

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Barbarian Prize

Deanna Ashford

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Deanna Ashford

Title Page

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Copyright

About the Book

'Taranis gave a muffled moan as she leaned forward and traced the outline of his nipples with the tip of her tongue. The salty taste of his perspiration sharpened her desire for him. She pulled one of his nipples between her lips and sucked on it gently. 'I want you,' Taranis said softly, his chains clanking as he tried to move into a more comfortable position.'

After a failed uprising in Brittania, Sirona, a princess of the Icenii, and her lover, Taranis, are taken to Pompeii and sold as slaves. While Taranis is used to satisfy the demands of a rich Roman lady, Sirona is confined to the home of a lecherous senator until his stepson, General Lucius Flavius rescues her.

After the lovers are briefly united their situation takes a turn for the worst. Sirona finds herself in the clutches of the erotic cult of Dionysus and Taranis must fight for his life as a gladiator in the arena. Meanwhile, beneath Mount Vesuvius, there are forces gathering that even the power of the Romans cannot control.

About the Author

Deanna Ashford is the pseudonym of an author of historical, romantic and erotic fiction.

She is the author of *Barbarian Prize*, *Doctor's Orders*, *Templar Prize* and *Wild Kingdom*, all available from *Black Lace*.

By the same author

Savage Surrender
Wild Kingdom
Doctor's Orders

Barbarian Prize

Deanna Ashford

**BLACK
LACE**

1

AD79

IT WAS HOT, far hotter than usual for late June, the month named for the goddess Juno, and the sun hung like a glittering ball of pure gold in the cloudless blue sky. Not even the hint of a breeze rippled the glassy green surface of the sea as the Roman warship, a liburnian with a high curving prow, glided forwards propelled by two dozen oars either side of the vessel. Each oar was manned by two wide-chested slaves, with hugely muscled arms. On days such as this, when there was no wind to fill the sails of the liburnian, they would be forced to row for hours and hours, each oarstroke controlled by the relentless beat of the drum.

As soon as the helmsman saw the island of Prochyta on the starboard bow, he leant hard on the huge oar at the rear, which served as a rudder. The boards of the vessel creaked as it slowly changed direction, rounding the headland into the Bay of Neapolis. The liburnian was not heading for the harbour at Misenum, the headquarters of the western imperial fleet where at least forty huge triremes were moored, but for a city further across the bay. Captain Cornelius was under orders from Governor Agricola to convey the captives in the hold to Pompeii.

Deep in the bowels of the vessel, Sirona stirred restlessly as the steady drumbeat coming from the oardeck above changed pace. 'The ship is slowing,' she whispered to Taranis, who lay beside her. 'Do you think we are pulling into port again?'

'There could be many reasons,' he said. 'Perhaps we are heading into more treacherous waters,' he added, pulling

her closer to him, the chains that held him clanking as he moved his arms. 'Don't be concerned, my love.'

She tried not to be frightened but she didn't find it easy to be as brave and steadfast as Taranis was. They had no idea of their destination or what the future held for them. Most likely they faced either death or slavery; the Romans were quick to punish those who dared to rise against them. When the Roman General Agricola and his legions had marched into northern Britannia, Sirona's father Borus had led an army made up of a number of different northern tribes against the invaders. They'd fought long and hard against superior forces, yet despite all their prayers and sacrifices the gods had been far from kind. She, along with Borus, his second-in-command Taranis and many of their men, had been captured.

At the express order of Emperor Vespasian, her father and most of the other prisoners had been taken from the vessel at Ostia. They were to be paraded in chains through the streets of Rome before being sent to their execution.

Sirona had no idea why she, Taranis and a few others had been spared for a time and left on board this vessel. 'I just thank the goddess Andrasta that she answered my prayers and allowed me to be with you, at least for a short while longer,' she said to Taranis.

During the long overland march south, Sirona, the only female captive, had been kept apart from the other prisoners. When they'd boarded the military liburnian at the port of Narbo in Southern Gaul, she'd been confined alone in a small aft cabin. Three days earlier, extra passengers had come aboard, a corpulent Roman general and his wife, and she'd been moved to the hold, but she had not been chained like the other prisoners. The few Roman females she'd known in Britannia were weak and submissive creatures, compelled to obey their fathers or their husbands at all times, so the captain must have thought that leaving her unfettered posed no threat to the safety of this vessel.

He clearly did not know that Celtic women were also warriors; even so, she cursed her weakness, as no matter how hard she tried she could find no way to free Taranis and the other prisoners from their manacles.

She caressed her lover's muscular chest. The heat in the dark hold was oppressive and his skin was slick with perspiration. The air around them was thick with the foul odours of stale sweat and excrement; yet she could still detect the familiar musky masculine scent of his body as she ran her hands over the grubby fabric of his loincloth. Beneath the thin layer of linen she felt his cock stir. The coarsely woven tunic her captors had given her to wear stuck to her hot flesh and the rough boards of the floor of the hold dug into her hip, but none of this mattered; all she could feel was her rising desire for Taranis.

He was a renowned warrior and military strategist whom Borus respected enough to make his second-in-command, even though Taranis came from Gaul and not Brittania. The first time she'd laid eyes on him she'd thought him the most amazingly attractive man she had ever seen. He was tall, at least a head taller than her fellow Icene, and most of his life he had been a mercenary, fighting against the Romans in far-flung lands. His skin had been darkened by the sun to a deep golden brown. His hair was the colour of ripe wheat, his eyes as blue as the clear skies of summer and, with his square jaw and masculine features, he was amazingly handsome.

She felt the hard contours of his belly tremble as she brushed her fingers across his hot, damp skin. Taranis gave a muffled moan as she leant forwards and traced the outline of his nipples with the tip of her tongue. The salty taste of his perspiration sharpened her desire for him. She pulled one of his nipples between her lips and sucked on it gently.

His muscles tensed, those on his arms cording, as he pulled her half across his body. 'I want you,' Taranis said softly, as a prisoner a few feet away coughed noisily, his

chains clanking as he tried to move into a more comfortable position.

‘Are you never satisfied?’ she teased. Over the last three days, she had learnt to virtually ignore the presence of the other prisoners and concentrate only on this brief, bitter-sweet reunion with her lover.

Taranis meshed his fingers in her tangled hair as he kissed Sirona. The hot wetness of his mouth increased her need for him, as her pussy grew warm and moist. He continued to kiss her while he cupped her left breast with one large hand, kneading it sensuously through the coarse linen of her tunic. The rough fabric chafed the sensitive tip, making her moan with pleasure. She pressed her fingers against his belly, then slid them beneath his loincloth. Curving her fingers around his cock, she massaged it gently.

‘Slowly,’ he begged. ‘Every touch of your fingertips sends me wilder than the god of war, Mars, in the thick of battle.’

‘Not too slowly,’ she said as she pulled off her filthy tunic.

She wanted him naked also, desperate to enjoy the tactile pleasure of his hot skin pressed close to hers. Unfastening his loincloth, she released his cock. Even though it was too dark for her to see it properly, she knew how beautiful it looked, so magnificently large, rearing stiffly out of its bed of golden hair.

The first time she’d seen his body totally unclothed had been in front of the altar of the goddess Andrasta. They’d made love in the ring of ancient stones, believing that the gift of her virginity would please their goddess of victory. At that moment Sirona had realised how much she loved him and had vowed to be his forever.

Curving her palm around his shaft, she pumped it slowly, feeling his erection grow harder as the moisture between her pussy lips increased. There was a certain kind of raw power in turning him on until he became so desperate to fuck her that he would do anything she wanted. Especially as this magnificent warrior had slain at least two dozen

Roman soldiers in a vain effort to protect her in the final battle before they were captured.

Nevertheless, he was in no mood to be patient today as he grabbed hold of her waist and swung her astride him. As she ground her wet sex against his muscular belly, savouring the slick heat of his skin against her open pussy, she felt the hard line of his cock brush her buttocks. His large hands cupped her breasts, kneading them roughly before his fingers focused on her nipples, pulling and squeezing them until she gasped with pleasure. Then he captured one teat, sucking on it hungrily.

‘Now,’ she gasped.

Sirona barely heard the loud groan uttered by a nearby prisoner and the rattle of his chains as, excited by the sounds of their lovemaking, he began to masturbate vigorously.

Having lifted her high in the air, Taranis eased her backwards until her sex was poised over his groin. He held her there with his strong arms as if she weighed next to nothing, letting the damp tip of his cock-head press erotically against her sex lips. Sirona struggled, giving a soft whimper of frustration, now desperate to fuck him. ‘Please,’ she begged, as he toyed with her senses, holding her tightly, only letting her body move downwards a hair’s breadth at a time.

‘Slowly, my love,’ he whispered. ‘I know how much you want this.’

As he spoke, he eased her down on to him. His thick shaft slid smoothly into her; the hot, hard, delicious length of it invading her cunt, filling her completely. Tightening her inner muscles around him, she started to move, rocking her hips backwards and forwards, lifting her body, and then grinding it hard down against his groin. The weight of his chains fell across her widely spread thighs as his hands slid down to grasp her waist. His fingers dug into her flesh and she leant back, increasing the depth of his penetration,

fucking him in the self-same rhythm as the drumbeat guiding the oarsmen above them.

Sirona felt the pleasurable sensations building inside her, spreading outwards like an all-consuming fire. It didn't matter that it was too dark to see Taranis clearly. In her mind's eye she saw his handsome face - his eyes glazed, his lips curved in a rictus of pleasure as she rode him hard. Her movements gradually became faster and faster until she was no longer in time with the slow thump of the drum, but following the accelerated beating of her own heart.

Taranis muttered her name as his hand moved between her widely spread thighs. He brushed the rough pad of his thumb against her clit and she gasped and jerked in response. He increased the pressure, rubbing harder and the combination of sensations spiralled totally out of control. Her internal muscles contracted around his cock shaft in powerful waves as the orgasm swept through her body.

As the intense sensations died away and the trembling of her limbs ceased, she realised to her surprise that Taranis was still engorged and erect inside her. 'What's wrong?' she whispered.

'Nothing,' he said softly. 'I want to feel your sweet lips sucking me dry.'

Lifting her hips, she let his shaft slide slowly out of her, then she edged backwards, ignoring the splintered, salt-encrusted wood that dug into her knees as she crouched over Taranis. She could smell his arousal as her mouth lovingly nuzzled his groin. She lapped at his swollen prick that was still slick with the juices of her cunt. At first, all she could taste was the musky flavour of her body's leavings. But, as she eased the tip of her tongue into the tiny slit at the top, she detected the familiar saltiness of his pre-come as it seeped from the opening.

'Take it fully into your mouth,' he moaned, as she brushed her lips up and down his veined shaft, then ran her tongue sensuously around the rim of the engorged head.

'Take mine instead,' begged a disembodied voice in the darkness.

'Quiet, Ramus,' Leod, a young warrior she'd known since childhood, shouted. 'Let them have the pleasure of forgetting this hell for a moment.'

Sirona was barely conscious of this brief exchange of words as she concentrated all her attentions on Taranis. She pressed her hand on his belly, feeling his stomach flexing as her lips encircled his cock. The smooth texture of the large glans was arousing and his powerful sex odour filled her nostrils, making her pussy grow hot with need again. She used her tongue, swirling and feathering his tightly stretched flesh as she tried to swallow even more of his huge shaft.

Driven wild with desire, Taranis gave a strangled groan. His cock twitched and Sirona knew he was agonisingly close to coming but she didn't want him to climax just yet. After easing her mouth away from his cock, she gently lifted his scrotum, lapping at it with the tip of her tongue. Taranis gave a strangled groan as she pulled one ball into her mouth, feeling the soft down covering the sac tickle her lips. Curving her tongue round the smooth hard stone, she sucked on it gently.

'Oh, yes,' Taranis gasped.

Ramus, who'd been quiet for a few moments, began to clank his chains agitatedly as he shouted a jealous string of obscenities. This time he was forced into silence by a well-placed kick from the prisoner next to him.

Immune to everything but her lover's imminent pleasure, Sirona played teasingly with his testicles, while she ran her fingers up and down his rampant cock, feeling it twitch excitedly.

'Please now,' Taranis begged. 'Let me come.'

Sirona slid her lips around the thick shaft, swallowing as much of him as she could until she felt his cock-head hit the back of her throat. Suppressing the brief urge to gag, she

sucked greedily on the organ. Her heart was racing now, her body filled with desire for him again. Her nipples contracted into two sharp points and her pussy became even moister as she slid her lips smoothly up and down his cock, squeezing them tight to increase the pressure. Roughly, she scraped a ragged fingernail across the strip of skin between his balls and anus. Taranis grabbed her hair, forcing her down harder on to him as he grunted loudly and bucked his hips. His balls tightened as the hot creamy seed spurted into her mouth. Sirona hungrily swallowed every drop of the life essence of his body until he was totally drained and lay limply beneath her, gasping for breath.

Taranis pulled her body across his so that she was cushioned from the rough planks, which served as their bed. Cradling her in his arms, he whispered tender words of love in her ear assuring her that, even though they might be destined to be parted for a while, the gods would one day allow them to be together again. Sirona rested her head on his broad chest, letting herself believe his reassuring words, feeling exhausted and for a brief moment happily replete.

She drifted off to sleep for a while, for how long she didn't know. She was jerked into wakefulness when the relentless thump of the drum on the oardeck above suddenly ceased. Orders were being shouted to the oarsmen. They were still moving, but very slowly, and waves were slapping loudly against the sides of the vessel. From what she'd heard on previous occasions, she was led to believe that they must be pulling into a harbour again. 'Where do you think we are?' she anxiously asked Taranis.

'Hush.' He eased her sideways, supporting her in the curve of his arm. 'Let's not think of that.'

Sirona's breasts were still a little tender and when his hand moved to gently caress her hot, slippery flesh she gave a soft gasp. At first he concentrated on squeezing and pulling at her teats until her nipples hardened and her breasts ached with pleasure. How easily he could arouse

her, she thought, as moisture pooled stickily between her thighs. Her body felt overripe and still sensitive from their last bout of sex, yet her clit ached to feel the touch of his fingers again.

Slowly, Taranis moved his hand downwards, lovingly stroking her perspiration-covered flesh. His callused fingers brushed the curve of her belly and she moaned and trembled, desperate for them to reach the copper curls covering her pubis. She wanted them to explore the burning valley of her sex, and gently ease their way inside her. Suddenly, he thrust his bunched fingers deep inside her pussy, moving them hard and fast, finger-fucking her with a rough kind of desperation that he had never displayed before. Sirona's breathing grew ragged, as she moved her hips to meet each thrust, and she gave a strangled moan as he rubbed his callused thumb against her clit. The combination of sensations became more intense until she reached the peak, but she was unprepared for the force of her climax as it came; this time the pleasure was even harder and sharper than before.

Sirona blinked, half-blinded by the bright sunshine, as she was led on to the deck of the liburnian. At first, all she could see was a misty haze of azure, ochre and gold, then slowly her surroundings came into focus. They had entered a busy port. On higher ground some distance away was a large fortress city. Sirona had visited a few Roman towns in Brittania but they were far smaller and much less impressive than this place. Even on their long journey through Gaul, which had been ruled by the Romans for many years, she'd seen nothing as imposing.

Beyond and below the protective ramparts, she could see many dwellings, so it was clear that the occupants of the city no longer feared invasion. The wide terraces were covered in palm and Cyprus trees and a number of the villas were very large, obviously the homes of wealthy and

influential citizens. Above the line of flat red roofs she could see a temple with gleaming white pillars, which faced out to sea. In the distance, some way behind the city, was a high mountain. The lower slopes were covered in vegetation but the sharply pointed peak looked grey and forbidding.

There were ships of all shapes and sizes tied up at the dockside and so many people. The port was crowded, as were the roads leading to the city gates. Some travellers were on foot, some on horseback, while others were in carts or ornate chariots.

A small group of citizens had gathered to watch the liburnian dock. With Roman military precision, the long oars were shipped and they glided alongside the wharf. Some of the sailors jumped ashore carrying the thick mooring cables, which were then wound tightly around the huge stone bollards lining the dockside. The cables tightened with a sharp snap and the ship jerked wildly. Sirona might have fallen if one of her soldier escorts hadn't grabbed her arm to steady her.

The vessel came to rest, parallel to the shore, almost motionless now in the still waters of the harbour. The gangplank was laid in place. Immediately, both soldiers took an even firmer hold on Sirona's arms and escorted her down to the dockside.

The two men led her through the small ring of chattering onlookers, who stared at her with evident curiosity, most probably wondering why a pathetic-looking female prisoner needed two soldiers to guard her. However, they did not know that she was an Icene princess, whom Governor Agricola considered his special prize.

Sirona felt weak from a combination of insufficient food and water, the terrible conditions in the hold and a lack of exercise. She had no wish for this escort but she was glad that they were holding on to her so tightly, otherwise she might have stumbled and fallen. It would not be seemly for

the only daughter of King Borus to show weakness of any kind.

It was a hot afternoon, almost as hot out here as it was in the hold, but Sirona still enjoyed the feel of the warm sun on her skin and fresh air at last to fill her lungs. Her first few breaths were fine, as most ports smelt the same. It was a musty mixture of seawater, the caulk used on the vessels and hot stale bodies – all mingled with the exotic odours of the different cargoes from far-flung lands. Then the faint breeze wafted towards her a foul odour of rotting flesh. She swallowed, willing her stomach not to heave in disgust. She was not aware that the smell came from the fish sauce factory close to the docks. Tons of fish-guts were left to decompose in huge vats, ready to be made into Garum, a favourite Roman condiment.

The port of Pompeii was a hub of activity, visited by merchant ships from all corners of the ever-expanding Roman Empire and beyond. Practically anything could be purchased here: spices such as Chinese cinnamon, treasures like Egyptian glass and amber and marble from Greece. There were even animals like wolves and bears from Britannia and leopards and monkeys from Africa.

‘I hear that there are at least thirty brothels in Pompeii.’ The soldier to Sirona’s left addressed his companion. ‘I’ve a mind to try one tonight.’

‘The one off the Via Stabiana, near the baths, is the best,’ the other said with a wide grin, which revealed his lack of four front teeth. ‘Most of the whores there are Orientals and renowned for their exotic foreign tricks.’

Sirona was curious to hear more. What sexual tricks she wondered? Rich and influential Roman citizens had slaves to serve their every whim and lived a life of indolent, sensual luxury, so perhaps there were many erotic pleasures that she knew nothing about. Also she was curious about this city the soldiers had called Pompeii. She knew little of her captors’ homeland, but she had heard tales of the splendour

of Rome. It was said to be a massive, truly awe-inspiring place. Emperor Vespasian resided there and had numerous palaces filled with gold, silver and precious stones. That wasn't surprising, as the Romans had huge armies and were an incredibly rich, powerful and widely feared nation, which had conquered almost a third of the known world and beyond.

She had to admit that Pompeii was an interesting city and, for a moment, fear for her own fate receded a little, as she was overwhelmed by the sights and sounds around her. All the citizens looked prosperous and there was an amazing mass of goods piled outside the many warehouses they walked past.

Her green eyes grew wide with astonishment as she spotted a large cage. Inside was a strange, but truly magnificent animal with golden fur and a thick ruff of darker hair around its neck. The lion paced his cage and gave a loud roar, which made Sirona jump nervously, as her escorts hustled her past the noble creature.

'Wonder how long he'll last in the arena?' the first soldier commented.

'Probably grow fat on Christians and criminals,' his companion joked, as they reached the paved road which led to the city gates.

Further on, to the left of the road, stood a large stone building. It was bigger than the warehouses and had an embellished portico with two stone columns and a large wooden door decorated with thick bronze studs.

One of the soldiers rapped on the door, which was pulled open by a man with skin as black as pitch.

'We come from Captain Cornelius of the warship *Cronus*,' announced her escort.

'You are expected.' The servant's voice was deep and he spoke Latin with a strange accent.

Sirona was hustled inside. Many Roman buildings were constructed around a central open courtyard and had no

windows in their outer walls; this place appeared to be designed in a similar manner. After passing through a small entrance chamber, they entered a large paved area, open to the sky, with a raised platform at the far end. All the Roman-style villas she'd seen in her homeland had statues, fountains and plants decorating the central garden, or peristyle as they called it, but this area was totally bare apart from a pile of low benches stacked in one corner.

An elderly woman hurried forwards. Her grey hair was pulled back in a bun and, although she wore a plain blue tunic, it was made of a fine fabric and she had ornate silver bracelets on both wrists. 'The master has asked me to attend to the girl,' she said, taking the small roll of papyrus one of the soldiers handed to her.

'You're welcome to her,' one of the soldiers said, pushing Sirona forwards. 'She doesn't look much like a princess to me.' He glanced disparagingly at his charge. 'I'd much prefer to fuck one of those oriental whores you mentioned,' he added, turning to grin lewdly at his companion.

Pointedly ignoring his crude words, the woman said in a dismissive tone, 'You may go now. Nubius will show you out.'

She nodded to the black gatekeeper who immediately led the two men towards the door. As they departed, they exchanged very loud, obscene comments about the whorehouse they planned to visit later in the evening.

'Come,' the woman said to Sirona. She didn't respond, staring blankly at her as if she did not understand the simple Latin word, even though she spoke the language fluently. Borus had told her that it was wiser to know one's enemies, but to let them know as little of yourself as possible. When she had been captured by Agricola's men, it had been presumed that, as a barbarian, who had not experienced the benefits of their civilisation, she would not understand their tongue. So she'd let the Romans believe she was just an ignorant savage. She'd continued this subterfuge when she had discovered that her captors often

spoke more freely in front of her, wrongly believing that she could not understand them.

The woman shook her head in irritation. 'This way,' she said in a firm voice, as if talking loudly would help the new arrival understand what she said. She took Sirona's hand and led her hurriedly through the paved courtyard, then turned left through a small archway into another courtyard. This one had a fountain at its centre surrounded by tall statues and pots of brightly coloured flowers. 'You're filthy, you poor thing,' the woman chatted on to herself, as she led Sirona into a tiny cubicle, which contained a narrow cot. The only other furniture was a small side table on which reposed a basin filled with warm scented water.

'You smell like you've been shut in a foul brothel for weeks.' The woman wrinkled her nose in disgust. She picked up a damp sponge and began to vigorously wipe the dirt from Sirona's arms and face. 'You really need a bath but this will have to do. The senator wants to see you right away.' She lifted Sirona's arms, tutting as she saw the cluster of hair in her armpits. 'A heathen through and through,' she muttered to herself, rinsing the sponge out in the basin before energetically washing the offending armpits. 'They should have warned me you would need a change of clothing,' she said anxiously, as she threw the sponge into the basin of, now filthy, water. 'I dare not pause to find one. He will become angry if he has to wait any longer.' She took hold of Sirona's hand, pulling her towards the door again. 'Come,' she said, concern sharpening her tone.

She led Sirona out of the cubicle, whereupon they turned left and entered a larger room, which had elaborately painted walls and, like most Roman houses, was sparingly but elegantly furnished. All Sirona's attention was immediately drawn to a man seated on a chair in the centre of the room. She knew that he was important because he was wearing the purple-bordered toga of a Roman senator. His much younger companion was wearing a short blue

tunic, which told her that he was most probably a slave or a servant.

The senator's cold grey eyes examined her thoughtfully and Sirona repressed an unconscious shiver as a trickle of fear slid down her spine. She couldn't explain her instinctive reaction as his expression wasn't unkind, just thoughtful and there was nothing repellent about him. On the contrary, although he was well into middle age, he was still good-looking. His angular features and long straight, slightly overlarge nose were softened by the short iron-grey hair carefully arranged in curls either side of his face, a style favoured by the late Emperor Nero.

'So this is the barbarian princess.' His tone was harsh. 'Bring her closer.'

The woman led Sirona forwards until she was standing in front of him, barely an arm's breadth away. 'She appears not to understand what I say to her, my lord,' she explained nervously, then she bowed her head fearfully, as if she might be punished for speaking out of turn.

'You may go,' he said and the woman immediately scurried from the room. The man glanced back at his young companion. 'A savage, Tiro. And she stinks,' he added in disgust, as he lifted an ampoule of scented oil to his nose.

'You wanted to see her immediately, Senator,' the young man cautiously reminded him. 'There was no time to have her properly bathed and perfumed.'

Sirona hoped that she was managing to appear quite unafraid as the senator stared at her. He took another sniff of the perfumed ampoule. 'You're from Brittania, Tiro, have you ever taken one of these savages to your bed?'

'No, Senator,' Tiro replied.

The Romans had ruled southern Brittania for over thirty years, but their efforts to conquer the rest of the large island were slow and hampered by resistance from many of the individual Celtic tribes. Governor Agricola had yet to begin his advance further north towards Caledonia.

‘Fucking her might prove interesting,’ the older man said thoughtfully. His narrow lips curved in a cold hard smile that turned Sirona’s blood to water. She had been raised as a warrior, taught to fear nothing, yet all her instincts told her to fear this man. ‘As you can speak her barbarian tongue, you can tell her to take off that filthy rag.’

Fighting the urge to stiffen defensively, Sirona stared blankly at her captor.

‘Remove your tunic, girl.’ Tiro spoke her language haltingly, but well enough for her to understand. ‘You must obey Senator Aulus Vettius at all times.’

‘I’m no girl,’ Sirona spat proudly. ‘I’m Sirona, Princess of the Icene.’

‘The Icene, the Brigantes – all the remnants of the tribes that fought under your father’s command have now surrendered to Governor Agricola,’ Tiro reminded Sirona as he stepped towards her. ‘Rome is now your master as it is mine.’

‘What’s wrong?’ Aulus snapped, clearly irritated by the fact that he could not understand what was being said.

‘Nothing, master,’ Tiro replied rather anxiously in Latin. He tugged at Sirona’s filthy tunic. ‘Take it off now or you’ll be punished.’

‘What are you saying?’ Aulus asked angrily.

‘I told her to strip,’ Tiro nervously explained.

‘Is she stupid?’ Aulus growled. ‘If she doesn’t obey immediately, make her!’

Having no wish to be forcibly stripped, Sirona angrily pulled off her tunic and with a proud toss of her head flung it at the senator’s feet.

‘She has spirit.’ Aulus gave a harsh laugh as he stared at her naked body. ‘Good tits too and nice legs.’

Like most of her tribe Sirona was naturally fair skinned and, since her capture, she’d grown even paler, as she’d barely seen the sunlight. The male prisoners had been forced to march across Gaul, but she’d been almost

permanently confined in the baggage wagon. She was unaware that her ivory skin would be envied by most Roman women who plastered their faces with creams containing white lead to lighten their sallow complexions.

‘Her hair colour is unusual.’ Aulus wasn’t looking at her hair, which, when clean, was the colour of burnished copper, he was staring at her pubes.

‘All shades of red hair are common in her land,’ Tiro told his master.

‘Then we should import more female slaves from Brittania – the brothels here need to provide more variety.’ Aulus pointed at her groin, curling his lips in disgust. ‘The body hair is quite offensive, is it not?’

Aulus had all his body hair removed by regular plucking, an uncomfortable procedure considered a necessity by most high-ranking citizens.

‘That is no problem,’ Tiro said quickly. ‘I’ll have her sent to the Venus baths with the other female slaves.’

‘No.’ Aulus shook his head. ‘She’ll use my household baths. I’ve no wish for anyone to lay eyes on her just yet. Bring her nearer, so that I can examine her more closely.’

Tiro pushed Sirona forwards until she was close enough to the senator to smell the rose oil that scented his skin, and see the pulse beating in his neck. She wished she was holding the bone-handled knife her father had given her when she reached womanhood, then she could have leant forwards and slit his throat. However, she could do nothing and she was forced to endure his long fingers probing and pinching her flesh. She tried not to flinch as he touched her breasts, pulled at her nipples and then stroked her flat belly.

‘Too muscular for a woman – but then she is a barbarian.’ He pushed his fingers between her thighs.

Tiro stared at Sirona as if he felt some kinship for her and pitied her plight. They were both from Brittania but there the likeness ended. To her, he was as much a Roman as this vile senator, Aulus Vettius, was. ‘I think that a well-schooled

whore would prove to be far more enjoyable for you, master,' he said cautiously.

'Whorish tricks bore me, as do the simpering attentions of sex-starved Roman matrons,' Aulus snapped, cruelly thrusting his finger inside Sirona.

She tensed and bit her lip. The brutal probing was both painful and demeaning. Yet, suddenly and ashamedly, she felt another darker emotion arise within her, almost akin to sexual arousal, an incomprehensible reaction she could not even begin to explain, especially when the only man that had ever touched her so intimately before was Taranis.

'She's barely moist.' Aulus removed his finger and delicately sniffed it. 'Yet she stinks of sex.'

'That's unlikely,' Tiro quickly replied. 'The captain of the *Cronus* had orders to keep her confined apart from the other prisoners.'

'Do you think Captain Cornelius fucked her?' Aulus grinned. 'I confess I would be surprised as he's said to be only interested in young boys.'

Tiro glanced at the papyrus the soldiers had delivered, which Aulus had left unrolled on a nearby table. 'I would not think he would dare to. It is written here that Governor Agricola issued specific orders to deliver her here untouched and unharmed.'

'She must be at least nineteen or twenty,' Aulus commented thoughtfully, as he continued to run his hands over Sirona's body. 'So I doubt she'll be a virgin . . . more's the pity.' He pinched and squeezed her buttocks, feeling them tense at his touch. 'I've a mind to test her skill.' Aulus looked at Tiro. 'Tell her to kneel and pleasure me. Even a barbarian should know how to do that.'

Sirona had to force herself not to react with horror to his words, as Tiro stepped behind her and placed a firm hand on each of her shoulders. 'Kneel and take my master's cock in your mouth,' he ordered curtly. 'He desires you to pleasure him.'