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Rosanna Micelotta Battigelli

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Advice from a *Brigantessa*¹

Rosanna Micelotta Battigelli

Gabriella Falcone stretches her legs tentatively on the pallet. The discomfort has subsided from her calf wound. Her finger is still tender, but she decides to remove the linen cloth binding it to let it breathe. The worst ache, though, is one she can never imagine subsiding, the ache of sadness and longing. *Papà. Luciano. Tonino.* At least Luciano is in a safe place, cared for by the nuns. *Papà* is gone forever. *Had she even embraced him before he left for the fields that morning? Shown him, at least, how much he meant to her?* He was not a man to be free with his words of affection, but Gabriella and Luciano had always sensed his devotion. He was like the craggy limestone hills around Camini—hard, weather-beaten, marked with the shadows of a hard life, but with a face and eyes that reflected his love, as the white rock-faces reflected the rays of the sun.

Thinking about Tonino only causes her despair. She can hardly bear to think about the feel of his lips on hers, the way his strong arms embraced her by the oleanders, the heady perfume of their pink blossoms gently washing over them by the river. Gabriella does not even attempt to console herself. *With what? The hope that he will still be alive when—if—she ever returns to Camini? Why would God grant her this favour, this act of mercy?*

There is little mercy in this world, she thinks bitterly, rising from the pallet. At least for the Falcone family. She feels her stomach contract. How long had she gone without food? She declined the portion of goat offered to her last night around the fire. The brigand Gaetano had cooked it over kindling gathered from juniper shrubs; she heard him explain to Don Simone that it made the meat sweet and spicy.

Gabriella was acutely aware of the brigand chief across from her. Stefano Galante's expression was unfathomable, his dark eyes reflecting the light from the fire. But she could not bring herself to taste anything that had been killed at the hands of Roberto, and when he appeared with the other brigands after Gaetano had finished roasting it, she murmured to Don Simone that her stomach was unsettled and that she just wanted to rest. He insisted she take a wedge of the coarse, dark bread with her, and she complied before retreating, aware of Galante's dark eyes following her up to the hut. She lay down on her pallet without touching the bread.

It is still where she left it, on top of her skirts at the foot of the pallet, a fly working industriously on one corner.

She stiffens at the sound of footsteps outside the tent.

"Signorina?"

¹ Excerpt from the novel *La Brigantessa* (Toronto: Inanna Publications, 2018).

Dorotea. Gabriella pushes aside the curtain and steps out. She squints at the brightness. She must have slept much longer than usual. The brigandess is holding out a bundle containing a wedge of cheese, flat bread, and several black figs. "The chief said you needed to eat; you must maintain your strength. I brought back a good supply."

Gabriella's insides contract again and she relents, nodding. She sees Dorotea's face relax in approval. Gabriella walks over and sits on one of the stumps, and when the brigandess follows her, Gabriella tilts her head questioningly.

"The Chief wants me to reassure you that you are in no present danger," Dorotea says, one corner of her mouth twitching as if undecided whether to stretch itself into a smile. Gabriella notices something flash as Dorotea gestures, and when her hands become still, Gabriella sees that it is a gold ring with a red stone. When the brigandess sits down on a stump opposite Gabriella, a glint by her boot reveals a polished dagger.

"A brigandess is especially vulnerable," Dorotea says huskily, catching her gaze. "She has to learn to protect herself without depending on the help of her fellow brigands. Or brigand chief."

Gabriella doesn't know what to say. She tentatively bites into the bread and chews it slowly, looking at the ground.

"You'll come to no harm here." Dorotea's voice has softened, and Gabriella looks up to meet her gaze, wondering what severe circumstances induced her to go into hiding. To become a *brigantessa*. Dorotea's eyes are strangely compelling—pools of silver-green with a speck of black for a pupil. Shadowed arcs hang below them like half-moons. Her shirt and trousers conceal any trace of womanliness, and with a grey bandana drawing back most of her hair, whoever encounters her for the first time is sure to mistake her for a man. She is all sharp angles, no tender jaw line, no shapely lips, no swell of a bosom.

Dorotea's eyes narrow. "The Chief has made it clear to us that you and Don Simone are to be protected at all costs. He has asked me to be your guardian."

"Guardian?" Gabriella murmurs. "Don Simone—"

"You need more than the protection of a priest here." Dorotea's mouth twists into a grim line. "Prayers aren't quite enough to keep the lawmen away. Or brigands from other bands." She slides her hand down one trousered leg until it clasps the alabaster handle of the dagger. "And you can't always know whom to trust." She releases the handle and leans closer toward Gabriella. "You can trust *me*, signorina." Her eyes flicker. "You will be safe with me."

A bird call makes her turn sharply toward the entry into the clearing. "That is Tomaso's signal," she says, rising. "He has seen something from his lookout or heard some news from one of the goatherds in the area. I must go." She begins to walk away, then turns to Gabriella.

"Forget who you were or where you came from," she advises gruffly. "You're a *brigantessa* now. You're going to have to learn to live like one. *If you want to survive.*"