

BOOK TWO OF THE AGRICOLA SERIES

# RED FURY RAGE



J. F. RIDGLEY

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*Book two of the Agricola series*

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*Red Fury Rage*

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*DEDICATION TO*

*Joe & God*

*My best friend who helped me dream this dream*

*RAGE:*

*noun: violent uncontrollable anger: angry  
fury, violent anger, a speech full of rage*

*Verb: feel or express violent uncontrollable anger*

GNAEUS JULIUS LUCI  
FILIUS ANIENSIS  
AGRICOLA FORO JULII

*Family*

**Julius**—father—Gnaeus (pronounced **ni-us**)

Lucius Agricola

Personal slaves Lugh—Irish redhead; Akim—Ephesian

Procillius **Valerius**—50—uncle, brother to Procilla,  
centurion

**Procilla** Valeria—39—Julius' mother

Door/master slaves: Milo—townhouse; Balor—villa

**Domitia** Decidiana—18—Julius' wife, daughter to  
Decidianus and Carnalia

Personal slaves: Excelia—the old crone; Zuri—  
African girl.

'Baby' **Gnaeus**—son with Domitia

**Julia** Agricola—2 daughter

Marcia—Julia's personal slave

**Rhianna**—Julius' past love, daughter of Boudica

**Gnaeus**—son with Rhianna (Colin)

*Senators (ages approx.)*

**Suetonius** Paulinus–50–senator, consul in Britannia,  
Gaius Plinius Secundus (**Pliny** the elder)–45 senator  
and friend

**Verginius** Rufus–47 friend, guardian Pliny the younger 1

**Titianus** Otho–40 consul in Ephesus

Cocceia–wife to Titianus Otho/sister to Nerva

**Otho**–32–Brother to Titianus Otho

Poppaea-ex-wife (later mistress/wife of Nero)

**Nerva**–32–friend, guardian of Trajan

Epicharis–lover and spy

**Trajan**–18–Domitian's friend

**Mucianus**–45–Consul of Syria

**Petillius** Cerialis–28–senator, Domitia's lover, future  
son-in-law to Vespasian

**Nero**–28–emperor of Rome

*Flavians (ages approx.)*

**Sabinus**–56–senator and friend

Plautilla–wife, daughter–Plautilla the younger

**Vespasian**–53 Friend, consul in Jerusalem

**Titus**–22–friend, senator, legate in Jerusalem

**Domitillia**–17–daughter, betrothed to Petillius Cerialis

**Domitian**–12

*Christians (ages approx.)*

**Mary**–60–mother of Jesus

**Paul**–55

**Peter**–60

**Mark**–57

**Luke**–72

**Timothy**–43

**Basilissa**–45–Roman domina, owns villa near Julius’

Baskus–roman soldier, guard at Jesus’ tomb

Murio–roman soldier, guard in Jerusalem

**Anastasia**–40–Roman domina friend of Basilissa



**CALGACUS AP DIRAS OF  
THE TRINOVANTE**

**Calgacus** (pronounced calg-ac-os), Son of Diras

**Rhianna**–beloved wife

**Colin** ap Calgacus–son with Rhianna

Roi–black and tan dog

*Boresti tribe*

**Alaric** ap Marget–chief of Boresti

Deira–Alaric’s woman

Stephan–12 son

**Kenna**–albino girl, sister to the High Druid **Kyain**

**Carnac** ap Carrie–friend and first warrior



**Boru**—warrior

**Dougal**—warrior

**Athaine**—warrior chariot driver

*Boresti red-haired sisters*

**Brigh**—oldest sister, Calgacus' woman

**Sheil**—daughter

**Cyan**—son

**Innen**—baby son by Calgacus

**Binn**—healer, Boru's woman

**Gwinear**—youngest sister, Athaine's woman

**Aiofe**—(pronounced ee-fah) warriorress, Carnac's woman

*Taexali tribe*

**Drust**—first leader of Taexali

**Morag**—rust's half-brother

**Moyna**—crone mother of Drust/Morag

**Cormag**—second leader of the Taexali

## CHAPTER 1

**S**QUAWKING SEAGULLS CIRCLED in the blue sky as the Roman galley tugged for its freedom in the restless water of Porta Liguria pier. Slaves piled cargo boxes on the deck while sailors finished securing the galley to its moorings.

Standing on the deck, observing everything before him, Julius inhaled the familiar, rain-washed fragrances from the nearby Maritime mountains, the sea, and all that had once been his home. His face snarled with disgust.

Nearly two years ago, he had been ordered to Britannia and had been one of those polished tribunes parading on the pier among the citizens clustered in groups, waiting for someone to arrive or to weep their good-byes. That was when Rome held his heart and loyalty. No longer. Not after the Consul Suetonius refused his request to bring Rhianna and Gnaeus back with him.

His Uncle Valerius' threat over that issue still echoed in his brain, "You will do as ordered and return to Rome even if I have to send you back like a slave." Julius' wrists, raw from the slave manacles that had cut into his flesh and soul, had proved his uncle's words. This last month at

sea had seemed endless after his uncle had knocked him unconscious, leaving him chained to the bunk inside the galley. Vomiting, dizziness, and pain had frothed in his skull for an eternity.

Each time the galley pulled into a port, his uncle's appointed guards had bolted his cabin door, confining him like an animal until the galley left the next day. Only when the shore was out of sight was he freed from his entrapment to walk the deck with the guards trailing him like dogs.

Britannia had become the land he loved with his heart and soul now. This was where Rhianna and his son lived—without him—because Rome had forced him to leave them.

Now, that same loyal Roman citizen standing there, looking at his past, was dead.

Lugh, his personal slave, had kept him from throwing every piece of his Roman life overboard, including himself. Meanwhile, the wiry, redhead had taught him the language of Rhianna's people—Iceni, a necessity when they returned to Britannia. That promise and the images of the woman he loved more than life as well as memories of his son had kept him alive.

Rhianna's pendant of a horse that represented the Iceni tribe shifted across his chest, bringing the ever-present memory of her sliding its chain over his head, whispering, *"As long as you wear this, my soul will be yours."*

"It will never leave me, my love," he whispered. His hand, scarred by vows to Venus, lifted her pendant to his lips as if to seal the promise once again.

Lugh pointed over the railing to the approaching pier where a regal woman searched the galley deck from her cart.

“I’m believin’ your mother be searchin’ for the likes of her son,” Lugh said.

Procilla Valeria finally located him on the galley. Her hand lifted to her mouth in shock at seeing her son wearing a filthy tunic, a ragged beard, and shaggy hair spreading across his shoulders. *No, Mother, I am no longer that polished tribune you sent away.*

All of his life, this woman had managed to see that he remained dedicated to Rome and the expectations demanded of all Roman sons: to honor his father’s house in all things; to add strength and might to Rome; and to respect the Roman gods that ruled the world. But all of her efforts were now dead to him.

Now, his only focus was to sell the villa and anything else so he could return to Britannia. This time, no one was stopping him. Not Rome. Not his mother. Not his uncle. Not Suetonius. No one.

Yelling broke Julius’ attention. The galley’s gangplank was now secured to the pier. He rushed to escape what had been his floating prison. The instant his feet found hard surface, he stumbled. Lugh caught his arm. “Dominus?”

He jerked from his slave’s touch. He was not a cripple. He could walk. After a few tentative steps, the ground finally steadied beneath him. The crowd parted to retreat from his stench of vomit, filth, and unwashed body. The mere sight of his mother racing toward him turned his insides as cold as the marble statues along the pier. Her radiant smile faded to concern as she reached to enfold him. “Julius, what—!”

He stepped back from her touch. “Mother.”

She halted under his unwelcoming snarl, her arms dropping to her sides. “Bona Dea, Julius! You smell worse

than the sewer rats in Rome.” Straightening, his mother regained her regal composure and covered her nose with a scented cloth. “Why has your slave allowed you to appear like this?” She glared at Lugh.

“Because I no longer care what Rome thinks, Mother.” Latin felt foreign—another separation from his old life. Julius smiled. That emotion also seemed foreign.

Quickly scanning anyone close enough to hear his blasphemy, his mother dropped her voice to a warning. “What has come over you Gnaeus Julius Agricola?”

*His son’s name!* Spoken in such a bitter tone cut every nerve in Julius’ body. “Nothing, Mother. Absolutely nothing.” He started toward the villa that was to give him his freedom.

His mother hurried beside him. “Julius, ride with me. You are in no—”

“I will walk.”

“Julius. Obviously, you are not strong enough.”

“Domina,” Lugh cautioned, “I be awarnin’ ya this isna the man you left in Britannia. He be a tortured soul, ifn’ there ever be one. Had his heart torn out by your brother. Something that shouldna happen to any man.”

Snarling at the interruption, his mother turned on Lugh. “How dare you speak to me, slave.”

Ignoring their heated argument, Julius passed the long familiar sights that he had wanted to show Rhianna. No place in Britannia could ever have such sun-filled plazas crowded with merchants selling everything she could ever want. Food she had never tasted. Wine she had never drunk. Cloth she had never caressed. Aromas she could never imagine. None of it would be enjoyed until Rhianna was by his side again.

Slowly, the noise of the city of Cemenelum evaporated to the peaceful sounds of rustling fields and thick groves of olive trees that stretched over the rolling hillsides bordering the road he walked. Small pebbles of gravel crunched beneath his feet. Fragrant fall breezes swept his path rising gently upward to the distant ridge of the Maritime mountains.

Once, he had loved the essence of everything around him, drank it in like a drunk man. Now, his soul longed for Rhianna's scent of violet flowers, her verdant green hills, Britannia's vibrant weather changes, and its cleansing rains that came unannounced.

Tears blurred his steps as the images of Rhianna floated to him. He longed for her to be walking beside him. Oh, to smell her fragrance and hear her voice or the soft whisper of her sleep beside him again. He wanted to hear the lilting sound of her laughter, the cry of his son. Most of all he wanted the contentment that had consumed them. He let his tears run their course, unhindered.

His mother's mule snorted behind him as her driver drove the cart in the growing afternoon shadows. "Julius. Julius, stop. I have something for you." She climbed from the cart and hurried toward him with a letter. "I . . . I think it best you should read it before we get home."

Was this the divorce papers that he had expected from Domitia's father? Or was this another plot, like the one his mother had devised to bring Domitia to Camulodunum.

He would never forgive his mother for that, because his entire life completely altered because of her. Calgacus had kidnapped Rhianna from him in an attack that had almost killed him. He had been left too weak to refuse his

mother's design to, finally, get him married to his betrothed —Domitia Decidiana.

“It is from Marcus,” his mother whispered.

*Marcus?* A letter from his life-long friend still in Britannia? Had he found Rhianna and Gnaeus? Hope swelled in Julius' heart until he noted that the seal on the letter was broken. Obviously, his mother had read it. Suppressing the rush of fury, Julius leaned against a nearby Roman mile marker set by a wooden fence to read.

*From: Marcus Ciprianus Equitus*

*To: Gnaeus Julius Agricola*

*Julius, I pray this finds you safely home. I know you are still angry, as you have the right to be. Rest assured everyone is searching for Gnaeus.*

What about Rhianna? Julius' heart silenced in his chest.

*Julius, I am sorry. Rhianna is dead. We found her buried near a stream. But only her. Therefore, Gnaeus must be alive. When we find him, I will personally bring your son to you. This I promise as a true friend.*

That was not Rhianna! She has to be alive. She is his life. He needs her. She cannot be dead! His brain spun. He stumbled and fell to the gravel road. Marcus has to be wrong!

A gentle hand rested delicately on his shoulder. His mother's touch. “Julius. I am sorry.”

How could his mother be sorry, since she detested the idea of a Britanni daughter? To her, Rhianna brought nothing to his father's house but disgrace. However, Domitia

Decidiana had brought everything—influence and money that would see him elected to the Senate, like his father.

“You did this,” he growled as he threw the letter at her.

She bent to pick it up. “No. Julius, I had nothing to do with . . .”

Lugh snatched it from her hand and began reading. “Gods of the earth and sky, this canna be true.”

Once again, ignoring his mother’s wrath unloading on Lugh, Julius continued down the gutted road staggering like a drunk, forcing his legs to keep moving past the spring-green hills and the many placid cows grazing in the fields. He tripped, falling into the gravel. Rhianna’s pendant slapped his cheek like an insult.

“I cannot live without you, Rhianna. I cannot,” rambled from his lips as he climbed back to his feet, uncaring where he went.

Lugh’s sandaled feet appeared before Julius, blocking his way. The man gripped the front of Julius’ tunic with both hands. “Dominus, the boy be livin’. Dominus, you canna be doin’ this to yourself.”

“Leave me alone, slave.” Julius attempted to free himself from the man’s grip but failed to remove him.

“Dominus, the boy be livin’. He’ll be needin’ ya, dominus. By all the gods of this world, be thinkin’ about the boy!”

*Gnaeus. His son.* Memories of Rhianna handing him that babe assaulted him. The moment flashed in Julius’ memory—Gnaeus’ innocent face, blue eyes, and golden hair. The image of his tiny feet kicking the blanket away, his tiny fists battering at the air. Tears once again flooded down Julius’ face as Lugh supported what was left of him.



Staring at the ruddy face crowned with sprawling red hair and a brilliant green gaze, Julius realized Lugh was right. “Yes, Lugh. I have to find Gnaeus. He needs me.”

Swiping free of Lugh’s hands, Julius forced his feet to move again. Strength filtered back into his body with a new rage. A rage that held a direction. A purpose.

As soon as he sold the villa, the slaves, and the stock, he could return to find his son. He not only looked like a Britanni, but he also spoke their tongue now. He could appear as assistant to Lugh, who would act as a trader. Then, they would find Gnaeus, and he would kill the bastard who had killed Rhianna.

Familiar cypress trees lined the roadway in the late afternoon shadows. Familiar vineyards stretched to the horizon on either side of the rising slope of the foothills. Familiar walls surrounding his mother’s villa were golden in the setting sun.

He burst into the courtyard to two lines of slaves stepping back and dropping their gazes as their dominus entered. Stumbling across the limestone pavers, he barged into the vestibule, passed the lararium to Rome’s gods without honoring them, and fell onto an atrium lounge.

His ancient past flooded back to him the instant he heard the bubbling impluvium pool and smelled the familiar potted plants placed around it. The memories welcomed him like an old friend.

His gaze stopped at his father’s tablinum where Domitia rose to her feet. Her blue stola floated about her. She had remained as elegant as he had seen at their wedding. The same pearl and sapphire earrings, worn at their wedding, now glittered about her as they had in Camulodunum. Her

mahogany brown hair was arranged up around her face to perfection. Her burnt-almond eyes were as expectant as ever. “Welcome home, husband.”

She came toward him like a lemur, carrying the busy bundle that Excelia, her personal slave woman, had placed in her arms. The white blanket fell open, revealing two tiny fists and tiny feet fighting the air above. An infant’s wail reverberated in the silent atrium. “Greetings from your son. Gnaeus Julius Agricola awaits his father’s acceptance.”

## CHAPTER 2

“**O**WWW, COLIN!” CALGACUS grumbled at his year-old son squirming on his back. “No woman wants a bald man.” Yet, Colin’s tiny hands kept pulling at the long golden strands of his father’s hair as if racing a stallion through the dense woods.

The feel of the boy’s legs kicking brought a smile to Calgacus’ face until a dampness seeped into his tunic. Colin needed changing. Fortunately, there were enough rags left to clean the boy, something his mother should be doing.

Rhianna’s persistent memory brought tears to Calgacus’ eyes. *Fucking Romans*. The tears dried with the hate-filled memory of the bastards who had killed the only woman he could ever love.

Once again, every moment of that horrid night struck like lightning. The two Roman soldiers, whom he’d thought were his friends, had attacked Rhianna and Colin—killing her. They had been left to feed the vultures; yet no vulture was ever going to touch her flesh.

His hands curled into fists with the memory of digging Rhianna’s grave. He remembered wrapping her body with what was left of their tent, placing her gently into the earth.

Before the last bit of dirt had completely covered her, he had whispered, “I’m sorry, Rhianna. I’m so sorry. But I promise you, I’ll take care of our son. He’s all I have left of you. I love you.”

It was a promise he made every night, followed by kissing her cape pin from their *joining*—an Icení horse of her tribe. He heard her reciting her promise again. “*Calgacus, son of the Trinovante, as long as you wear this, my soul will be yours.*”

The small she-goat he’d named Nan brought him back from that abyss. She resisted the rope tied to him and his half-grown, black and tan pup he called Roi. It was time to milk her, but he needed to find a place to camp first. She’ll have to wait.

A man’s terrified wail pierced through the trees along with the hungry grunts of a boar. “Stay. Protect,” Calgacus ordered to Roi as he dropped the leather pack pole. The young dog immediately sat.

“Get ready Colin, cause we’re gonna have some fun.” Hefting his spear in one hand, Calgacus broke into a jog toward the horror ripping through the darkening shadows.

An opening in a grove of trees revealed the boar shaking a man by the leg like a rag while its victim helplessly stabbed his knife at the pig wherever he could.

Calgacus stopped long enough to heave his spear forward to watch the blade sink deep between the boar’s shoulders, dropping the animal on its meal. “And that, Colin, is how a man kills a boar.”

Colin had grown quiet as Calgacus eased closer toward the still carcass, with knife in hand. “And this is how you finish him.” He sliced the animal’s jugular, feeling warm

pungent blood squirt over his hands. There was no resistance from the dead animal. Yet the man groaned.

“Don’t move, old man.” Grabbing the animal’s hind leg, Calgacus lugged it off the weathered man, possibly a chieftain by the looks of the silver torc about his neck.

“Don’t . . . be callin’ . . . me old,” the man spat in gasps. “If I had this leg . . . here, . . . I’d . . . whip your—”

“Well, you don’t, and I doubt that.” Calgacus yanked the rope from his waist to stop the wound from bleeding. “You’re lucky to even have a leg. Now shut up and let us stop the blood.”

“Us?”

“Colin and me.” Calgacus nodded back to the quiet little being strangling him with his tiny arms.

Another frantic yell screamed from the man the instant Calgacus poured the last of his water over the deep wounds. “Colin,” the man gasped moments later. “Your name . . . or the boy’s?”

Calgacus focused on the mangled mess of the man’s leg. “The boy’s, Colin. Mine’s Calgacus ap Diras of the Trinovante. Yours?”

“Alaric ap Marget, chief of the Boresti.”

“Well, Alaric ap Marget of the Boresti, where are your men?”

“Fucking lost.”



A fire warmed the campsite as Calgacus gutted the boar he’d hung from a tree limb. Somehow managing to remain conscious, Alaric entertained Colin, who was enchanted

with the silver torc around his neck. Roi lay beside Nan, who was ravaging the nearby bush.

Calgacus let the boar's intestines slop to the ground, tossing Roi a few raw pieces of meat. He was proud of the half-grown mutt for coming when called, dragging Nan with him.

A limb snapped somewhere in the trees. Instantly, Roi jumped to his feet, snarling. Calgacus wheeled to stand between his son and Alaric, knife ready. Images of the Romans tore through him as four men stepped from the shadows. They weren't Roman. But each warrior's gaze glared with cold threat as they eased long swords from their backs.

"Stop, Carnac! He...saved my ass. More than...you bastards," Alaric yelled. Sudden pain stopped his words.

The men's attention shifted to the wounded man. Swords retreated as grins slithered through unshaven beards and long mustaches. "Well, Alaric, what got ya this time?" this Carnac chortled as he squatted by the fire, tucking his brown cape beneath him.

"This boar," Calgacus said, nodding to the carcass hanging in the tree. He plucked Colin from the chief's lap. "He'll live."

"He'd better," Carnac's reddish-brown hair fell over his shoulders as he reached to check Alaric's bandages.

Alaric swatted the hand aside. "Get away, Carnac. He's done . . . more than any of you. Where the fuck . . . were you?"

"Looking for your ass." The warrior's brown eyes gleamed with humor as he nodded to the dangling carcass. Beyond the blue woad tattoos, nothing showed of his body. "You gonna share, Alaric."

“It’s . . . his boar.” Alaric motioned to Calgacus. “Ask . . . him.”

“There’s plenty after the boy eats.” Calgacus wiped his knife on his leggings and sat down on a nearby rock. Colin reached for the dog that came to them, dragging Nan with him. The goat bleated her dislike. Night was closing in fast with a chill.

“No problem with that. Don’t look like he’ll eat much.” Carnac rose to his feet, stance wide-legged and empty handed. “Carnac ap Carrie.” He motioned to the men moving in from the shadows. “That’s Boru. Those two, Stephan and Beesh. Boys, finish that carcass.” Carnac looked to Calgacus. “Mind?”

Calgacus shrugged. “Appreciate the help.”

The one called Boru obviously was a seasoned warrior. The two boys attacking the boar were possibly on their first outing as young warriors. Calgacus remembered his first time with his father. A good memory but painful now.

“You are?” Carnac asked as he sat beside Alaric.

“Calgacus ap Diras of the Trinovante. Son’s Colin.”

“Seems the boy is managing well enough. Where’s your woman?” Boru asked as he stirred the fire.

Calgacus set Colin in the dirt between his legs. “Dead.” Saying it hurt.

Nan started bleating again, so Calgacus drew her close enough to squirt milk into Colin’s mouth and occasionally to Roi eagerly enjoying the offer.

“Makes it hard on a man when he has to do a woman’s job,” Carnac remarked as he dropped wood on the fire. Sparks flew skyward.

“Sometimes.”

The casual conversation seemed easy enough. However, Calgacus was not trusting anyone as he had the Romans. Not ever again.



Scents of cooking meat taunted everyone as fat drizzled into the fire. Calgacus cut off a slice of cooked meat, chewed it for Colin, who ate with relish, and nodded to the rest to help themselves. Alaric cried out the instant he reached for a proffered morsel.

“Gonna make it hard to dance at Beltane, Alaric,” Carnac huffed. The others chuckled as they feasted.

“Long as it . . . don’t mess with pleasuring . . . women,” the leather-faced chieftain barked back. Alaric adjusted himself against the tree and looked at Calgacus. “I owe you . . . my life, Calgacus.”

“Glad I was here to help,” Calgacus answered.

Colin lay asleep on his chest as the chill of the night sat in. He drew his cloak that Rhianna had given him on the same day she had pinned the pendant on it.

“That’s Icení, . . . isn’t it?” Alaric asked.

“It is.”

Wiping boar grease from his chin, Carnac asked, “Same queen who tried to break the Romans?”

Gleaming gladiuses flashed in Calgacus’ brain. “It was.”

“We came late and saw the dead.” Carnac threw another piece of wood on the fire. “Never seen a true Roman till then. From what I hear, you don’t want anything to do with them.”



“You don’t.” Calgacus needed to change the topic. His guts were churning. “So, Alaric, if I own your life, what kind of man do I own?”

Alaric smirked, letting Carnac speak for him. “He’s the chief of the Boresti tribe, who has a habit of going off on his own to hunt.”

“Problem is, you just . . . can’t keep up, Carnac,” Alaric spat. “Obviously . . . none of you . . . can.”

“We best get him back to Binn,” Boru said, concern blazing in his blue eyes.

“Take the boar,” Calgacus said. “Leave enough for the boy and me.”

“Come with us,” Carnac offered. “We can see that you are both taken care of. There are plenty of women to see to that . . . and more.”

## CHAPTER 3

**D**OMITIA STUDIED HER husband sprawled across the garden couch, drunk again. The wine bag lay empty beside him. This is what she had witnessed for weeks now. A drunk. A filthy, smelly drunk.

Footsteps in the atrium drew Domitia to turn as Julius' mother approached, carrying Gnaeus. "Is he the same?" Procilla asked.

"The same."

They both turned their gazes to the man lurching for the empty wine bag, groaning. "Lugh! Sons of Dis. Lugh!" Julius fell from the bench and laid there in his misery. "Slaves! Where are you? Slaves!"

A slave started past Domitia. She stopped him. "Go back to the kitchen. I will deal with this."

"You will not!" Procilla placed a hand on Domitia's arm to halt her. "Leave him alone. He brought this on himself. Let him deal with it."

"Lugh! By the gods. Lugh, where in Hades are you?"

"I be on my way, dominus," Lugh announced.

Domitia and Procilla watched as that disrespectful, impudent slave of Julius' hefted the weight of his dominus'

arm onto his shoulders. Lugh's glare was intense as he staggered past the two women to disappear into the nearest bedroom off the atrium.

"What Julius sees in that fool slave of his is beyond me," muttered Procilla. "He is nothing but disrespectful and crude. He should be whipped for his insolence."

Domitia took her son from Julius' mother. Gnaeus nuzzled for food. He was hungry. "Your son is unfortunately not the man my father married me to," she spewed.

Glaring, Procilla left the room. Excelia drew closer. "I remember how excited you were to marry him, domina," her personal slave whispered. "Now, look at him."

Domitia turned to the elder woman who had been at her side most of her life. "I cannot stand the thought of him now."

Oh, yes, she remembered their betrothal day when she had first seen Julius appearing with his friends. She had melted with adoration because Julius was beyond perfect. Tall, strong, perfectly built as though he were a son of Jupiter.

She recalled his warm brown gaze, gentle, kind, even sparkling with humor. His touch had sent a thrill trickling up her arm as he slipped the betrothal ring on her left hand. She had thought, then, that Venus had blessed her with the most perfect husband.

The thrill of their wedding in Camulodunum had changed all of that. He had endured the wedding procedure in the Claudian temple. That night, he had joined with her as a true husband. Then the gods blessed them with a son—Julius' one true son. And now she was wedded to this filthy mess.

"He has yet another son, domina?" Excelia asked.

"Apparently. With that Britanni bitch."

The slave woman smirked. “But your son is a true Roman, the true bearer of the name Gnaeus Julius Agricola.”

“Yes.” Domitia walked to an atrium lounger, dropping the shoulder of her tunic to nurse the hungry boy. Milk flowed at his touch. Comfort enfolded her as Gnaeus’ little hand patted her breast as he feasted.

Until Julius took Baby Gnaeus in his arms that day, fear had accompanied her every day since the child was born. By taking his son in his arms, he had claimed the boy as his own. How easily Julius could have refused, leaving him to die on the doorstep. But he had not.

Yet, there was obviously no love for the babe. After all, Julius had known nothing of the birth. At his mother’s advice, they had kept the fact from him until that moment Julius appeared in the atrium.

Now, the boy had a filthy, good-for-nothing drunk for a father who constantly clung to the bitch’s pendant, whining for that woman, moaning for his other son, cursing the Empire as well as everything in it. Then, proceeded to drink himself into oblivion each night and day.



“Rhianna’s gone. That bastard killed her, Lugh.” Sobs racked Julius as he curled on the bed. “He killed her. I couldn’t protect her. I couldn’t protect my son or the bastard who has him now!”

Lugh nodded from his chair beside Julius’ bed. “He be livin’, dominus. We be findin’ the boy as soon as we be gettin’ back.”

Julius tried to stand. “I have to go back, Lugh. Now! We have to go back. Now!”

Lugh rose from his chair. “We will, dominus. As soon as you be gettin’ yourself in order.”

“Order? Lugh, I will never be . . .” Julius’ head spun. Nausea twisted his guts. Then, his brain began throbbing again. “. . . that man again. I hate him. I hate everything Roman.” He slumped back to the pillows where the world settled to a normal pitch.

“Ah, well, you be a different man now.”

“Different. Yes. I will be a different man. Britanni.” Julius smiled proudly. “I look like one, do I not? We need to celebrate. I want to toast to this new man.” The pitcher was empty. “Wine. We need wine.”

“Ah, dominus, that be a problem. There be no more wine in the cellar.”

“You’re lying to me. Go! Ask the slaves. They know where it’s hidden.”

“Yes, dominus.” Lugh left the room.

Julius fell back into the mattress to stare at the white ceiling. Images of Rhianna appeared in his mind again. The sound of her voice mentioning that bastard’s name—Calgacus—roared in his brain.

Then came his uncle’s voice, *even if you have to go back as a slave*. Immediately, he started grinding at his wrists where the slave manacles had been. Delicious pain burned up his arm—pain he deserved. It was the same dying pain Rhianna had endured after being torn from him by that Calgacus, the bastard who had killed her and taken his son.

A roar filled the room. His roar. His pain. Images of both bastards flashed before him. His fists slammed into the nearest pillow, again, and again, and again. Feathers flew like brains. Like blood. “I want my son! I want my son, you bastards!”

Once again, tears claimed him, dropping him to the mattress. The warmth of the feathers fluttered against his cheeks as his fists curled into his face. He rolled away, drawing his knees upward to keep the memories of Rhianna in his heart.

“Dominus. Dominus, you be fine? Here, hold this. Hold this.”

Julius felt the cool metal of Rhianna’s pendant touch his hand. He grabbed it. Life surged through him. He could breathe now.

Managing to sit, he gazed at the silver pendant of an Icenian horse racing away, racing like Rhianna had that day in the field, laughing. He heard her, laughing again. She was not dead. She was alive. Marcus was wrong.

“He be bleedin’,” Lugh grumbled. “Rippin’ the scabs on his wrists again. Get some cloth. Go! Be quick about it!” The attending slave raced out of the room at Lugh’s orders.

Julius studied Lugh. “Go away. Leave me alone.”

“Dominus, we best be gettin’ this stopped.”

Julius studied his bloody wrists. It was the bastards’ blood—those he had just killed. See! Their brains lay everywhere about him, on the floor, the bed, everywhere.

“Lugh. They are dead. See. I killed them. But I haven’t found my son.” Worry exploded in his soul. He had to find Gnaeus. He had to. Julius staggered to his feet and tried to lift the bed. It wouldn’t move.

“We will, dominus. We will. We be findin’ him. Now lay down. Rest.”

Somewhere, he heard a far distant cry of a babe. A faint smile eased over Julius’ lips. “I hear him, Lugh. You hear him?” Julius stumbled into the atrium.

Listening, he let the wonderous sounds draw him to the stairs. Up. To the corner room. It was getting louder.

He had found his son. Joy beyond joy flooded over him. Making it to the doorway, he pulled the curtain back. There he was, Gnaeus, his son, kicking his tiny feet, waving his precious little hands.

Domitia's old crone woman was in the way. "Move aside. I want my son."

Excelia braced, unmoving. "But dominus, you are drunk?"

"I said move." He shoved her aside to sweep the babe into his arms. Life filled them. Precious life. The precious life of his son.

Clutching the delicate body, he slumped into the corner chair. "I found you. I found you." He kissed Gnaeus' forehead, brushed the silken hairs back with his scarred palm. "I found you."

"Julius!" Domitia rushed into the bed chamber. "Give him to me."

Julius curled his arms around the precious body. "No. No one will take him from me. Ever again. Now get away."

"You are holding him too tight. Please, let me have him," Domitia begged.

"No." His son did not want to leave his arms. That was why he was crying. "He's my son. Now, go."

Panic filled Domitia's face as she motioned to Excelia. "Stay with him."

"I will, domina."



Frantic tears flooded Domitia's eyes as she eased out of Gnaeus' room. He has my baby. This man is drunk and out of his mind, crushing that little body to his chest.

The feral look in Julius' gaze was clear. He was not going to let her save her baby boy. "Mother Juno, hear me. Protect Gnaeus. Please," muttered from her lips as she leaned against the door frame.

Peering into the room, Domitia saw Excelia watching cautiously, not moving. Her gaze held no panic. The sounds of the rocking chair squeaked with an easy rhythm. Gnaeus had stopped crying. In fact, he was gurgling as if he liked where he was. A low hum filled the growing shadows. Thick. Low. Masculine.

"What is going on?" Procilla asked as she stopped by the door.

"He has Baby Gnaeus."

"Bona Dea, no. I must . . ."

Domitia clutched her mother-in-law's arm. "No," she whispered. "Do not go in there. He will not let you have him. Excelia is in there."

"No. No. You cannot have that . . . not right now." Julius' voice came past the door curtain. "Not right now, Gnaeus. Not now. Only when you are big and strong. But one day I will give you your mother's pendant. She loves you as I do."

Fire scorched Domitia's soul. "That is my son! Not that damn bitch's whelp!" seethed from her lips.

Procilla gripped Domitia's wrist. "Not now, Domitia. Not now," she whispered, nodding toward the atrium.

Domitia shook her head, refusing to leave her son in the arms of that man. "He thinks that is her son. Her son!"

"I know, dear. I know. But it is best we trust Excelia right now."

Trembling with fury, Domitia barely allowed Procilla to pull her away from the doorway. Once in the atrium,



Julius' mother attempted to draw her onto a lounge. "We both know that Julius is not thinking right. Let him have his grief."

Domitia's gaze froze on the curtained doorway of Baby Gnaeus' bedroom. "He will never give my son that pendant. Ever."

"No. He will never give it to him. Leave this to me. I will see that that pendant disappears. But we must leave it alone for now."

Slumping to the lounge, Domitia glared into her mother-in-law's eyes. If she divorced Julius, as she desperately wanted to do now, she would lose the only thing that mattered to her—her son. So, she was trapped with this man. "He makes me sick every time I lay eyes on him."

His mother sighed with frustration, "Julius is not himself, Domitia. You can see that. It is grief. Just be patient. He will come to see that you are a far better wife than that Britanni girl ever could be."

"I hate him. I hate him!"

"No. No, Domitia. You do not hate him. You are just angry and rightfully so, my dear. Julius is struggling. Give him time. He will come to his senses to see that he loves you more than . . . *her*. I promise you, Domitia. He will realize his mistake and turn to you for understanding and forgiveness."

Domitia glared up at the curtained door of her son's room. "Your son is no honor to Rome or to anyone right now. I cannot stand him." Her venom spewed deliciously out at his mother.

Lifting her chin, Procilla simply smiled. "He will be himself, again, Domitia. He just has to go through this."