

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

---



# The Amulet

Lisette Allen

# Table of Contents

Cover Page

Other Books by the Author

The Amulet

Copyright Page

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

The door opened slowly and there stood a man. The dim light of the passageway outlined his massive figure all too plainly. He wore nothing but a loincloth and a glittering, somewhat sinister gold mask that covered the top part of his face. She saw the taut bulge of his genitals and recognised the gleam of pure sexual excitement in the dark eyes that glittered behind the mask. Had he been watching the beautiful dancers too? Or had he been watching her, Catrina, as she furtively stroked her own heated body. Perhaps, she surmised wildly, he was some dark primeval god who had come in answer to her surging sexual need. Anything at all was possible in this strange, exotically decadent household!

**Other books by the author:**

Elena's Conquest

Elena's Destiny

Nicole's Revenge

Nadya's Quest

Risky Business

# THE AMULET

Lisette Allen



This eBook is copyright material and must not be copied, reproduced, transferred, distributed, leased, licensed or publicly performed or used in any way except as specifically permitted in writing by the publishers, as allowed under the terms and conditions under which it was purchased or as strictly permitted by applicable copyright law. Any unauthorised distribution or use of this text may be a direct infringement of the author's and publisher's rights and those responsible may be liable in law accordingly.

Epub ISBN: 9780753528549

Version 1.0

[www.randomhouse.co.uk](http://www.randomhouse.co.uk)

Black Lace books contain sexual fantasies.  
In real life, always practise safe sex.

This edition published in 2004 by  
Black Lace  
Thames Wharf Studios  
Rainville Road  
London W6 9HA

Originally published 1995

Copyright © Lisette Allen, 1995

The right of Lisette Allen to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Printed and bound by Mackays of Chatham PLC

ISBN 0 352 33019 8

*All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior written consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

# Chapter One

*'Great god of light, hear oh hear our prayer . . .'*

From the remote depths of the forest, the hushed voices drifted in fervent unison up to the velvety, starlit sky. As if in answer, a light summer breeze shivered softly through the canopy of dark oaks, teasing the low flames from the flickering ring of fires and twisting the pungent smoke into swirling spirals. Somewhere beyond the clearing an owl swept between the trees, its slow, heavy wings beating against the warm night air like some giant moth in the darkness.

The priest's handmaiden stood all alone in the ring of firelight at the centre of the sacred grove. Around her in the shadows, the people of the tribe knelt and watched her, their eyes fixed hungrily on her slender, white-robed form, while their lips moved together in the low, hypnotic murmur of the chant.

*'Oh, mighty Lugh, god of light, hear us, give us victory this night!'*

The lonely figure of the girl in their midst gave no sign of acknowledgement as their words lapped around her. Everything about her was completely still, except for the reflection of the firelight that flickered on the smooth, silken tresses of her silver-blond hair, and the slight rise and fall of her high, small breasts beneath her thin woollen robe. Her hands were clasped tightly together, and her wideset eyes were pressed shut in the pale, dreamy oval of her face, as if she was in a trance.

But she could hear them. She could hear every word, and feel their hungry eyes, burning into her, waiting avidly; and with a sudden stab of despair, she pressed her hands to her

aching eyes. It was no good. Her gift had deserted her. She could see nothing but the blackness, and spinning golden circles against her eyelids . . .

Then there were soft footsteps on the grass behind her, and she shivered as she heard the priest's urgent whisper in her ear. 'The amulet, Catrina - remember your amulet!'

Bowing her head in anguish, feeling the priest's hot breath on her neck, she clutched at the little silver talisman that hung on a chain around her neck. She felt the smooth coldness of it searing her fingers, and suddenly her mind seemed to empty itself into a dizzying void.

'It's working?' the priest hissed urgently into her ear. 'Quickly - can you see anything yet?'

'One moment,' she pleaded. 'One moment, lord Luad . . .'

Then, suddenly, she caught her breath in an agonised gasp, because her vision had returned.

He was there. The mist swirled down in the darkness of the distant valley, forming a rank, threatening miasma; but she squeezed her eyes shut even tighter until the mist slowly cleared, and he was there, riding out from the gates of the enemy city, the city of the Eagles. Torches blazed from the high stone walls, casting a garish orange light on the man's harsh profile as he lifted his face to the hills. Behind him, the flickering torchlight was reflected fiftyfold in the gleaming armour and crested bronze helmets of his cavalry.

Catrina took a deep, searing breath, her eyes still tightly shut. In her mind she could even hear the steady drumming of the horses' hooves on the paved road that the Roman warriors had built so long ago. He was coming, the man of her dreams, up into the hills, riding blindly into the secret forests and bleak, moorland haunts of his enemies. *Into the trap . . .*

The shadows of her vision swirled around her, and the voices of the tribe penetrated her numbed hearing as the vision faded at last.

*'Victory,'* they were chanting more urgently now, *'give us victory this night!'*

Suddenly they seemed to press in on her, like an alien people, and the pungent smell of the dried herbs that the priest had scattered in the flames seemed to choke her, making her dizzy. In that moment Catrina felt helplessly trapped. She wanted to cry out and push them all aside, and run to the man in her vision and stop him riding into the terrible danger.

'Catrina.' The priest's strong hand gripped her shoulder warningly. 'Catrina, you must speak now. Everyone is waiting to hear your words.'

Opening her eyes dazedly, still trembling with fear, she saw that Luad the white-robed priest was still gazing down at her with his pale, anxious eyes. 'Tell the warriors that you dreamed of victory!' he urged in the same low voice that was meant only for her. 'Quickly - tell them what they want to hear, Catrina, before they grow restless and begin to doubt us!'

Catrina stared up at him wildly, her wide green eyes helplessly shadowed with what she had seen. She could feel the tribe's expectation reaching out to her in the sacred oak grove; could see the warriors' women standing waiting in the shadows, hungry to play their part in the coming sacrament. The warriors themselves knelt silently in the fire circle, their naked torsos gleaming with oil and blue war-paint as they waited to partake of the sacred ritual before riding out to battle with the red-crested Romans, mortal enemies of their people. *But the man she had seen was a Roman, and he was riding straight into their trap . . .*

With all the strength she possessed, Catrina forced herself to look up into the hooded priest's compelling, clean-shaven features and pushed the dream from her mind, in case Luad should glimpse some remnant of her vision. Leave me alone, priest, she thought rebelliously. Leave me alone! Feeling for the familiar reassurance of the silver talisman at

her breast, her fingers tracing the tiny outline of the goddess's head that was engraved on its smooth surface, she said steadily, 'I see victory, Luad.'

The tall, strongly built Druid continued to watch her, just long enough for her to feel a shiver of fear as his cold eyes assessed her. Then he nodded, apparently satisfied, and turned to the hushed circle, to call out, 'So. The goddess has spoken through her handmaiden, Catrina. It is victory tonight, my people!'

A sigh like the night breeze rippled through the clearing. The chanting began again, low and insistent. At a nod from Luad, more herbs were strewn on the fires, and the pungent smoke rose high in the air as the ornate bronze chalice filled with mead passed round the circle. A small drum began to beat lightly, hypnotically from the edge of the clearing, filling the warm summer night with the rhythmic resonance of bone on taut animal hide. At its signal the waiting womenfolk glided forward into the circle of fire and began to move to its hypnotic sound, swaying in the smoke and shadows, their faces rapt as their filmy gowns moved and clung to their half-naked bodies. The kneeling warriors watched them hungrily, their senses inflamed with drink and the knowledge of what was to come.

Catrina stepped slowly back out of the ring of fire into the darkness, her head bowed, feeling empty and drained. Her part was over. She knew what would happen next, and it wasn't for her. She knew that the women of the tribe, their bodies bathed and scented in homage to the mother goddess, would slowly weave their way closer to the warriors of their choice and then would disrobe to offer them their lithe, ripe bodies, driving their men into a frenzy of desire before pleasuring them and bringing them to exquisite release. Then the exultant band of warriors would ride away into the night to kill their enemies, the Romans.

Catrina stood apart as she always did; different, alone, separate from the rest of the women. Before tonight, she

had never minded her isolation. Luad, her protector as well as her priest, had told her long ago that it was a precious gift to be marked out by the goddess as she was, to be favoured with her precious amulet. But now, she felt a strange, empty ache somewhere deep inside her as the other women joyfully filled the clearing with their dance, their sensuous bodies like swaying, golden-tipped flames, their lips reddened with *ruan* and their eyelashes stained with berry juice as they drifted on sweet clouds of incense and honeyed mead. One by one, they dropped to their knees before their chosen warrior, reaching out eagerly to caress the men's painted torsos with the priest's magic oil, running their delicate, lascivious fingers over the swelling chest muscles and stroking the strong, corded thighs of the warriors, preparing to make their own sweet sacrifice of the flesh.

Catrina suddenly turned her head away and pressed her burning cheek against the smooth, cool bark of a young tree. Never before had she felt so alone. Why - why was she different? She closed her eyes, but she could still hear it all; the murmuring words of the white-robed Druid, the throbbing beat of the little hide drum, stirring the kneeling warriors into a frenzy of excitement. She knew that the women would be dancing faster and faster now, would be brushing their proudly naked breasts against the warriors' mouths, hotly caressing the men's sturdy phalluses with their fingers until they stood strong and proud from their sinewed thighs, murmuring incantations to the mother goddess as they twined their suppliant bodies round the hot, eager men of the tribe and worshipped them.

Catrina would always be apart from them. Luad had told her so. 'My maiden of snow,' he had called her proudly only that afternoon, fingering and lifting her silky, moon-silver hair as she had worked to prepare the herbs for this night's ceremony. A snow maiden indeed, as untouched and pure as the icy streams that ran from the mountain in winter; she

was part of their rituals yet separate, and Luad made sure that everyone knew it. Sometimes, Catrina was troubled by the warriors staring hotly at her slender yet womanly body, ravaging her high-breasted tenderness with greedy, disturbing eyes; but she knew that under the priest's protection, she was as remote from them as if she was in a silver cage. No one dared to cross the Druid priest by even thinking of touching his chosen one.

She was apart from these people; accepted by them, but not one of them. She didn't even look like the big, tawny women of this tribe, but was slender and startlingly fair, with a small, delicate face and shadowy green eyes. And she had the gift of the sight. Taking a deep breath to steady her churning thoughts, she turned her gaze back to the clearing and watched them in the maelstrom of their ritual, as she'd watched them so many times before; the hooded priest, standing at the edge of the clearing as if in a trance, and the figures twining slowly, fervently, on the mossy floor of the firelit grove. Just a few feet away from her, a stalwart warrior was shuddering as one of the women reached to guide his heavy, throbbing phallus deep into the velvety softness between her legs; they began to couple in silent passion, the woman offering her ripe breasts to her man's hungry lips as she wrapped her strong legs around his waist and writhed in primitive delight.

Catrina felt a strange tremor run through her own body as she watched from the shadows. She'd seen it all so often before, but tonight something was different. Her blood pulsed hotly in her veins, in a way she'd never known before, and she knew she was not in control. She felt sick with apprehension, haunted by her searing vision of the Roman with the sea-blue eyes, and her body was in a helpless, sweet torment that she didn't understand.

She swallowed hard, her breathing shallow and unsteady, because the sight of the nearby warrior, triumphantly plunging his manhood deep within the gasping woman in a

final explosion of fleshly homage, made her feel weak with a strange yearning. Her small, high breasts tingled and chafed against the white woollen tunic, as if longing for the hot wetness of a warrior's mouth; the secret flesh between her legs pulsed and trembled rebelliously, and she was conscious of a shameful, seeping moistness that oiled her thighs. Oh, what was happening to her? Crossing her hands across her breasts to try to assuage the sweet, painful ache that was gathering in her strangely stiffened nipples, she squeezed her eyes shut in anguish.

Then Catrina let out a low cry because Luad's hand rested on her shoulder again, and this time she saw with a heart-stopping jolt that his face was dark and dangerous beneath his enveloping white hood.

'You keep yourself too much apart, lady,' the Druid said softly. 'The warriors will think it a bad omen, on this of all nights.' His fingers rested heavily on her shoulders, teasing aside her long, silken hair; the tips of his forefingers and thumbs rested lightly on the little silver amulet, and she trembled as she felt his power burning through the precious metal. She fought down a shiver of fear. Why couldn't he leave her alone? She said quickly, 'I am tired, Luad, that is all. May I leave now?'

His fingers massaged her amulet slowly. 'Then you must fight your tiredness, must you not? You are special, Catrina, very special. You have the sacred gift from the gods, the power of seeing.' His hands slid back to her shoulders, and moved round to knead at the nape of her neck. 'Do you still see the enemy, Catrina? Are the Romans still riding towards us?'

She closed her eyes, shivering as she felt the power surge through her, and in a low voice she replied, 'Yes, Luad. I see the enemy.' Then suddenly she remembered that in her vision there had been a man of their own tribe riding beside the Roman leader, and she blurted out, 'Where is Brant tonight? He is not among the warriors!'

Luad smiled thinly. 'Brant is doing his duty. He has gone to the stone city to tell the red-crested soldiers that a convoy of women and children, travelling south from a remote fort, is under attack from a neighbouring tribe. That is why the Romans ride out so speedily.'

'Then the story of the women and children is not true? It is a trap?' Catrina's voice was scarcely a whisper.

'Of course it is a trap.' Luad spoke scornfully. 'But how did you know of Brant's part in all this? Can you see him?'

Catrina shut her eyes again in an agony of suspense. Yes, there was the red-headed warrior Brant, on his shaggy mountain pony, riding at the Roman leader's side. Brant was smiling up at him, whispering his lies, and the Roman with the blue eyes was listening intently and not seeing Brant's duplicity. Catrina clenched her fists, trying to reach out to him, to fight through the bleak mists that separated her from him, but she'd almost lost him, and she was in despair.

Then, suddenly, her vision grew clear again, and he was there. The man of her dreams. He was gazing straight at her, and she waited breathlessly for him to recognise her, but somehow his eyes, his beautiful dark blue eyes, were sightless. Horrified, she realised that the man was *blind* . . .

With a cry of despairing pity, she reached out into the darkness to touch him, to help him. Deep within her trembling, vulnerable body she felt a fierce stab of something that was almost pain, only it wasn't a pain, more a sensation of incredible, tender longing that hurt her terribly, a feeling that she'd never experienced before, as if some secret, innermost part of her that had always been frozen in unawakenedness was melting into warm, anguished life. No! He mustn't die! Sweet goddess, she prayed silently, touching her amulet, save him for me . . .

She dragged her eyes open, frightened at the sensation engulfing her. Numbly she saw the silent, intent figures still writhing in erotic ritual in the shadowy circle; saw the dancing flames gleam on the painted, rippling muscles of

the big Celtic warrior Cernwi as he lifted a suppliant woman astride his hips, his eyes closing in rapt adoration as his partner lowered herself sighing on to his erect manhood and he was able to sheathe himself deep within her. The woman threw her head back, murmuring little crooning sounds of pleasure, and rubbed her pink-tipped breasts rapturously against the solid wall of his oiled chest, clasping her thighs fiercely round his thrusting loins and twining her fingers in his shaggy hair as she rode him into oblivion. They were like fire spirits as they mated so primitively in the fierce, sparking light of the flames. And the agonised Catrina, silently watching them, was aware again of the strange, pulsing moistness between her own slender thighs and thought suddenly, What would it be like? To feel a man like Cernwi holding me, worshipping me with his body - to feel that strong, magical shaft of flesh deep within my own forbidden places, jerking with hungry life . . .

Luad had moved behind her. He was watching Cernwi and his woman too; she heard the sharp intake of the Druid's breath as he watched the big warrior spurt out his seed. Then, suddenly, Catrina felt Luad's hands on her breasts. She stopped breathing, stunned with shock as his hands slid beneath the soft white wool of her robe, because he'd never touched her like this before. His palms were cool and questioning, and her stomach lurched at the unexpected tingling sensation. Then his fingers fastened, very gently, on her tender nipples, pulling and teasing at the rosy buds; and the colour rushed to her face as she felt the turgid flesh stiffen shamefully at his expert touch. She twisted her head to gaze up at the priest, not understanding. Then she saw the hot, hungry look in his eyes, and felt the rough ball of his thumb insistently circling her pouting nipples, and she sprang away from him, feeling somehow desperately betrayed.

She had travelled with Luad for many years now, amongst the tribespeople of the wild northern forests and hills. Luad

was young for a priest, in the prime of his manhood, and she accepted it as quite natural that he always participated in the rites he'd initiated, joining with the women at the climax of the ceremony. Catrina had always assumed that he took his pleasure like a sacrament, condescending to bestow his virility on the eager womenfolk of the tribe with a kind of cool detachment. He was popular with them, too, because he was tall and strongly built, with long, flowing dark hair that emphasised the cold refinement of his cleanshaven face.

But now, she suddenly realised with a blaze of alarm that the Druid priest was hot and hungry for a particular kind of fulfilment. This time, his chosen woman was to be her, Catrina!

He was drawing closer again, even though she'd sprung away from him like a frightened woodland animal. His hands slid out to encompass her waist and pulled her close to him, so she could feel the hard heat of his body through her thin white robe. His breath was hot in her face as he took her helpless hand in his. Then, in a husky, unsteady voice, he whispered, 'Hold me, Catrina. Touch me. Feel the power in me.'

With a juddering shock, she realised that he was guiding her numb fingers between the parted folds of his robe to where the all-too masculine flesh stood out hard and proud from his body. As he pushed her trembling palm against the hot, velvety rod, she saw his avid eyes light up and heard his shallow, excited breathing rasping through his lungs; he squeezed her fingers shut, forcing them to the throbbing tip of his phallus, and she gasped as she felt the quivering flesh of his manhood. He shuddered in delight at her touch, his eyes closing in rapture, and rubbed her imprisoned hand swiftly up and down his rampant, bone-hard erection; with a low cry of defiance, Catrina pulled herself free and sprang back away from him, her fists clenched, suddenly realising.

*Luad the priest had been keeping her all this time for himself . . .*

Again, the acute sense of betrayal washed over her, and she rubbed her palm rebelliously against the wool of her tunic as if his fiercely aroused flesh had scorched her. Her heart thudded painfully as she backed up against the gnarled trunk of a twisted oak, and she saw the Druid's face tighten as he let his garments fall back into place. He said slowly, 'You reject Luad the priest, Catrina?'

Catrina moistened her dry lips, knowing real fear. Then she tossed back her long, silky hair in a gesture of defiance. 'I have the sight, my lord Luad,' she said quickly. 'I have to keep myself apart, or my gift will be lost for ever. That is what you've always told me.'

The Druid's brows drew darkly together as he pondered this, and Catrina held her breath, tense and ready to run. Then he said reluctantly, 'That is true. But you may minister to my needs without violating yourself, because I am a priest. Let me show you how . . .'

Catrina braced herself against the tree, reaching behind her to grasp at the rough bark, her face white with unspoken resistance. Then there was a waft of musky perfume and Catrina saw Eda, one of the most beautiful of the tribe's women, gliding softly towards them from the firelit circle. Her tunic had slipped from her shoulders so that her full, heavy breasts were proudly bare, their nipples dark-crested and stiff as she swayed towards the watching priest. Shooting a look of contemptuous scorn at the slender, silvery-haired Catrina, Eda tossed back her mane of waist-length copper hair and lifted her hands to Luad's shoulders.

'My lord priest.' Her voice was low and seductive, and slightly slurred; Catrina realised that she had drunk deeply of the sweet, potent mead. 'The ceremony draws on, and I would claim my privilege.'

As her luscious breasts rubbed against the coarse fabric of the tall Druid's robe, Catrina saw him catch his breath, his

eyes mesmerised by their fullness, and heard him grate out, 'What privilege would you ask, Eda?'

Eda sank gracefully to her knees before him, murmuring, 'I would honour you, my lord!' Without waiting for his reply, she carefully parted his heavy robe and gasped in delight when she saw that his heavy phallus was already erect and trembling with arousal. Shooting a glance of open scorn up at Catrina, she leaned forward to kiss the veined purple shaft, while stroking at the heavy, hair-roughened sac of his testicles with sharp, eager fingers. Luad hissed between his teeth with excitement, and Eda lifted her head to smile up at him. 'Is it your will, my lord, that I should pleasure you? I assure you, I can offer you more satisfaction by far than your little priestess. She would not know what to do, my lord, with a handsome, virile man such as you.' She turned a cold grin on Catrina. 'Would you?'

The colour flared to Catrina's face. 'It is true I lack your experience, Eda,' she said in a low voice. 'Can you remember the names of all the warriors you have coupled with tonight?'

For a moment Eda's face tightened in anger, then she smiled and said, 'Jealous, Catrina? Never mind. I think it's ice that runs in your veins, not blood. At least you will never know what you are missing.' Then she broke off, because the Druid's fingers were tightening in her thick, shimmering coppery hair, and he was saying hoarsely, 'Do your work, my fine Eda. Take me in your mouth - ah, yes. Do your work . . .'

With a slow, secret smile, Eda dipped her head to swirl her pointed tongue around the tip of his phallus. The priest shuddered, and his penis grew even thicker, the swollen glans prodding hungrily at Eda's voluptuous mouth. Eagerly the woman wrapped her velvety tongue round the taut, throbbing flesh and drew him deep between her hot, moist lips.

Catrina, frozen into immobility, saw Luad jerk and close his eyes as he braced his muscular, strong thighs firmly against Eda's delicious ministrations. He came within seconds, pumping himself with a groan of release into the redhead's eager mouth, while Eda sucked and licked, swallowing hard until the very last of his seed was spent.

Catrina didn't wait to see what happened next. Tearing herself away, she ran from the clearing and pushed her way through the woods towards the nearby stream, plunging her face blindly into its cool, clear water. Her blood surged dizzily through her veins and her small breasts tingled with shame.

Eda was right She, Catrina, was the outsider. With her fair colouring and slender build, she didn't even look like the rest of the tribe. If only she knew more about herself and her past, then she might feel as if she belonged! But she had no memory at all of her childhood, of the empty years before Luad had claimed her; and no possession except her precious little silver amulet.

Luad had found her one cold spring day, crouching behind the rocks just above the moorland path along which he was travelling. It was the first of her memories, and she remembered every detail, every word of the encounter. The young priest had reined in his shaggy pony and said, 'What are you doing here all alone, child?'

She was shivering visibly as she whispered, 'The river flooded my home, and swept me away. Now I have nowhere to go.'

Luad had nodded, frowning. There'd been heavy rain for weeks, and he'd heard the news that the great river that flowed down through the city of Eboracum to the sea had burst its banks, wreaking havoc on the lowland settlements. He'd asked gently, 'There are none of your people left?'

She had caught her breath and whispered, 'No. No one.'

Luad had gazed down at her from his saddle, intrigued by her slender, almost delicate frame and her long pale hair.

Even her clothes were of unusually good quality, though they were torn and stained by her sojourn in the hills. She was not like the usual children of the tribes. 'How did you escape then, child,' he questioned, 'if the rest of your people were lost to the river?'

She'd gazed up at him, her wide green eyes dark with anguish. 'I don't know. But I knew it would happen,' she said brokenly. 'I knew the water would come, because I saw it in a dream. I tried to tell them, but they wouldn't listen to me. They wouldn't listen . . . Then the water came and swept me away, and threw me against the rocks.' Her voice became a racking sob that shook her small body, and Luad saw then that there was a deep cut on her forehead, presumably from where the flood had cast her ashore. He had said sharply, 'You say you saw what would happen, in your dreams?'

'Yes,' the girl had whispered. 'I often see the future as I sleep. But no one will listen to me.'

'I will listen to you,' Luad had said, his eyes alight with excitement. 'Who were they, your people?'

She drew a deep, shuddering breath to steady herself and said in quiet despair, 'I don't know. I can't remember. I can't remember anything.' It was true. Her mind had been emptied by the trauma of the flood. All she could tell him was her name, Catrina, and all she had with her, apart from the clothes she wore, was the strange silver amulet on a chain round her neck. Luad looked at the amulet with silent concentration. It was beautifully crafted, and was engraved on one side with the image of a woman's head, her thick coils of hair radiating from her face like the rays of the sun. A goddess, he realised. The sign of a goddess, to avert the evil eye . . .

It was then that the young, ambitious Luad decided to take the striking silver-blond child into his protection. She recovered well from her ordeal, though she would always bear a small, white arrow-shaped scar on her forehead, and soon she became his constant companion on his travels

through the northern hills while he carefully trained her to develop her unusual skills.

Luad was not without skill himself. He had valuable medicines for the marsh fever and the eye-sickness, and he could heal the worst of festering wounds with his precious salves. Riding at his side on her little pony, Catrina had seen and learned much. From the shelter of a low turf hide, they'd watched the fierce cavalry patrols ride out as the Romans guarded the northern wall, and they'd followed the line of hostile forts from sea to sea. Luad had taught her to speak the Roman tongue, and once they'd even ridden within sight of the great stone city of Eboracum, with its vast legionary fortress. Catrina had been stunned by the sight of the roads filled with soldiers and ox-carts, by the bustling alleys and shops, the great mansions where the wealthy lived and the reed-thatched hovels of the poor. She'd caught her breath in delight at the barges and galleys that sailed up the river, unloading their precious cargoes at the bustling warehouses that lined the bank. It was another world. At first, she couldn't believe that ordinary men could live in such a vast, crowded place, but Luad had sensed her superstitious fear and said softly, 'They are mortal men, Catrina, the soldiers of the Eagle. They bleed from the bite of the sword, just as we do. Soon, if the gods are willing, they will all die.'

Lately, she'd heard the warriors talking around the fire at night, and she heard them murmur that the chief Roman commander, governor of all Britain, had gone away across the seas to fight. He had taken many of his soldiers with him, leaving the legionaries pitifully few in number. She knew that the northern tribes were gathering, waiting their chance to swoop down and kill all who were forced to remain behind in the beleaguered northern garrisons, and she knew where her loyalties should lie. These fierce, blue-painted warriors and their womenfolk were her people, after all, who had taken in the wandering priest and his

handmaiden for season after season and given them food and shelter.

And yet, as Catrina sank back on to the mossy turf beside the little stream, her green eyes were dark with anguish as she thought about her Roman, the man she had dreamed about. Her whole body pulsed with newly awakened emotions that she didn't understand; she imagined him gazing at her with his splintering blue eyes and taking her into his arms, crushing her aching breasts against the cold breastplate of his armour and pressing his firm mouth against her lips. He was beautiful, her Roman, with his powerful, perfectly sculpted body and his bronzed, dangerous face.

Luad - priest, healer and her protector - was a figure of fear to her now, because he wanted the death of all Romans. She'd suspected for some time that his magical powers were not all he made them out to be, and that he was relying more and more on her, Catrina, to maintain his hold on the people of the tribe. Tonight, she had realised that he needed her in another way, and he wanted her all for himself.

She gazed into the darkness of the forest, her amulet warm and heavy against her breast, and felt her body surge with a mixture of despair and growing rebellion.

Away to the south, the soldiers rode steadily into the night, and the centurion at their head cursed softly as his big black horse stumbled slightly on the rough, muddy track. They'd left the proper road long ago, with its good, stone-flagged surface laid by his own legion, the men of the Sixth Victrix, during months of hard toil; and now they were heading relentlessly up into the dark hills, into the uncharted territory haunted by the barbarian tribes of Brigantia.

Alexius the centurion narrowed his clear blue eyes in thought while he murmured words of encouragement to his nervous steed. The bearded Briton at his side, in his greasy

red leather cap and homespun cloak - Brant, he called himself - had ridden his foam-flecked pony to the gates of Eboracum just over an hour ago, and had babbled out some tale about a convoy of Romanised British people under attack from a tribe of wild hillsmen. Alexius had no alternative but to answer the call for help, because Brant said that the convoy contained women and children. But even so, Alexius cursed the timing of the attack because his men were out of their element up here in the hostile hills, and they knew it. He heard one troublemaker grumble a little too loudly into the darkness, and turned swiftly to lash him with his tongue.

The legionary instantly dropped his head, cowed. He should have known better. The centurion Alexius had risen through the ranks to become *primus pilus*, first among spears, the chief centurion of the whole sixth legion, and was therefore effectively military commander of the Eboracum garrison in the elderly legate's absence. Even the rawest *tiro* knew that Alexius was not a man to be trifled with.

They were rising up a steep incline into a narrow wooded valley. Somewhere a bird called out in alarm, its cry harsh and raucous in the silence of the night; Alexius, his skin prickling, felt the shoulders of the hills close around him and glanced sharply at the barbarian on his shaggy pony.

'You're sure it's this way, Briton?'

The man fawned, touching his forehead in grovelling humility. 'Yes, lord! I take you the swiftest way - I swear it, by all the gods!'

Alexius saw the shifting light in the Briton's eyes as the man glanced nervously into the shadows on either side. Suddenly, with a heart-stopping clarity, he knew. The signs weren't much - just the sound of a crackling twig in the darkness, an alien smell, the rasp of the Briton's sharp breathing, nothing more. But it was enough.

Alexius wrenched at his horse's reins so hard that the big animal lurched back on to its haunches. 'Mithras!' he swore. 'Sound the alarm. Close up. To arms!'

Even as he called out he knew it was too late. He could hear the terrifyingly familiar hum of noise filling the air as the Britons made their droning battle chant across their shield rims. And then the enemy were upon them, with their wild bearded faces and naked torsos glistening with paint, running down the hillside with their heron-tufted war spears singing through the air. The night was filled with the sound of their war horns braying, and their fearsome battle-cry swelled to an almighty roar as they swooped on the grim-faced cavalry.

The Briton had vanished into the darkness. Alexius, silently cursing himself for every kind of fool, held his sword high and rode forward to meet the enemy. In this narrow cleft, there wasn't even room for his men to make a proper battle formation, and they were hopelessly outnumbered. His only hope now was for a speedy death.

In the middle of the night, Catrina woke shaking from her dream with the perspiration dampening her brow and the terror constricting her heart. It had been an evil dream, and for a moment she couldn't breathe. All around her the other women slept heavily on their narrow straw pallets, crowded into the low thatched hut. Then she realised with a jolt that Luad was there, leaning over her in the darkness, with his eyes alight with triumph.

Pushing her hair back from her face, desperately fighting back the muzziness of sleep, she whispered, 'Luad. You startled me. What is it?'

He put his finger to his lips. 'Come and see.'

A tremor of nameless fear ran through her as she pulled herself up from her pallet. Wrapping her cloak around herself against the unexpected coolness of the night air, her throat tight with nameless apprehension, she hurried after

him, desperately trying to keep up with the dark-haired priest's long strides as he made his way to the oak grove.

The ashes of last night's fires still smouldered, and there was an acrid smell in the air, of charred wood and pungent herbs. Several of the tribesmen were gathered there, waiting; one of them stepped forward quickly, murmuring low greetings to Luad.

'He's still alive?' queried the priest sharply.

The man nodded. 'Aye, he's wounded but conscious. He refuses to speak, but I reckon that with your permission, lord priest, we'll soon change his mind.' Meaningfully he jerked his thumb towards a place where the shadows gathered at the edge of the clearing, and Catrina felt her stomach lurch sickly.

A man was bound to the trunk of a sturdy oak, a soldier. They'd stripped him of his armour already; his linen tunic was dusty and blood-smeared, and a filthy bandage was wrapped tightly round his head so that it covered his eyes. Beneath the blood-stained horror of the bandage, Catrina knew that his eyes would be blue, deep blue.

Luad surveyed the bound captive for a moment, then said sharply to the other man, 'Is he blind?'

'So it would seem, lord Luad. He took a sword blow, just above the sockets. It might heal, or it might not.' The man let a slow, unpleasant grin twist his features. 'A pity, though, if he doesn't get his sight back, because then he won't see what's going to happen to him.'

Luad nodded appreciatively, while Catrina clenched her fists and gazed in horrified pity at the man who was so helplessly bound. They had tied him so tightly to the tree that the sinews of his upper arms and shoulders were strained and knotted beneath his tunic, and she could see all too clearly how he braced himself against his pain. The Roman was blind, as she had foreseen. Did he know their language? Did he understand what his captors were saying?

She swallowed hard and said, as steadily as she could, 'What will happen to him, Luad?'

A slow, triumphant smile flickered in the priest's eyes; his finely chiselled features were cold and dangerous. He drew her quietly to one side so the others couldn't hear and whispered quickly, 'This is my chance, Catrina. Now I can show the people of the tribe that the power of the old ones still lives on in me, their chosen one. The prisoner is mine.'

Even as Catrina drew away from him in instinctive fear, he turned to gaze at the helpless Roman and said softly, 'In answer to your question, why, he'll die, of course - on the night of the full moon. After the women have finished with him.'

## *Chapter Two*

Julia lay face down on the soft towel that was draped over the smooth marble bench, her eyes closed in ecstasy. The skilled hands continued to rub and stroke at her oiled skin, bringing every inch of pampered flesh to a state of delicious, quivering anticipation. She turned her head slightly and her long, ringleted hair, as dark and glossy as the purple grapes that lay on the table beside her, slid luxuriously across her shoulders.

‘A little lower, Nerissa,’ she murmured.

The slave-girl’s hands wandered obediently down the hollow of her back, drawing gently on Julia’s beautiful, taut buttocks. Julia sighed with pleasure, feeling the warmth of the caress tingling through her, then decided reluctantly that she’d had enough for the time being and drew herself up to reach for her goblet of sweet Falernian wine that stood beside the grapes on the low wicker table. She felt no urge to dress, because the room was beautifully warm from the channels of heat that ran beneath the floor; and as if that wasn’t enough, a wrought-iron brazier filled with glowing charcoal had been placed near to her. Even though it was midsummer, Julia knew the British climate well enough by now to take no chances. In the corner a palm-oil lamp cast its smooth yellow glow around the luxurious room, lighting up its intricately tiled walls and low, cushioned couches, and looking round it all, Julia couldn’t help but breathe a little sigh of satisfaction.

When Flavius, her rich, elderly lover, had been appointed governor of the city of Eboracum and had asked her to accompany him to this cold, barbarianinfested northern province, she’d been filled with trepidation. But now, she