his small gestures of thoughtfulness, let them blind her to the full realisation that she was a captive. That way lay fatal weakness. He was like his wolf, domesticated until roused, then a killer.

‘Sure? I can find you a cloak, Una would lend one.’

‘No.’ She struggled to suppress another shiver. It was not cold, the air still held the heat of a long hot day, yet her whole body felt chilled to the core and she knew, if she relaxed, she would begin to shake. Shock, she supposed, surprised to find herself able to analyse anything.

‘Then what is it?’ he said gently. ‘What do you need, Julia?’

‘What do you think?’ She spun round, coming toe to toe with him, so close that she had to tip her head back to look up into his face. ‘What do you think I want, that I need?’

There was a dangerous flare of anger in his eyes as he answered her. He had hoped to soft-talk me, she thought bitterly. He does not like that thrown back in his face.

‘To be free,’ Wulfric answered. ‘But you cannot be free now, Julia—you are mine.’ She took two angry steps away from him, ducking out of the tent to stand at the entrance, arms folded tight across her body to stop the shaking.

Outside some of the nearer tents children were helping their mothers set up trestle tables, some carrying out stacks of pottery vessels, wooden plates, horn beakers and spoons.

‘We will eat outside.’ Julia began to turn, to announce loftily that she did not care where they ate, she was not hungry, when she saw that Wulfric was speaking not to her, but to Berig, who was hefting in a box made of planks.

‘Badi,’ he said, pausing when he saw her watching. ‘Bed.’ Julia turned a shoulder. Why should she learn their coarse language? She was not going to be here long enough to trouble herself. ‘People will stare,’ he added, picking up Wulfric’s reference to their meal.

‘Let them. Here, help me with the trestle, it is too warm to eat inside. They will get used to the sight of her soon enough, sooner if Una can spare her any clothes.’

Julia felt something contract inside her. Change her clothes for those of a Goth? It was to lose her identity. Even now, looking around, she regretted her plain braid, so like many of the barbarian women. I am not like them, I am Roman, she told herself fiercely. To cease to look like a Roman was another step down the very slippery slope of accepting what Wulfric was trying to make her.

If she looked like his womenfolk, would Wulfric still look at her with that hot gaze she saw every now and again, simmering behind the cool green eyes? She must seem exotic to him, perhaps that was an attraction and homespuns would be a protection. But the heat of that look was treacherously seductive, even while it scared her.

‘Come, Julia, I will show you where the things for eating are.’ It was Berig, very obviously making an effort to be civil. Julia almost told him that she had no intention of eating, let alone setting a table, then turned back meekly and followed him into the tent. The sooner she became familiar with the tent and everything it held, the sooner she would know exactly what resources she had to hand to help her escape. A knife, for a start, to cut the heavy canvas of the tent side.

‘Here.’ The lad was lifting platters and bowls down off a makeshift shelf. ‘The spoons and beakers are there, see?’

‘I need a knife for eating,’ she said.

‘Oh.’ Berig clapped a hand to his side where his eating knife hung from his belt. ‘Yes, of course you do. Let’s see what is in here.’

So easy. Julia took the knife with an absent air and added it to the pile of things to carry through. Too much to hope for civilised eating couches, fine linen napery and wine in glasses, of course.

Berig was carrying folding stools through, which answered at least part of that speculation. But as she began to set out the table, Julia found herself wondering at the skill of the wood turner who had produced the platters. Even the earthenware bowls were not unpleasing with their subtle glaze, thin walls and delicate scraffito decoration. She ran a thumb into the elegant bowl of the horn spoon she held and was forced to acknowledge that these people might not have the sophistication of Roman citizens, but their objects were not crude.

‘Wondering where the Rhenish glass and the silver platters are, Julia?’ Wulfric was watching her. Wulfric always seemed to be watching her…

‘This is well enough, I suppose.’

‘The Rhenish glass is in the third chest to the left of the door. I had thought ale, with Una’s rich game stew, but if you have a fancy for wine tonight we can get the glass out. The silver, I am afraid, is packed a little more inaccessibly, but if you give me notice of your desire to dine off it, I am sure Berig can find something.’

A rich game stew. Her stomach roiled, distracting her from his sarcasm—although to be fair, it would probably have revolted just the same at the thought of dry bread and water.

‘I would not disturb him to find such a thing for a mere slave,’ she said tartly and was hard put to it not to throw a horn beaker at him when Wulfric merely grinned.

‘You are determined not to show any weakness, are you not, Julia Livia?’ Her formal name for the first time. ‘I am well aware you feel totally disinclined to eat, let alone having to sit down out here, in full view of a good score of interested watchers, and consume game stew. But that is exactly what you are going to do. Eat, and maintain your strength.’

Julia narrowed her eyes at him. What does he know, this big, strong, invincible man? Has he ever felt fear in his life? Ever felt his stomach turn into a roiling mass of butterflies? Ever felt small and powerless and desperate? No, of course not.

Once she had seen a tiny shrew confronted by a hunting dog a thousand times its own size. She had thought the tiny scrap would drop dead of terror as the dog extended its nose, snuffling in curiosity. But, no, it had jumped an inch in the air and buried its sharp teeth into the nose of the dog. Well, I am that shrew, she told herself fiercely. I will win.

Berig was coming back, carrying a steaming pot, his sister at his heels with her own platter and spoon in her hands, four children round her skirts. 'Greetings,' she said to Julia, nudging the children to speak.

'Greetings,' she responded, unwilling to snub this woman because of the sins of her menfolk.

They sat down at last, platters of bread, cheese and butter on the table along with the stew, a jug of ale. It seemed a very strange way of eating, but Julia did her best. Keep up your strength, an inner voice nagged her.

The stew was delicious. Savoury, hot, rich. She ate with an appetite she had not thought she could ever feel again, the cold at her core melting, the spasms of shivering ebbing away. Then she looked up to find Wulfric's eyes on her. Her captor.

Julia dropped her spoon, forgot the knife she had so carefully secured, and ran for the latrine, every morsel she had eaten and drunk rising up to choke her.

She was bent double, retching miserably, when an arm came round her shoulders to support her and a damp cloth was pressed into her hand. 'Thank you, Una,' she murmured, thankful for the support. At last the misery ceased and she sagged back against the figure behind her, head spinning. A beaker appeared and she rinsed her mouth with relief. 'Thank you,' she said again, a little more strongly.

'I am sorry,' said her helper and she froze against the supporting arm. Not Una—Wulfric. 'I should have let you eat inside.'

'Let me go!' She struggled to free herself, scarlet with humiliation at the position she was in, suddenly utterly conscious of where she was.

'Of course, come on, you should rest.' For one hideous moment she thought he was going to pick her up bodily and carry her out. The thought of being carried out of a latrine in front of an interested audience of barbarian families was too much.

'Don't you dare pick me up,' she hissed, swivelling round to face Wulfric. He threw up his hands in a gesture of denial and let her get to her feet. 'Stay there,' she added, pushing back the weight of her plait and summoning all her dignity. Then she stalked out of the wicker enclosure, across the intervening space and into the tent without a glance in any direction.

Inside, away from all eyes, her determination deserted her and she clung shakily to the pole that held up the front of the structure. 'Bed,' said a voice behind her, and this time, as her knees gave way, she let him scoop her up and carry her to the curtain hung across the corner. 'There.' Wulfric laid her down on the bed and she felt her weight bear her down into the well-stuffed mattress that Berig had so reluctantly prepared. 'There's water.' He gestured at a jug. 'And here is Smoke to keep watch over you. Rest—you are of no use to me sick. Goodnight, Julia.'

He did not look back as the striped fabric fell to shield her little corner. Julia strained to hear his footfall, but only Smoke, head raised until he knew his master had left the tent, gave her a clue. The wolf circled around, found a comfortable spot and lay down at the foot of the bed. Julia could just see the tip of his tail in the light of the rush lamp that burned on the small chest set beside the bed.

She lay rubbing her sore stomach and trying to regain some balance. The knife was still on the table outside, of course, and the wolf lay in her way to the door. No escape tonight then.

Julia sat up, untied her girdle and pulled off her overtunic, leaving the long white linen undershift. She folded the fine amber cloth carefully and coiled the woven girdle, then opened the second chest. There were linen towels as fine as the one Wulfric had handed her earlier. Stolen, no doubt, like his silver, she told herself, laying her clothes on top, then draping her used towel on the

closed box. She unlaced her sandals and washed her feet in the cool water that remained in the bowl, then set to work spreading the rugs on the bed.

It was unfamiliar work. Every morning she rose, leaving her bed rumpled for Tullia, her body slave, to make up fresh. The clothes she had discarded the night before would have been removed, of course, and a fresh selection set out for her. On her dressing table would be her combs and mirror, her cosmetics and oils, her boxes of jewellery. All she had to do was choose. And at night, Tullia would unpin her hair and comb it out, she would cream her face and wipe away the traces of the paints and she would hold out a fresh night rail for Julia to slip into. Flowers would be set on the dressing table, clear oil burned in the lamps.

It would all be perfect. Cool, tasteful, perfect. From outside there would be nothing to hear. Slaves padded silently, all too aware that to be heard was to arouse the wrath of the mistress of the house. Her father would be in his study, or out at an important meeting, her mother would be entertaining friends, or at the theatre. The house was as tranquil, and as lonely, as the grave.

Julia arranged the bed until she had a pillow to sit up against, then climbed under a light rug. Smoke raised his head and came to stand by the bed, his tail waving slowly back and forth, tongue lolling. Smiling, Julia leaned across and scratched him behind the ears. The wolf closed his eyes, then licked her wrist before padding back to his sleeping spot.

Outside she could hear the murmur of conversation, could make out Wulfric's voice amidst a number of other men, despite the fact they were all speaking their own tongue. There was something deep and calm and dominating about his speech. She had expected the Gothic language to be harsh and guttural, instead it had a strange and almost hypnotic rhythm to it. Further away a baby cried and was hushed, dogs barked, someone came past on a horse, its feet slow and tired sounding.

Her eyes heavy, Julia looked around the space that was now hers. The hangings glowed in the lamplight, the few items had a comforting ordinariness that soothed her, and she began to drift off to sleep. Hazily there was the realisation that she was not feeling lonely, she was feeling warm and safe and at home.

Her eyes flew open. It was terrifying—her own mind was betraying her into weakness. She bit her lip, feeling the tears welling up and willed herself not to cry. To be strong and not to give in.

Chapter Four

Wulfric woke with a sudden completeness that had him reaching for the unsheathed sword that lay by his bed. Silence, except for the piping cry of the tiny owls that haunted the cypress trees. He flexed his fingers round the woven leather of the hilt grip and threw back the covers, his eyes wide on darkness, his ears straining for any sound out of place.

The sentries were quiet, the dogs silent. From the far corner of the tent he heard Berig's light snores, cut off as the boy turned on his side with a grunt. Then he heard a faint sound, repeated. A sob.

Hades, she is crying. He released the sword and lay wondering what to do. He was not used to women, not women under his own roof. No sisters, no wife, only intervals of physical release with the willing ones, for whom love was a cheerful, uncomplicated, commercial transaction.

Uncomplicated was not what he had here. What did you do with weeping women? In his experience you handed them over to the other women. Somehow he did not think either Una, or Sichar, would thank him for waking her up at this hour to comfort a slave.

He turned over, trying to harden his heart as he would over the whimpers of a basket of hound puppies, separated from their mother for the first time. There it was again. Damnation! If she had been howling and shrieking, he would have stuffed his fingers in his ears and abandoned her to hysterics, but there was something about the suppressed gasps of grief that went to his heart.

With a groan he rolled out of bed, took a step, thought better of it and dragged on trousers. No point in giving her real hysterics by looming up stark naked in her bed space. As he crossed the tent, instinct steering him round obstacles in the dark, a wet nose butted him on the back of the hand. It was Smoke. The wolf took his fingers between his teeth and tugged gently.

'Yes, I know, I heard her. Let go,' Wulfric whispered, running his free hand over the animal's head. He ducked out of the tent and raked amidst the embers of the fire until he found a red-hot patch and lit a rush light from it.

Smoke led the way in the wavering light and sat down by Julia's bed, his head on one side as if puzzled. She was lying on her back, the covers thrown back, her arms above her head, sprawled in a restless sleep interrupted every few seconds by a soft, desperate sob. The wolf whimpered.

'She's dreaming,' Wulfric whispered, looking down at the slim, vulnerable body. She was beautiful, he realised, now she was not frightened or scowling. Her face was stark with a kind of misery. Her body was slender, elegant, even lax in sleep. Her calves, all that could be seen of her legs under the long tunic, were bare. He wanted to touch, to run his palm over the smooth olive skin, see the contrast between it and his own golden tan as he had when she had laid her hand on his arm in the alleyway. Was that the moment when he had decided to take her?

The sensible thing would be to leave her to work through her nightmare. She might wake in the morning with some of those fears exorcised, but to rouse her now would be to risk terrifying her—she would imagine his motives were quite other than they truly were.

Wulfric hunkered down beside the bed, lifting the little lamp to study her face, trying to push away the ignoble thoughts of what would happen if he slid into the bed beside her, lowered his mouth to hers…Oh, yes, your motives are not so pure, are they? he jibed at himself.

Then he saw the tears on her cheeks and something inside him seemed to twist painfully. I have done this. She is my responsibility now.

Cautiously he rose and bent over the bed, picked Julia up bodily and sat down, the slim figure cradled in his arms. She was no weight at all in his lap and it was easy to turn her so her head rested against his chest just over his heart. He held her to him one-handed and smoothed the other palm down over her temple and cheek.

‘Shh, Julia. Shh, it is all right. You are safe.’ He hardly said the words, pressing his cheek onto the smooth black silk of her hair. He could feel the wetness of her tears against the warm skin of his pectorals, the flutter of her pulse as his caressing hand reached her throat.

She breathed in a great sighing breath and lay against him, utterly relaxed in sleep, the sobs stilled. A weight settled on his knee; Smoke was resting his jaw there contentedly.

‘Get off, you old fool,’ Wulfric hissed. The wolf rolled an eye at him and settled himself more comfortably, as if aware his master was not going to risk pushing him away. He began to dribble gently.

Wulfric felt his eyelids begin to droop. This was foolishness. Tomorrow he had to attend Council, give his king his opinion, fight for his view against those who would oppose it, in a matter that could affect the destiny of their people for generations. Tomorrow the scouts might ride in with news that the emperor had taken the field and was marching on Rome and he could find himself preparing for battle. Tomorrow, even if everything went well, he must make plans to strike camp and lead his kin group and his allies where Alaric ordered.

And here he was, losing valuable sleep sitting up comforting a slave who did not even know he held her, while a wolf slobbered over his trousers. It felt good. Soothing Julia soothed an inner turmoil he had not even been aware he was suffering. He could feel his shoulders dropping in relaxation, he could feel his breathing slowing to the rhythm he tried to teach Berig, the swordfighter’s focused semi-trance. Everything became very simple, centred on the warm, fragile body in his arms.

She shifted slightly; her hands, which had lain limply in her lap, moved restlessly, one slipping round his back, the other sliding up his chest. The innocent, unconscious, touch made his breath catch in his throat, his relaxation vanished to be supplanted by a sensual awareness that had his body hardening, his loins aching. He had to put her down, and urgently.

Smoke grumbled as his head was unceremoniously pushed to one side. Wulfric twisted on the bed and laid Julia down, drawing the blanket up over skirts that were rucked up to her knees. He backed out of the corner, picking up the rushlight as he went, as tense as though he were facing an armed opponent. ‘Stay,’ he breathed and Smoke lay down at the foot of the bed.

He regained his own bed, shaken. Julia was dangerous to his peace of mind, to his body’s equilibrium, to his focus and control. Restless, he turned on his side and tried to get comfortable, accepting the ache in his groin as just punishment for his thoughts. Dangerous. Some part of his mind, the part that observed him, chided him—his conscience, he supposed—noted coolly that he did not consider taking her back with him into Rome in the morning and setting her free. No, he told himself as he slipped back into sleep. She stays.

Julia woke to a strange light, an unfamiliar room, a peculiar bed. Where…? She sat up, scrubbing the loose tendrils of hair back from her face, and found herself staring at a large wolf, that was watching her from the far end of the bed.

Oh, dear God, it wasn’t a dream. She was in a Visigoth’s tent, yesterday had happened, she was a captive, a slave, and she had no idea how she was going to escape. Her side of the tent must be facing east, she realised, as the strong glow of the sunrise penetrated even the heavy canvas to light her bed space.

And then the dream came back to her. Julia fell back onto the straw-filled mattress with a groan of horror and forced herself to remember her lurid night-time fantasy. Wulfric had captured her, held her against her will and yet her treacherous imagination had brought him to her bed, virtually naked. She had dreamt he had held her in his arms, caressed her face and neck, and she had felt the heat of his naked body, the sensation of silk over iron that was his skin and muscle. She had fantasised that his body had grown hard as he held her and that she had wanted to caress him in her turn, feel his mouth on hers—on every part of her…

‘No!’ Julia rolled over on to her side, dragging the covers over her head as though her shameful thoughts could be blanked out. It did not work. How could she be so wanton as to dream like that? To want her enemy like that? He was beautiful. There was no denying it. To depict the nude male form was considered an acceptable artistic convention; to admire the result was quite normal. But a respectable virgin did not lust after real men like that. One did not think about…

‘Are you awake?’ It was Berig, on the other side of the curtain, as effective an antidote to desire as any she could think of.

‘Yes.’

‘Well, get up, then!’ He sounded irritable. ‘Wulfric said I had to stay here until you were up and working with Una.’

‘He is not here?’ Oh, merciful escape if he is not! To have to face him with the memories of that dream fresh in my mind…

‘He’s in Rome, gone to Council. I should be there, waiting on him, not hanging around while you wake up.’

‘Well, go then,’ she snapped.

‘I cannot.’ Berig’s voice became fainter, he was obviously walking away. ‘I have to make sure you have breakfast and go safely to Una’s.’

‘I am quite capable of both.’ Julia flung back the blankets and got up. ‘Is there hot water?’

‘Yes, my lady. In a pot on our fire if your ladyship would condescend to come and get some.’ Berig sounded both angry and sarcastic.

Tugging her tunic over her head and winding the girdle round her hips, Julia scooped up her sandals and emerged into the main tent. Berig, wearing a fine linen tunic edged with heavy braid and with a silver clasp around his wrist, looked older—until she saw his expression, which was pure sulky youth.

‘You are very fine,’ she commented, pushing her feet into her sandals.

‘I was expecting to see the king. I have to do my lord honour.’

‘Well, go and see your precious king then and hold Wulfric’s horse, or whatever you are dressed up to do.’

‘Alareiks ist thiudans thizos mikilaizos thiudos thize Gutane,’ Berig snarled at her. ‘Is mikils guma ist.’

‘I understood one word of that—Alaric,’ Julia said impatiently, then realised that the high colour in Berig’s cheeks was genuine anger that she had spoken slightingly of his leader. ‘I am sorry, I did not mean to insult your king, but he is my enemy. I give you my word, I will wash, eat and go to Una’s tent—you go to Wulfric. I am not likely to escape with Smoke dogging my every step, now am I?’

Berig narrowed his eyes at her. ‘Your word? Is the word of a Roman woman any better than those of the men?’

‘My word is good,’ Julia said steadily. And I did not promise not to try to escape, only to go to Una’s.

‘Very well.’ He was out of the tent at a run. A minute later she saw him canter past, his cloak whipping in the wind behind him.

Julia went to the latrine, managing, with some difficulty, to persuade Smoke to wait outside. Still, he was as good as a bolt on the door for ensuring privacy. He hugged her side while she ladled hot water into a bowl and worked out how the suspension hook could be swung to one side so the water did not boil dry.

Washed, her clothing straight, she set her sleeping space in order, then surveyed the rest of the tent. Yesterday’s platters and spoons lay unwashed in a large bucket. She pulled back the curtain that screened Berig’s space and saw his bed was in disorder and a pile of dirty clothes lay on the floor. Julia prodded them with her toe, shrugged and went to investigate Wulfric’s space. It was in a like state, only the pile of discarded garments was larger.

‘Hmm.’ Julia found bread, cheese and honey, poured hot water over the honey, dashed in a little wine and sat down inside the tent to eat. She washed up what she had used that morning and last night and replaced it on the shelves, tied a loop of leather around an eating knife and fixed it around her waist under her tunic and went out of the tent, leaving the rest of the housework exactly as she had found it.

Una was dropping clothes into a large bucket of steaming water. ‘Good day, Julia.’ She smiled. ‘You bring…so wasti? I do not know the word.’ She lifted a dripping garment out of the water.

‘Clothes? Washing?’ Una nodded. ‘No, thank you. I found hot water.’ It satisfied the other woman, who must have assumed she had left the laundry soaking in the tent. Julia smiled. ‘I can help you?’ She had no objection to assisting this friendly woman with the clear blue eyes and the swelling belly. She just had no intention of clearing up after two hulking males.

‘Thu hilpis.’ Una nodded agreement. ‘You could bring more water?’ She gestured to the yoke leaning against the tent wall.

‘Very well.’ Julia hooked on empty buckets and lifted the yoke. ‘Where from?’

‘The river is that way.’ Una pointed. ‘A very small river.’

Interested to see how far Smoke was prepared to let her go, Julia followed the direction the other woman had indicated. It led downhill and, as she went, she passed other women coming back, all carrying water. They stared, wide-eyed, at her clothing, but nodded and smiled when she greeted them. None of them showed any alarm at the wolf padding at her side—doubtless they all knew by now that Wulfric had acquired a female slave. How many of them understood her Latin, she had no idea, but Good morning probably sounded much the same to everyone, whatever the actual words used were.

At the bottom of the slope was the stream, its banks muddy and trampled. Someone had set stones as a makeshift hard standing and a small queue of women had built up, waiting patiently while their friends took it in turns to stand dry-shod while they dipped their buckets.

‘I’ll just see if there’s another spot,’ Julia said brightly to Smoke as she strolled off across the shoulder of the valley. She wandered along, trying to give the impression that she was interested only in the gaudy flash of a hoopoe flying past, or the spikes of wild flowers in the shade of bushes.

The first meander in the stream took them out of sight of both the watering place and any of the tents on the hill and there, straight as an arrow across the water, was a line of stepping stones, and on the opposite bank a deep grove of trees.

Now, all she had to do was to distract the wolf. There was a tree by the stones on her side. If she could just slip her girdle around Smoke’s neck and then tie him to the tree…Then there was a flurry of movement in the grass in front of them, a dozen white scuts tearing frantically away. ‘Look, Smoke, rabbits! Catch!’

The wolf was off from a standing start, terrifying death behind the desperate rabbits. Julia took to her heels, sliding and slipping down the slope, onto the first stepping stone. She jumped for the next, and the next. Almost across now. There was a splash to one side of her and Smoke pulled himself up out of the stream on the far bank. He trotted round to face her at the end of the line of stepping stones, head on one side, coat dripping.

Julia balanced, arms outstretched, the stone rocking treacherously under her sandaled feet. ‘You are supposed to be chasing rabbits,’ she said crossly. The wolf did not budge. ‘Oh, very well then, let’s go back and get the water for Una.’

‘Well? Is there a decision? What did Alaric say? My lord?’ Berig was hopping from one foot to another as Wulfric emerged from the Basilica where the king had been holding his Council. To one side a depressed-looking group of senators waited their turn for an audience with the invader. Wulfric eyed them curiously. Was one of them Julia’s father? Or her betrothed? They had dispensed with their eastern silks and embroideries and had dressed in pristine white tunics, sweltering under

the great weight of their togas as though to emphasise their role and status as Roman patricians. Much good would it do them.

'Lord?'

'Berig, if Alaric wished you to be privy to his councils then he would invite you.' Wulfric felt hot, irritable and sweaty. He violently disagreed with Alaric's decision for the next stage of their journey and none of this had been helped by a tendency to think about Julia at inappropriate moments. He had been on his feet for most of the day, arguing his case for them to move north west, into Gaul, into the rich, well-watered lands that lay open and inviting to a farming people. But the king, backed by his inner circle, had other ideas and nothing Alaric and his supporters could say had swayed them.

Hilderic had come to stand with him, the rest of his kin clustering close. 'They are wary of you, Alaric's men,' the older man had murmured, running a scarred hand through his beard. 'He knows there are many who would follow you and he is not well.'

'I am Alaric's man,' Wulfric had retorted, low-voiced. 'His man until death.'

'Quite,' Hilderic said with a sly smile. 'And until his death, of course. Look at yourself—look who stands at your back and your shoulder. Look at the gold you wear and the gold your kin have gained, following you. And then ask, who should the old men who stand at Alaric's back fear when he has gone?'

It had shaken him. It shook him still. His ambition was to lead his kin, as now he did. Beyond that, he wanted to draw into alliance with them as many strong men as he could, for their mutual protection. To be acknowledged as a leader by warriors of Hilderic's experience and standing was heady, but that was as far as his ambition had led him, despite the whispers that had sometimes come to his ears.

Now Hilderic, who spoke for most of the men in the loose alliance ranged with him, was hinting openly that he should bid for the throne when Alaric was gone. There was no harm in speculation about what would come, others would argue. Alaric's health was uncertain, his temper and judgement unsettled. One day, he would no longer lead. One would be a fool not to be ready for that day.

Wulfric realised he was standing in the middle of the courtyard, hand on sword hilt, a scowl on his face. Poor Berig was visibly quaking.

'We stay one more day. That is all I can tell you. The food is running out.'

'But—will we fight the emperor? March on Ravenna?'

'We stay one more day. When I can tell you what happens next, I will do so. Now, where are the horses?'

'Here, lord.' Subdued in his best clothes, Berig led the way to where an urchin was holding the reins. He tossed him a small coin and swung up into the saddle as Wulfric followed suit. 'You look tired,' he ventured as they rode out of the city.

'I've been sitting on my backside in a hot room with a crowd of sweaty men all day. I've been up and down like a bucket in a well, talking and arguing, and my throat is raw. My feet ache worse than if I'd been on a two-day route march and in these clothes I feel like a trussed-up chicken. Otherwise I'm fine.' He pulled irritably at the neck band of his best tunic.

'We could wrestle?' Berig suggested hopefully. 'You promised you'd show me that throw you used on Rathar.'

Wulfric shaded his eyes and looked at where they had got to. Another league into camp. When he got there, there were meetings to hold, men to brief, the whole organisation of breaking camp to set in motion. And that confounded woman to infuriate his mind and inflame his body.

'You're on. See that grove of trees? Race you.'

They rode back into camp an hour later, battered and laughing, their good tunics slung over their saddle bows, their bare chests gleaming with sweat. Berig had a split lip, an interesting bruise coming up on his right bicep and an inch of skin missing from his left knuckles. Wulfric suspected

he himself would have a black eye come the morning. He certainly had a bruise over his ribs and a wrenched finger. The boy was fast, and beginning to put on weight as his muscles developed. It would be time soon to take his sword practice seriously.

'I could eat a horse,' Berig declared, sliding to the ground and wincing as his bruises were jarred.

'Two horses, but a hot bath first.' Wulfric slapped him on the back and walked with him towards the tent. 'Odd. There's nothing on the fire. Where's Julia?' He flipped back the tent flap and went in. Flies buzzed around the previous night's dirty dishes. Berig's bed was just as he'd left it and so, when he went to look, was his. He kicked at the pile of filthy clothes and strode across the tent to the curtained corner. 'Julia!'

Her bed space was immaculate, and empty.

Chapter Five

'Julia Livia!' It was a bellow now. He was hot, hungry, the warm glow of hard exercise was edging towards stiffness and he had expected comfort and soft, feminine, attention to his needs, not fly-covered dishes and heaps of grubby linen.

'She's washed up the things she used,' Berig said, prodding the dishes. 'Just hers.'

'Julia—'

The sound of Smoke's bark brought them round the corner of the tent. Julia was sitting on one of the folding stools, taking advantage of the late afternoon sun. She looked, he saw with mounting fury, beautiful, her braid thrown over one shoulder, her patrician profile smooth and calm.

There were the remains of a meal by her side and she was amusing herself by combing Smoke's thick coat. The wolf was lying on its back, paws in the air, letting her groom his stomach.

'That is my comb!' The childish complaint was out of his mouth before he could stop it. Berig gave a gasp of shocked laughter and ducked out of the way of retribution.

'Really?' she said indifferently. 'It was on the floor and some of the teeth were broken. There's a good boy, then!' It was all too apparent that this was addressed to the wolf and not its master.

'Where is our dinner? Why isn't the washing done? Why is the tent a mess?'

'Because that is how you left it. Una gave me some food just now—I think she expected you to be eating in the city.'

'Because you told her so, I suppose?' He was so angry he was seeing red. Julia added fuel to the flames by shrugging one shoulder elegantly.

Wulfric took a deep breath. 'Smoke, get up and stop behaving like a dog. Berig, go and build up the fire, put on the biggest cauldron. Then go and buy a chicken and ask Una if she'll put it on her spit for us. Then go and get the tub off the cart and scrounge some more hot water. You can bathe at your sister's, Sichar won't be back a while yet.

'And you—' he pointed a long finger at Julia '—you make the beds and gather up the dirty clothes and wash the dishes and when you've done that you can damn well scrub my back.'

Berig left at the run, he was glad to see. As for Julia—Halja, he was angry enough to turn her over his knee. Smoke got to his feet and padded over to his side, tail waving apologetically. Julia just sat and stared at him defiantly.

'Move!' he roared. She jumped, got to her feet with a look of scorn and strode off to the tent. Wulfric followed, leaning against the front tent pole, watching with narrowed eyes as Julia disdainfully twitched the bedclothes back into order, kicked the dirty clothing into a pile, shovelled it into a basket and then picked up the bucket full of dirty dishes.

'You will have to move if you want me to put these in hot water.' She stood in front of him, her free hand fisted on her hip, and glared at him. If he had not been so skilled at reading an opponent, watching the eyes of a swordsman for the flicker of intent, he would have believed her unafraid. As it was, he could feel a sneaking admiration for the way she stood up to him, despite the fear flickering in the back of those big brown eyes and the betraying pulse at her temple under the fine skin.

And he was frightening, Wulfric knew it, and cultivated that reaction. To lead and to fight he had to look dangerous, and he had to follow through on it whenever necessary. He could not hide that from her, even if he wanted to—and he did not.

He was almost twice her weight and head and shoulders taller. He was half-naked, sweaty, battered and had all too obviously been fighting, and yet she did not flinch. He remembered the way she had resisted those two men in the alley—hopelessly outnumbered and outweighed, but not giving up. He had no wish to break her spirit, but he was beginning to wonder if that was what it would take to bend her to his will.

‘Will you please move?’ Julia repeated, trying not to let her voice shake. Oh, but he is scary. And big. And attractive. She was utterly horrified at herself for thinking it, but she could not deny it. Something fundamentally female was responding shamefully to the nearness of power and arrogance and sheer masculine beauty.

Wulfric moved to the side with a feline grace and she made herself walk past him and out to the fire. If his size had made him clumsy, then she knew she would not feel this erotic tug. But he moved like a panther, not like the bear he sounded like when he growled, and when he was near she could not stop watching him. Julia scooped hot water onto the greasy dishes, well aware that his eyes were following her.

What on earth would he think if he knew she had been having luridly arousing dreams about him? Dreams so vivid I can still recall the feel of his skin under my palm, still feel the indentations around his bicep where he had removed a bracelet, still… She gave herself a vigorous mental shake and fixed a studiedly neutral expression on her face.

A rumble presaged Berig with another youth, rolling what looked like a vast half-barrel around the side of the tent. They manhandled it through the tent flaps, then there was a thud as they rocked it flat onto the ground.

Julia went into the tent and peered into the tub. It came up higher than her waist, high enough for a big man to sit down in comfortably. ‘Ugh,’ she commented. ‘You sit in your own dirty water?’

‘In the absence of a hypocaust and bathhouse system, a strigil and a slave to oil me, yes.’ Wulfric was stripping off his bracelets. He placed them on a stool and bent to unlace his boots.

‘Julia, mind your back!’ It was Berig and his friend again, this time laden with buckets of hot water. ‘He’ll want fresh towels—there.’ The lad tipped his head towards the back of the tent and took out the empty buckets.

How many towels does a large wet man need? she wondered, then picked up a stack, along with the jar of soap balls. They seemed odd to wash with, but she had to admit they were effective. There was more splashing; the lads were working hard at filling the great tub.

‘That should be enough,’ Berig declared at length. ‘I’ll go and have my own bath now.’ He went out, dropping the tent flap and leaving Julia alone with Wulfric.

He reached in to test the temperature, then stretched. Julia hastily put the towels down within his reach. ‘No, fold one so I can rest my head on it.’

Yes, my lord, no, my lord. Fuming, Julia did as she was told and hung the result over the edge of the tub, then turned her back with a gasp as his hands went to his belt buckle. Very definitely time to go.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Out.’ There had been no sound of splashing behind her, which meant that well over six foot of naked man was still standing there within reach.

‘Wait. I may want more hot water.’

She stopped and stood, just inside the door, listening to the sound of Wulfric climbing into the bath, the splashing of water, his long exhalation of pleasure. ‘That’s good.’ Then, ‘I need another bucketful of hot water.’

Julia snatched up one of the empty buckets and ducked outside. Water was steaming in the cauldron and beside it Berig had left another bucket to top it up. Julia tried it with a fingertip. Cold, straight from the stream. It had not even been sitting around in the sun to take the chill off. With a smile she hefted it up and went back inside.

Over the rim of the tub she could see Wulfric’s head, streaming wet, the long, blond hair dark and slick. He rested it on the folded towel. ‘Just pour the water straight in.’

‘Certainly.’ The side of the tub was too high to lift the full bucket straight up. Julia pulled a stool close and stood on that, balancing the wooden container on the edge. Wulfric was lying back,

his eyes closed. She let her gaze roam over the wet skin, the way the water flowed off the sculpted muscle, the shadows of the submerged part of his body.

'Where exactly shall I pour it?' she enquired sweetly. The green eyes flew open at her tone, but too late. Julia upended the bucket and a torrent of cold water hit him straight in the chest.

She expected spluttering, splashing and a shout of rage. What she was not prepared for was for him to rise straight up out of the water with a bellow of fury, grab her round the waist and heave her into the tub with him.

'Aagh!' She was wet to the waist, then with appalling suddenness, Wulfric sat down, dragging her with him, and ducked her under the water. She kicked and struggled, knocking against knees, tangling with legs, treading on feet, until he let her up to breathe.

'Waurms! Thaunus! Unhultha!' He gave her a shake and held her, spluttering, in front of his face. 'Serpent!'

'I am not your slave, I am not your servant, I am a free Roman citizen and I will not fetch and carry at the orders of a loutish barbarian!' Her defiance was somewhat marred by the fact that her plait had come undone and she was trying to declaim through a mass of wet hair. She twisted in his grip, tried to stand, tangled her feet in her undertunic and fell back with a splash to land painfully on her bottom. 'Oh, I can't move!'

Sobbing with anger and frustration Julia tugged at her skirts, then began to struggle as she felt Wulfric's hands on her girdle. It snapped as though it were a single thread and, despite her shrieks and clawing hands, he dragged tunic and undertunic together over her head and threw the sodden bundle out of the tub.

I am naked. I am naked in a tub with this naked man. I want…No! 'Let me out of here,' she demanded, her voice vibrating with feelings she did not dare express. She wrapped her arms round her breasts; they did not seem to cover very much.

Wulfric's anger appeared to have vanished altogether. He was leaning back, his arms around the rim, water dripping from his beard, an appreciative grin on his face. The water lapped around his chest. Julia tried very hard not to stare at the flat pectorals, the strong tendons of his throat. She could feel his feet, one each side of her hips as she crouched there between his legs. 'Please.'

He lifted one hand and gestured to the edge of the tub. 'Feel free.'

'Stand up? In front of you?'

'I could always stand up instead and turn my back,' he offered. She could see he was biting the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

'Thank you, no.' She glared at him. 'Why can't you just close your eyes?'

'Because I am enjoying myself,' he admitted simply.

Julia put her hands on the edge of the tub as though to lever herself upright, then snatched at the towel Wulfric had been cushioning his head on. He caught her wrist easily and held it. 'Now what?' he enquired, straight faced.

'This.' Her slender hold on her temper snapping she launched herself at him, striking with her free hand at his imprisoning fist. 'Let me…'

His response was never what she expected, she should have learned that by now. He made no attempt to evade her blows, simply pulling her close in against himself. Frightened, furious and excited in equal measure, she looked up into the clear green eyes so close that she could count his lashes.

'You savage! Let me go.'

For a long moment they stared at each other, then with a growl Wulfric released her hand, encircled her waist and trapped her mouth under his. It was her dream of the night before and more. Their bodies touched together, slipped apart, as her hands came up to grip his shoulders and her mouth opened under his with an instinctive, fierce response she did not know she possessed.

They were both angry. She had no idea whether she was more angry at him than herself, but there was no mistaking that Wulfric was furious with her, and utterly determined to bring her panting and pleading to his feet.

His grip on her was punishingly hard, his mouth plundered without any mercy, lips and teeth and tongue possessing and taking with a power that seemed to only increase as she refused to be cowed by it. He plunged his tongue into her open mouth, hard and hot. Innocent of a man's body she might be, but Julia knew what this invasion mimicked. Writhing against him under the water, she tangled her own tongue with his. I will reduce him to begging for me and then I will laugh…

He let her go as violently as he had taken her. Julia fell back against the side of the tub gasping, rubbing the back of her hand across her swollen mouth, staring at him wild-eyed.

'You are a virgin—you should behave like one,' he snapped at her, his chest heaving.

'You hypocrite! You presume to lecture me on my behaviour? You kissed me, you forced me!' Her hands were shaking. She clasped them together.

'Forced you? I think not, Julia.'

She could feel the shamed blood staining her cheeks, saw on Wulfric's face nothing but male arrogance and the desire to dominate. She had fought back, not with her fists but with her sensuality and he could not deal with that, she told herself, fighting for some balance.

'You are an animal,' she managed to spit out.

'I would be taking you on the floor by now if that were the case.' She gasped. He stared at her haughtily and she read his pride and the indignation that she had insulted him in the hot green look. 'Wash my back.'

'What? Now?'

'Yes, now.' He reached one long arm over the side of the tub, groped in the jar and came up with a soap ball.

'I would sooner stick a knife in it,' she retorted flatly.

'I am aware of that.' Wulfric shifted round until his broad back was towards her. His disregard for the danger she posed was an affront in itself.

Julia stared at the expanse of shoulder, the long, flexible line of his back, the strong dip to the spine, the dramatic narrowing to his hips. Below the water she could see the taut shape of his buttocks. His hair was plastered to the skin, covering his shoulder blades.

'Now,' he growled. 'The water is getting cold.'

Julia began to make lather, and then to wash her own body as fast as she could. Sharing bathwater was a dubious way to get clean in her opinion, but she was going to wring what benefit she could from this hideous situation.

'What are you doing?'

'Washing.' She ducked under the water to rinse off the suds, pushing her hair back out of her face. No rosemary hair wash, no sweet oils, just one large, sweaty barbarian's bathwater. Julia grimaced at the magnificent back in front of her.

'Then wash me, slave girl.'

She scooped one hand under the fall of his hair and threw it over his shoulder, then attacked his back as hard as she could. Wulfric grunted, not, she was sorry to realise, with discomfort, but with pleasure. Gritting her teeth, she scrubbed the coarse soap ball over his back, following up with her other hand, kneading the muscles as though to pummel her anger out into them. She followed the fascinating masculine lines as far as his waist. No further.

'You have stopped.' He turned his head to look at her. Julia shifted closer, the only way to shield her naked body. Her breasts were a finger's breadth from his back.

'You can reach the rest.' She tossed the soap ball up over his shoulder. Reflexively he lunged for it and she scrambled over the edge of the tub, seized her sodden clothing and ran for her bed space.

Wulfric caught the soap one-handed, pivoting as he did so to admire the exquisite rear view of Julia vanishing behind the curtain. 'Little witch,' he murmured to himself, settling back into the rapidly cooling water. 'Little vixen.'

What had happened just now had been no part of his intentions, but with Julia Livia it seemed his prized self-control was like a reed in the wind. She could provoke him just by the way she lowered her lashes with exquisite disdain, let alone by the sight of her naked body a hand's span from his.

Wulfric lifted a foot to the rim of the tub and began to soap his leg, trying to give proper attention to the condition of his muscles and the feel of the tendon he had strained two weeks before. His physical condition was important; some chit of a girl, however aggravating, was not.

Only…he lowered that leg, satisfied with the lack of discomfort in the tendon, and raised the other. Only, she was not a girl. He had let her lack of stature compared to the women who surrounded him delude him into thinking her nearer Berig's age than his own twenty-seven summers. But she must be twenty, he supposed.

Well past marriageable age in his society. What was the matter with this senator she was supposed to be betrothed to? Had the man ice water in his veins?

He, Wulfric, was very uncomfortably aware that what was coursing around his own veins was not ice water, but hot blood. He had not meant to kiss her. He had known, without having to think about it, what the effect of taking that lush, red, angry mouth would be. His own body had predicted absolutely what her narrow frame would feel like under his hands, how the sweet curves and soft skin would feel against his own hardness, against his bruised flesh.

And he would not take what he so easily could, because his faith told him it was wrong and his honour despised the thought that he would force a woman.

Even this one who attacked him with his own weapons of sensuality and of anger. He knew what she was about, even if he doubted she could explain it to herself. She had wanted to show him that he was less than he believed himself to be, and he knew that even greater than her fear of him was her own terror of being afraid, of not living up to the standards of a patrician Roman lady.

Did she know what danger she had been in? Had she any concept of the fire she was playing with? Surely she did. Somewhere, under that angry defiance, there must be the belief that he would not force her. She had gone white around the mouth when he had flung that remark about taking her on the floor. That had shocked her deeply and yet she had the spirit to continue to taunt him, to play her dangerously provoking games with him. Somewhere there was a trust in him and in his honour. He should not care, but it seemed that he did and that the thought warmed him, deep inside where he kept the emotions that a leader could not show.

He stood up in a surge of water and reached for a towel, swathing it around his hips as Berig ducked into the tent. The boy was clean, damp and his hair was slicked back.

'Una says, do you want the salve for…Bloody hell!'

Wulfric followed his gaze to the beaten earth of the tent floor. Trodden, swept with a stiff broom, the summer-hardened earth had made a perfectly serviceable floor. Now there was a muddy ring right around the tub, a quagmire directly in the centre of the living space.

'Your lord splashes a great deal.' Julia emerged from behind her curtain, her creased clothes clinging to her, her gaze scornfully averted from Wulfric as he stood there up to mid-thigh in cooling, dirty water. 'I was surprised to find him so clumsy.'

With a flick of her skirts she picked her way around the mud, past the gaping youth and out of the tent.

Wulfric balled the towel up in his hands. 'Empty the tub, get some straw for the floor and sort something out with that hell-cat for dinner.' He climbed grimly out of the tub onto the stool and from there to dry ground.

Berig swallowed audibly. 'What are you going to do to her?'

Wulfric stood where he was, hands on hips, and considered his tactics. He saw the shadow slide under the tent flap and raised his voice. ‘Do to her? Why, nothing. Nothing at all. If she wants to eat, then she must cook. If she wants to drink, then she must fetch water, and, if she wants to sleep on a bed, then she must wash the linens.’ And if she wants to tempt and torment me with those red lips and those soft curves, those big brown eyes—then she will find I am as much a rock to her wiles as to her temper.

Chapter Six

Julia stepped silently away from the entrance to the tent. Smoke padded round the corner and eyed her. ‘We are both in disgrace,’ she told him. ‘You for acting like a dog, me for being me, I suppose.’ Further defiance seemed pointless. She would end up hungry and thirsty, Wulfric would be no worse off than he had been before she had come into his life and Una would carry on looking after two households.

The sun was low now, the smell of food wafted from cooking pots all around, the noise levels were rising as the men returned and the children ran home after play.

It was too late to start preparing food, even if she knew how. If Wulfric told Una not to feed her, then the other woman would obey him, but surely tonight she would help.

Una came out of her tent as Julia approached, her small daughter peering round her skirts at the stranger. ‘I have clothes for you,’ she said before Julia could speak. ‘I do not know the names in your tongue, but here.’ She held out a pile of fabrics and smiled as Julia took them. ‘Soon, they will be too little for me.’ She gestured at her swelling figure. ‘I will teach you, you can make more.’

‘Thank you. Will you teach me to cook too? After tonight, Wulfric says I must cook, or not eat.’

Una smiled, a twinkle in her eyes that made Julia blush. Wulfric’s voice raised in a roar would not have been stopped by canvas walls. How much had their neighbours heard? ‘Help yourself.’ She gestured at the fireside. ‘Berig had already brought me two chickens, they will be ready soon. There is bread here, butter in the crock in the tent.’

Julia thanked her again, smiled at the shy little girl and made her way back, passing Berig laden with two buckets of dirty water as she did so. She had no intention of going into the tent while Wulfric was in goodness knows what state of disturbing undress, so she set the new clothes on a stool, poured the cool, greasy water off the dirty dishes and set to washing them.

They were draining in the bucket when Smoke lifted his head and his tail began to thump, cautiously. She turned, just as warily.

Wulfric was bare to the waist, a towel thrown over his shoulder, a bone comb in his hand. He nodded to her as casually as though they had been discussing the weather just a few moments before, tugged the wolf’s ears and hooked a stool towards him with his foot.

If I tell him to put his tunic on, he will realise just how much he disturbs me, wandering about half-naked, she fumed, managing a tight smile. Berig, his friend at his heels, vanished into the tent, reappearing at length with the tub. Julia dragged out the trestles and set them up, decided she could not manage the board by herself and began to collect up the stools.

When she turned back to Wulfric, he was sectioning off a wide strand of hair. It was, now she saw it both wet and combed out, almost as long as hers. It would be a thorough-going nuisance, getting caught in chain mail, sticking to sweaty skin in battle, blowing in his eyes. All the men wore their hair long, so it must be the fashion, she supposed, but she had not thought Wulfric so bound by such trivia that he would overlook the disadvantages. Roman soldiers cropped their hair even shorter than most, which seemed eminently practical for a fighting man.

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