

CHAPTER 1



The acrid smell of dung and feces filled Brietta Driscoll's nose when she awoke slowly, the back of her head pounding fit to burst. She couldn't reach back to feel the size of the lump, but she knew it was there. Her worst fear had been realized: she'd been captured. Her heart began to hammer its way out of her chest. The only things that were a certainty in her life now were repeated rape and death.

She had to get out of here.

At first her eyes wouldn't focus in the pitch black, and she wasn't sure that that wasn't a good thing, considering where she was—the temporary jail the Centurion had had erected when he marched into her small town to suppress their puny rebellion. Once she'd oriented herself a little, and waited for the atrocious pounding in her head to abate some, Brietta pulled experimentally against the bonds that held her hands behind her back. There was no give. None at all. It was as if she, herself, had tied them, dammit. She could hear her brother, Dirce, cackling at her dilemma in that annoying manner of his. Of course, if he knew of her situation, he would have already mounted a rescue

attempt, however foolhardy. Dirce was the bravest warrior in the region—too bad he didn't quite have the brains to back up all that brawn and bravado.

That was where Brietta had always come in. Although her father certainly wished she hadn't been encouraged in such things, she could glance at a battle map and not only recall it immediately in intimate detail within her mind, but she could also see potential enemy weaknesses and make intelligent suggestions about how to exploit them, all thanks to a meddling grandfather who had ignored his son's wishes and educated his granddaughter right along with his grandson in most things. Unfortunately, she was too small to do much of the physical stuff, although her grandfather had insisted that she learn to defend herself in the best manner possible, so she learned—because Cedric the Hearty didn't believe in using snubbed swords in training—to be quick on her feet. She had several serious scars as reminders when she'd lost her concentration and forgotten to duck and dodge.

Luckily, though, her training—such as it was—hadn't really had to be done in secret, either, because Camlin was always gone on one campaign or another against the neighboring tribes. There was always some sort of rebellion to put down, and Camlin was never happier then when he was away from home—and away from his annoying children who always seemed to get into one scrape after another from dawn to dusk, most of them designed specifically to shame him and their name, he was quite sure.

Despite the fact that her head throbbed with even the smallest of movements, Brietta nonetheless began to pull against her bonds, and explore the small cell she was in as best she could. It was nothing but a hole—badly dug at that—with a heavy grate over the top. She struggled to her feet—falling several times in the process until she found her footing on the

sloping floor—but she was much too short to reach the grate even if she managed to get her hands freed, somehow.

Settling back onto the floor in what must have been a more orderly fashion than she had arrived there originally, Brietta set her mind to concentrating on two things: regaining the use of her hands and remembering as much as she could about how she had gotten into this position.

Working her wrists and hands within the tight ropes rubbed her tender flesh raw in spots, but it would be more than worth it if she could manage to escape. It took her a long while but she was patient and eventually the already fraying ropes gave way. The first thing she did when her hands were free was to capture the long, lush fall of her hair in one of the remains of the rope, hiding her femininity—unsuccessfully, it had turned out—under her rough boy's cap. In the dense darkness, she got on all fours and felt around, gaining a physical knowledge of her surroundings. Her jail was less than three feet in circumference and probably seven feet deep and... was apparently quite a busy place: her fingers encountered spongy, rotting flesh-covered bones just under her nose.

Unable to control the reflex—not knowing whether she was desecrating the resting place of a man or an animal—Brietta turned and wretched. She didn't try to fight it, just live through it and go on. Her only real hope was to get out of this place and back to Hallobert Keep. When the spasms were over, she steeled herself and put her hands right back into the mess they had been in, rooting around for anything that could assist her escape.

After many long moments and several more instances doubled over, she had what she wanted: two long, strong bones. Leg bones, her mind wandered and imagined, and her gorge rose again but she fought it back. She had to keep a cool head, and ignore her weak stomach as much as was possible. Besides her puny stature—she barely reached most men's shoulders—it was her one true

weakness, although usually it assailed her afterwards. She was a skilled healer—her garden at Hallobert Keep flourished with herbs and flowers meant to heal warriors after battle and assist women in childbirth. Brietta could keep a cool, calm head during the heart of the crisis—she'd sawed off bones and stitched up holes in chests and heads that made the stomachs of the huge men who had carried the poor victim in empty right in front of her.

But afterwards she could always be found hunched over her chamber pot, or letting fly out the nearest window.

But this was the here and now.

It took her what was probably several hours, but she managed to claw her way to the top of the hole using the bones to lift herself. The grate at the top—which weighed more than she did—was another obstacle she tackled patiently, inching it further and further to one side until, on her final attempt, she could shimmy her way out of that blasted hole. But she didn't spend time resting on her laurels—she tucked herself into a dark corner behind a tent and let her eyes adjust to the torchlight, clutching the remnants of her ragged shift as close to closed as she could get. No sense tempting fate any more than she had to—she'd already narrowly escaped rape before being thrown into the pit.

And five seconds later, a big, hard hand clamped down onto her shoulder. "What have we here?" boomed a loud, baritone voice.

Caught. She'd been caught not more than three minutes after she'd escaped. Brietta was terrified—not wanting to be thrown back into that dank hole in the ground—but more so she was mortified. Had all of her grandfather's training gone for naught with her? Was she, as a woman, somehow inherently stupid, like everyone else—besides her grandfather and her brother—thought?

She found herself roughly turned to face her captor— an Optio, judging by his uniform and the way he carried himself.

The centurion's second in command. Brietta cursed her small size. This man was huge—as all of the Romans seemed, and she had no real defense against such brawn. Grandfather had taught her to recognize opportunities for escape, to be cunning and smart against her enemy, but there was little he could do about the fact that she took after her delicate mother in regards to her size.

But that could be turned to her advantage, also, because men never expected a woman to think much.

They just wanted them to cook, bear children and keep quiet. At least, that was what her father wanted of a woman, anyway.

“Well, what have we here?” He was speaking Latin and obviously had no idea that she understood him. Cedric had always said that one of the best ways to defeat an enemy was to know him inside and out—and that included learning their language. It was one of the areas Brietta had excelled at, much to the embarrassment of her less learned brother. She could speak most of the tribal dialects from the regions around them, as well as that of the Franks and even quite a bit of the more guttural musings of the Jutes.

He frowned down at her. “Why, you're the one we threw into the pit, aren't you? The daughter of the local chieftain?” He didn't wait for her response; not that Brie would have deigned to give him one anyway, but began to drag her away, past the richly decorated tent of the tribune with its colorful flags flying, across the camp to a modest tent with no flags of rank whatsoever.

Brietta steeled herself, knowing what was likely to happen next—he was probably throwing her into a tent full of lustful soldiers who would sate themselves with her before tearing her limb from limb. Her grandfather hadn't been able to speak to her of this, but Ula, the old housekeeper who had been her maid and surrogate mother, had told her in a perversely gleeful tone, of the horrors she could expect to endure before she died in captivity, hoping it would convince her not to continue to go on raids

with the band of rebels she led. Since she was still a virgin, and despite her unusual upbringing still sheltered from some things, she didn't understand a lot of what she'd been told, but whatever it meant, it didn't sound good. Not that it had had its desired effect and stopped her from risking her life.

But she knew that this tent was that of someone important, not by banners of rank, but rather those of heralds and crests. One of them looked very familiar and heralded the Dionisius family... there was something about that family and one of its warriors that stood out from all of the lectures her Grandfather had droned on about, but she was too addled by her current situation to recall it.

Still, just as she was tucked under the flap and shoved into the tent, Brie straightened her back. Whatever her fate, she would meet it head on, as honorable as she, a mere woman, could.

The inside was dimly lit, and as simple as the outside. There was a long table with a few crude chairs, a pile of furs over a bedraggled couch in one corner that must've been used as a bed for the occupant, and a fire in a brazier that barely managed to take the chill off the damp evening air. Most of his armor was hung carefully from a wooden rack in one corner, the mark of his rank—his helmet—resting atop it. A centurion commanded eighty men within a legion, and during the heat of battle he needed to be easily recognizable. Unlike the rest of the men, the pale horsehair crest on his helmet went side to side instead of front to back. This was a man who had probably been fighting so-called barbarians for the Romans for more than fifteen years. He would have been pulled from the ranks and elevated to his lofty status because of his success and bravery in many battles. His staff—almost as thick around as a man's wrist and nearly as tall, with what looked to be a gold finial at the top—was propped next to the ensemble. She shuddered, having recently seen many such vine sticks in use—all in exceedingly unpleasant ways.

For the first time since she'd awakened, Brietta became aware that she was cold. Very cold. Gooseflesh rose on her arms and her nipples peaked painfully against the rough fabric of her tunic. At first, she thought she was alone, but then a deep masculine voice rumbled into her ear from a point to her right that was almost close enough to touch her. "What's this?" before the owner of the voice moved around in front of her, giving her a good look at the man who held her life in his hands.

If she hadn't been alert prior to being shepherded into this place, she was now. Just looking at the man with the booming voice made every inch of her body, from her hair to her toes tingle. The nipples that were already pinched tight rose just that much more, as if blatantly trying to attract his attention, offering their hard, fleshy selves to him. He was a huge man. Bigger than anyone she'd ever seen before. Dirce was the largest of their warriors, the largest one she'd ever seen... until now. The Romans completely dwarfed the Anglo-Saxon warriors. This man had to be at least a head taller than Dirce, and almost twice as wide at the shoulders. His bare arms were tanned and massively muscled, rippling with veins and crisscrossing scars from previous battles. He was a walking, breathing testament to the strength and success of the Roman war machine.

Brietta had never reacted to any man this way before, and she certainly didn't want to react to this one. Especially now that she was in a severely disadvantaged position. She wanted to present him with a strong front. Brietta was quite alarmed to realize that that was the least of what she wanted at this point. She wanted to kiss him—to run just her fingertips over that broad chest and watch his eyes eagerly for any sign of reaction.

Startled and dismayed at her own thoughts, Brie consciously reined herself in, ducking her head immediately and trying to appear as meek as possible.

But apparently, she was too late. The giant's curiosity was already caught, and to her complete and utter horror, he stepped

even closer, coming into the dim light of the brazier, shadows falling on tanned flesh and carelessly highlighting the jet black locks and his sheer, masculine width.

It was all she could do to keep her eyes on those huge, leather booted feet as severe disappointment in herself flooded her stomach. She had always considered that she was nearly as good as Dirce. She would never hope to match his raw strength, of course, but she could—and did whenever challenged—meet or exceed it, always with intelligence and cunning.

Although it was unlikely, she'd learned as she'd grown up, her grandfather had filled her head with tales of past Celtic Queens and embellishing on the accomplishments of current, regional female rulers, hinting broadly that if she worked hard enough, she might just join their exalted ranks... and Brietta had believed, foolishly, it seemed, as one by one those she'd held in high esteem had fallen, overcome usually, and even more humiliatingly by her own father, either by use of brute force or out and out seduction. Far be it for her Father to do more work than was necessary when he could manage to accomplish his goal by tipping some wench onto her back—queen or no.

Brietta had seen the violence with which Camlin often took his women—granted, they were usually slaves or household help, but still. The sounds of the helpless girls' screams had often drifted into her chamber on any given night—and even sometimes during the day... it confused her if she thought about it too much, because those niggling sounds often resembled moans of pleasure rather than screams of pain. But she'd also accidentally walked into her father's chamber and that scene—two naked bodies writhing, her father groping the serving girl's ample, rounded breasts hard as he worked his hips back and forth from where he lay between her outspread legs.

A small shudder ran through Brietta at the thought. She had resolved long ago that she would never let any man do anything

like that to her, and had confessed her feelings of disgust to her maid, Ula, who had merely cackled at her.

“Aye, you’ll do it. Once you’re married it’ll be your husband’s right to crawl between your legs any time he likes. And if you’re a good wife, you’ll not say nay to him.”

Brietta, who was all of eleven at the time, and not yet betrothed due to her grandfather’s machinations, had squared her shoulders and shook her head vehemently. “Then I shan’t get married.”

Ula, who was busily trying to dry her charge’s long mane of hair at the time, yanked the impudent girl’s head back sharply as she rubbed at the wet scalp with a rough cloth fit to leave the girl bald in patches. “You’ll marry who your father chooses, girl— old, young, fat, slim— you are your father’s to give away to any man who’ll make him a good allegiance.”

“Marcus, our guest here is cold.” That sharp, humiliatingly suggestive tone snapped her rudely out of her reverie as his blatantly insulting gaze swept down her body, and suddenly Brietta was reminded that most of her body was exposed... and that she really *was* cold. “Stoke the fire.”

“This is the girl that was captured with that rag-tag band of Anglos. She’s been enjoying the unique hospitality of the pit. I just happened to have the pleasure of running into her just as she was trying to make her escape.” The eager Optio did exactly as he was told as he spoke, a knowing smirk on his face that disappeared as soon as the bigger man began to speak again.

“Who were the guards that should have been watching her?” The question was asked in a deceptively off-hand manner, as he was crossing the room to gather a rough blanket.

A shiver ran down Brietta’s spine, and she was suddenly extremely glad that she wasn’t one of those men.

“Gaius and Antonio,” came the snapped back information. “Lucius, they—“

“Deal with them.”

Unconsciously, Brietta's eyebrow rose at the absolute command in his voice. This was a man who was used to being obeyed and would never tolerate either being questioned or—Gods forbid, being out and out disobeyed. And he and the smaller man obviously had a fairly close relationship of long standing, or he would have had to explain himself further. They knew each other well enough that few words were necessary.

She had studied the constructs of the Roman army at her grandfather's behest—as well as Latin—and knew that the chances were that these two men had seen a lot of hard battles together, and that as a centurion—the undisputed commander of eighty Roman soldiers who would live and die by his word—he would have been given the right to choose his own second-hand-man—his *Optio*.

She filed away the part of his name she had learned, struggling to recall why that name sounded familiar.

Having been given an assignment, Marcus departed through the tent flap, leaving Brietta with a big smirk, as if he knew what awaited her in the clutches of this giant of a man.

But what he did then amazed and surprised him when she found the blanket wrapped around her shaking shoulders. It was a gallant gesture that almost made her smile, until he moved in front of her to pull the flaps around her, reaching under the blanket to cup a taut breast, lightly pinching the already peaked nipple.

When her fist hit his shoulder, she automatically shifted a little to bring her leg around behind his while he was off balance from the blow so that she would have the leverage she would need to push him onto the floor—and from there, hopefully, flee this forsaken place with her hide—and her virginity—still firmly intact.

But he was bigger and stronger than any other man she'd ever encountered, and for a moment, when she realized that what had been a full-force, total-body punch to her was barely

noticeable to him, her mouth hung open carelessly. He wasn't knocked off balance in the least.

In fact, the bastard was grinning down at her, his huge paw still cupping her intimately, his fingers pinching a little harder until she could barely subdue a squeal. "Well, it seems we have a fighter on our hands. Perhaps I should take you to Rome and see how you'd do in the arena."

Every ounce of blood left her face at his words. Until then, she had been living in her own little fantasy world, where she would inevitably fight her way out of the huge Roman encampment and back safely to her home—to Dirce and Ula and Grandfather and her menagerie of pets, where Grandfather would scold her for getting captured in the first place and drill her from morning until evening until she nearly dropped from exhaustion.

The man in front of her, touching her in a place where no other man had ever dared, and doing it as if he had every right and expectation of doing so, was the true reality of her situation. She was his—and, considering some of the other possible options, he was the lesser of any evils.

It was impossible, however, considering his sheer size, to think of him as the lesser of anything. Especially when his second hand came up to claim her other breast and squeezed as he kneaded it, not unlike how Siobhan, the cook, kneaded the day's bread.

He was being deliberately hurtful, watching her eyes and her face closely for every nuance of her reaction to what he was doing. Brietta drew a deep breath and expelled it slowly, closing her eyes and trying to divorce herself from what he was doing, but he wasn't about to have any of that. Her eyes flew open and she stared right into his as he wrapped the long length of her hair along his thick forearm and grasped it close to her skull with his fist, prying back her head, but keeping her eyes as he bent towards her breast. Brietta hadn't given up, but nothing she

did—none of the attempted kicks or quick moves was met with anything other than an annoyingly amused chuckle. His mouth descended lower and lower until his lips encircled her still upright nipple.

It was a flash that lasted only seconds, but he bared his teeth just slightly before they sank into that tender flesh.

She could no more control the guttural scream that erupted from her throat than she could stop him from doing whatever he wanted to her. Pain was only part of its impetus, however—the rest of it was pure unadulterated anger. Brietta had never been forced to submit to much of anyone. Oh, her Father, when he bothered to pay attention to her, she supposed, but not often enough that she couldn't slough it off. She did submit to her Grandfather but then she wanted to do that—she wanted to learn anything the old man could teach her. Even though he was older than she was, she'd never really bowed to her brother—even though he could overpower her easily once he grew up, and she was often on the receiving end of a cuff from him when her mouth ran amok with her, she always found a way to get even for anything she considered to be a slight.

But this—she had no idea how to deal with this. She was entirely at her enemy's mercy. And he was thoroughly enjoying every second of it. To think she had wondered what it would be like to kiss this monster! Although his teeth were clamped so tightly on that bud that she thought it might come off entirely, his lips were drawn back into a grimacing grin—and not just to show the horror of what he was doing. Their eyes were as locked together as his teeth and her nipple, and, once she'd come down from the scream and was trying desperately to remain as still as possible so as not to jostle herself in his mouth, he gave her a slow, deliberate wink.

Brietta's teeth—which were one of her crowning glories since they were all healthy and fairly white—were grinding together so violently that if she had been in her right mind, she

would have worried about breaking them. But all of her attention was focused on this horror of a man, just as he intended, she was sure. She could no more look away from what he was doing to her—from the pain he was causing her—than she could have defeated him in the Arena.

Finally, she couldn't stand still and take it one second longer—Brietta tried to wrench away from him, from the source of her pain, but thought better of it when she began to think her nipple was being torn off.

Still keeping that tidbit between his teeth, he managed to growl, "Stand still, little bird. All of your frantic movement is just making it worse."

She hated that he was right, and that she had already decided in her own mind to do as he was commanding, but now it would look like she was obeying him, and Brietta couldn't have that, so she did exactly the opposite and began to fight him for all she was worth. He ended up letting go of his precious captive, but only long enough to get a better hold on her. As hard as Brietta tried—and she knew her life as she knew it was on the line here, that if this man was able to overpower her, which seemed depressingly inevitable, that nothing she knew would ever be the same—and despite all of her training, she ended up being defeated by the basest of methods—brute force. With those arms wrapped around her there was no place she could go—certainly not towards the barbarian, and not backwards, either. As he tightened his embrace, moving became less of a concern and breathing replaced it. The man was atrociously strong, and he kept her bound against him, waiting with apparent infinite patience while she struggled futilely, reduced, really to only being able to move her feet, and that just the barest of bits.

At one point, he lifted her entirely off her feet, so that she had no choice but to lean against him for support. She kicked at his shins almost dutifully, because she knew that was what she should be doing, but with no real heart in it.

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She was well and truly caught, and chances were that she wasn't going anywhere until he decided to let her.

If he didn't kill her first, or sell or give her to someone else.

Like his men.

All eighty of them.