

Because of Mari



NIGHT OWL ROMANCE
FREE READ



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By

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Title: Because of Mari

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Mari was a warrior and wanted to prove it. She sat upon her horse with her oak and elder shield within easy reach, as well as her sword and scabbard. Her long red braid brushed her blade, which rested at her side. One couldn't be too careful, not with the possibility of running into Roman soldiers.

"They can't be trusted." She urged her horse toward her tribal home in the east of England.

Her thoughts streamed continuously as she crossed over green territory ripe with summer's full life. Scents of the earth perfumed the crisp air. *Plenty of the Celtic people accept the forced alliance with Rome. My own father is a client-king to Rome, trading farming goods for luxurious products such as silk and jewels or fine Roman wine. 'Tis not worth it. I feel in my bones we will be betrayed, the alliance meaning nothing.*

She would continue to try to convince her father to lead a rebellion against them, knowing they could coax neighboring Celtic tribes around the nation to join and fight to regain their independence.

A frustrated sigh fell from her lips. Darkness descended upon her, and she made camp on the hard ground. Under animal wraps near the flickering flames of a small fire, she slept fitfully and dreamed of that awful day.

In her long gown, flowers in her hair and musicians ready to play into the night around a cheerful fire of celebration, she waited for her man. Prince Caedmon never showed up. Her father, the king, in his flowing robes, sent an envoy to the neighboring kingdom. The young man returned with the message that the wedding was called off. Mari's warrior brother picked up his sword and shield and mounted his horse, preparing to exact revenge.

Their father wouldn't have it. "No, son. Celtic tribes should not divide at this time while the Romans occupy our land."

Mari looked her brother straight in the face. He gripped his sword hilt, and the roaring fire behind him cast waves of yellow over his leather tunic.

"I swear I will change Caedmon's mind," Mari announced. "I swear by the power of the Druids that my prince will be my husband and ride by my side to dispel Rome."

Her father, the king of his tribe and a peace-loving man, looked at his daughter with a frown on his face. "I see rebellion in your eyes, Mari."

Her hands rested in fists at her sides, itching to swing a sword and bring the Roman governor to his knees.

"Do not children ever listen to their parents? I have two very stubborn offspring," the king said, without reproach in his voice. Mari heard sad love.

Mari awoke and brought down a wild rabbit with her bow and arrow. She skinned it, gutted it, and cooked it on a spit, and then enjoyed the roasted taste. Back on her mount afterwards, she made her way back home. She entered the tribal settlement and went into her roundhouse. The earthy floors added a bit of coolness as a relief to the hot summer sun that blazed outside. Animal furs decorated her family home. She barely noticed the bronze carvings that her grandparents had provided, and she went to the center of her home. Her parents stood near the fire. The evening meal sizzled, scenting

the air with smoking meat. Mari's eyes were drawn upward to the hole, which guided the smoke out. The hazy grayness shielded her eyes from the white light of the sun.

"Father, Mother, I am back, but just for a moment."

"Welcome home, Mari," her mother said, a woman with the same copper hair as she.

"Yes, welcome, child," Mari's father added.

They were dressed in light, short, wool clothing dyed bright red and blue. Bronze strips and leather added embellishment. They looked at her dressed in a warrior's clothes, the breeches of a man.

"I am going out again to our sister kingdom to speak to Caedmon."

"You're wasting your time," the king said. "The prince left you at the altar."

Mari's mother nodded, gazing down with slumped shoulders.

"I want to win him back and convince him to join our kingdom against Rome."

"If I can't change your mind, Mari, then at least put on a...lady's attire," her father said.

"I will take your advice. Thank you," she said.

Her father grinned. "That is wise. You will not win your prince's heart back wearing that."

"We wish you well, child," her mother said.

Mari hugged her parents then walked to her bed and pulled a wooden box out from beside it. She withdrew a long, woolen gown dyed red. Light irritation whirled in her mind. *These silly garments get in the way when wielding a sword!* She changed then approached her parents. Her mother touched her shoulder in concern.

Mari touched her mother's hand. "Do not worry."

She hugged her again and walked out into the shadows of approaching dusk, cursing inwardly at the long walk ahead. *Damn gowns don't allow for comfort on a horse!* At least her sword could be strapped on.

Hours later, she crossed the threshold of the neighboring kingdom.

The village slept—the quiet of night a soothing thing for her soul. She sneaked into Prince Caedmon's home, knowing he currently resided alone. She knew his parents were traveling with his younger siblings. Caedmon lay asleep on his bed, and she set her torch in a wall sconce right near his bed. She put cold steel under his chin, and he opened his eyes.

He blinked, as if adjusting to the low light and the wavering flames. "Mari."

"Get up."

He nodded. She retracted the sword a few inches. He pushed himself up with his hands.

Her heart pounded in her chest as she looked at the strong warrior, his blond hair with braids at the sides, and his piercing green eyes watching her with amazement as the flames of the torch made them gleam.

"Why did you do it, Caedmon? You swore you loved me, that you would love me until the day you died."

"Mari, put that sword away."

She pressed the tip against his muscular chest. "Answer me. I'm dying to kill you."

"Are your tribesmen here, waiting outside?"

“I don’t need them for this.”

“I’m sorry, Mari.”

“But why? I want to know.”

“I don’t love you anymore.”

Anger pulsed in her blood, bringing it to boil. She stared him down. Something in the depths of his emerald eyes shifted, as if he were lying to her.

Her heart leapt with hope. *Perhaps there was more to the story?*

“You’re coming with me, Caedmon.”

“What? Where?”

“To fall in love again.”

Confusion clearly defined his features now and narrowed his brow.

“Rouse yourself and dress. And don’t even think about yelling to your guards. If they knew that you had betrayed your kingdom to the Roman Procurator, they would have your whole family killed.”

“Do not make such accusations, woman! We are clients to the Romans and nothing more.”

“You have betrayed the Celtic people to them in a much deeper way. I know. I was going to marry you, remember? On the night you pledged yourself on sacred Druid land to love me forever, I saw it.”

“You saw what, Mari?”

“The bronze Roman infantry helmet, shield and sword, and I know you didn’t get those by killing a Roman soldier. They were given to you as a trade for secrets betraying your people. Is that why you left me? Are you now promised to some Roman concubine?”

“You will shut up now!”

“Do not speak to a princess this way! I could…”

“You could what?”

She wagged her weapon in front of him. He leaned back.

“Come with me, or feel my sword,” she said with a sneer.

“You feel I betrayed the Celtic people. Why go through this trouble?”

“You’ll find out.”

“I concede, for now. Permit me to dress.” He glanced at the blade.

She nodded and waited in silence as he dressed for the night.

“Bring a small bag of your belongings.”

He sighed. “Mari—”

“Do it!”

He swiped up some articles from a wooden box. She tipped her head toward his window, and they slipped out.

She led him by sword point into the forest. A full moon hung in the sky.

“Where are we going?”

“To a shelter.”

“Ah. This could be enjoyable,” he said.

Their feet cracked branches resting on the ground as they made their way through tall trees and up to a small cottage.

“Go inside. You will not leave this cottage untransformed.”

“I beg to differ, Mari. *I* am the man here. My pride will never allow this. You will leave here the transformed one, swearing your loyalty to Rome and as my concubine if I should wish it,” he spat out. “I accept your challenge.”

Her lips turned up at one corner. He amused her. “We shall see who will be the victor.”

One morning, two months later, they walked out of the shelter hand-in-hand. She leaned against his shoulder and sighed. “My love.”

“My beautiful Mari.”

He brought her hand to his lips. “How a fierce warrior such as you seduced me should never get out, you understand me, right?”

She grinned. “I swear on my honor as princess of my kingdom and now yours that I won’t say a word how I did it, husband.”

“I’m a king now. Thanks to your envoy, I know of my father’s passing. We must get back and prepare for the rebellion.”

“I will raze Londinium to the ground as you take care of one or two other cities.”

“Oh, Mari. You were right about the Romans. And me. I was wrong. You made me see reason. You promised not to tell anyone of my foolishness. But now, I insist that you stay out of the rebellion.”

“Why?”

“Because you could be killed.”

“I’m a brilliant strategist, and you know it! I will bring victory to the Celtic tribes.” She looked into his eyes searching his response and saw sadness.

“Yes, I know,” he muttered.

They argued for a few minutes. A Roman soldier approached them, and Mari frowned when she noted the smile on her husband’s face. Cold dread seeped to her core.

Her thoughts raced with abandon. *Was Caedmon the one to have conquered me? Did he pretend to succumb to my love, marry me, expressing his undying love in order to bring me to heel because he knew I could lead such a powerful rebellion as to drive the Romans out of Celtic territory?*

She imagined the gaze of love he gave her on their wedding day. He looked into her soul and swore eternal loyalty and devotion.

Now he greeted the Roman...Oh no, he was a commander. Her heart pounded, and nausea turned her stomach.

Caedmon pulled his sword out of his scabbard. Was he going to kill her now? Or—a spark of hope dashed across her heart—was the Roman commander turning against his people and came here to speak with Caedmon about that?

Mari gave her husband her strict attention. Had he coaxed this Roman into joining them? She touched Caedmon’s arm. He turned and looked into her eyes. Love rushed her.

“Caedmon...”

“Mari, we need to talk.” He looked at the Roman and lowered his sword, tipping his head.

She swallowed past the lump in her throat and forced a smile on her face. She ran her arm down her husband's arm. "Love, I'm a bit tired. Might I rest first? Tell me a little later about your news."

His tipped his head in agreement and placed a soft kiss on her lips. As she headed back toward the cottage, she crinkled her brow. *There was authentic love in that kiss.* She shook off her confusion and went around to the back of the small dwelling. She untied the horse and jumped up onto it then guided it to the clearing behind the cottage. Once there, she urged the horse forward and raced like the wind to her kingdom.

Later that night, she arrived at her father's home, breathless.

The king approached her with anxiety in his face. "Mari?"

"Father, we have been betrayed. Prepare for battle."

"Are you sure?"

She breathed in rapid breaths, nodding frantically. "Yes."

"I have three other kings here from neighboring areas, visiting. I will get things started. I do believe in you, daughter. I don't like to fight, but if we have been betrayed..."

"We have."

"All right." He raced away.

She darted off and met soldiers preparing for battle. They marched westward in order to meet the Roman legions that Mari knew in her gut would be approaching. Sure enough, they came in from the distance. She cringed in anger, in disgust. She rode ahead of her tribesmen and greeted a single man on his horse.

Her husband.

She looked at him as if he were evil incarnate.

"Mari," he reached his hand out to touch her.

She shrieked back. "Dare to do that again, and I will slice your hand off."

Sadness washed over his face. "Mari, I was so worried. You disappeared."

She spit at him.

"Mari! You are my wife!"

"I renounce you, traitor!"

"Traitor? Mari, what are you talking about?"

"The Roman soldier who came to our cottage."

"What about him? We are not currently engaged in battle with the Romans. We planned a rebellion together. I have a plan."

"What were you doing? Planning to turn us over, to put us further under their oppression?"

"Mari, please!"

She slid her sword out of its sheathe. "Fight, traitor!"

He raised his shield and caught the blade with a loud thump over its leather covering. "Stop, I love you!"

"You are a liar."

"No, I swear it."

"There is a Roman legion behind you."

He sighed. "Yes, but like your father, I believe that sometimes we must do things that we don't agree fully with."

"So you admit your treason, your lies!"

“That’s not why they are here.”

“But you’re here together.”

“Yes.”

She swung at him. “I should have killed you two months ago. You dishonored me when you left me at the altar.”

“I deeply regret that.”

“You disgust me with your continued habit of lying.”

She swung at him. He swooped back and fell off his horse. She jumped down and engaged him on the ground. He ducked and turned and avoided her blade. Finally she managed to press the tip against his neck. To her dismay, tears ran down her cheeks.

“Now I have to kill you, for the honor of my people.”

“The Romans will attack if you do this.”

“My people are prepared to fight. Seeing their princess take down a traitor to the Celtic people will inspire them. You come with the Romans.”

“Yes.”

“That legion behind you...” She glanced to the ground then back at him, agony in her heart. “...to bring us to our knees. I hurt your pride, didn’t I, by taking you? You planned this all along as revenge.”

“Kill me, and you will never know. Do you want to know if I really love you, Mari? Or perhaps the Romans promised to secure my throne permanently if I gave them my cooperation.”

“I knew it!”

“Oh Mari, you can’t believe that. I’m in love with you. Let me prove it. Let me get my sword, or you will never know.”

You might kill me the moment it’s in your hand, but what if...what if you really love me? What should I do?

She gazed into his eyes. *I must know.*

She nodded. He walked over to his horse and grabbed the sword on its back. He approached her, and she trembled, anticipating her future.

“Mari.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, so much.”

She swung her sword in an arc and stopped short of his neck. “Make your move. Just...tell me the truth.”

He stepped back. She let her arm down. He swung at her and pressed his blade to her neck. Tears ran down her cheeks.

“I could get out of this, you know, and kill you, husband.”

He smiled. “Perhaps.”

“The Romans are watching. Are you a proud Celtic king or a Roman dog? Show us all.”

“I am a king, and I intend to stay that way. I also intend to have an heir.”

“I will never allow myself to be taken prisoner.”

“Hmm.” He grinned. “Come with me, wife.” He pulled her into a deep kiss.

Even as tears ran down her cheeks she lifted her hands and pulled away. “Never.”

With her other hand, she raised her sword. He lifted his as well, pulled away from her, and drove his sword into her side.

He cursed asking “Why?”

The lovely, older woman cuddled her young granddaughter in her lap, whom she was raising, recalling the story of the day their eastern Briton tribe defeated the Roman legion.

“Grandmother, finish your story. What happened?”

She smiled. “We won that battle.”

“I know. Why?”

“Because of Princess, or should I say, Queen Mari.”

“Did she kill King Caedmon?”

“No. He was faster. His blade struck her first.”

The little girl frowned deeply. “But Grandmother...”

“Caedmon had arrived on that field with a legion, yes, but in peace. He had convinced a certain Roman commander to join forces with the Celtic people. They were supposed to fight alongside our tribes.”

“Poor Queen Mari.”

“When she fell, her people charged the field with such ferocity that hardly a Roman was left standing. The other Romans, far away that day, heard of this battle and left the region alone since then. Hopefully, someday they will be gone forever. Seeing Mari lying on the ground, struck down, caused the tribes to go home and double the strength of their fighting force. Mari’s husband disappeared, and Mari’s body became missing.”

“What a sad story. Her husband didn’t really love her.”

“I’m not finished yet.”

“Good.”

“It turned out that Mari’s husband was true to her. He brought the legion of Romans behind him to join with her people. However, a survivor from the battle admitted that the Romans were planning on betraying him. The Romans really were there to kill every Briton standing on that field, without Caedmon’s knowledge.”

“And?”

“I found out later that Caedmon pulled Mari into hiding during the heat of the fighting. He took her to a secret place and nursed her back to health. Their people believed them to be dead but used their memory as a source of inspiration to their Celtic pride.”

“Did she hate him for stabbing her?”

“At first. Then he changed her mind and made his stubborn woman see reason. He gave up his throne for her. They lived a quiet, happy life in seclusion.”

“Like us.”

“Yes. When you were born, your parents begged me to take you out of the area until things became safer. We can stop our traveling and go back home.”

The little girl sat up straighter and touched her grandmother’s silver-streaked red braid. “Grandmother? I’m going to meet my parents?” She smiled.

“Oh, yes, child. The time is right. They love you, you know.” She paused in thought then tickled the girl.

The little one laughed. When settled down, her grandmother gazed at her granddaughter with love. “Mari got her wish for her people to go against the Romans.”

She's a headstrong woman who sometimes acted stupidly and foolishly, but she always meant well, and one always knew where one stood with her."

"How do you know what happened to her and Caedmon, Grandmother?

Everyone thinks they both died that day during the battle, and that the Romans stole their bodies."

"Mari is my daughter. You are a princess."

She gasped. "Caedmon, er, my father, wanted to be a king."

"Yes. Which, do you think brings more power to their people? Which would be more helpful, their memory, or if your father went back and reclaimed his throne? What do you believe, little one?"

"I think they should claim their thrones."

"So do I. Let's go find them."

"Will they do it?"

She smiled. "I know my daughter. Of course!"