

BOOK ONE OF THE AGRICOLA SERIES

RED FURY REVOLT



J. F. RIDGLEY

PRAISE FOR *RED* *FURY REVOLT*

I feel that Ms. Ridgley has done very well at telling her story, while being respectful to the events that devastated Britannia, and even shook the Roman Empire itself, in A.D. 60 to 61.

This book would have made an excellent stand-alone novel; however, I am glad to see that Ms. Ridgley intends to make it into a series. Those familiar with Roman history in Britannia will recognize some of the names; names of individuals whose place in history would culminate over twenty years after the end of this book. I look forward to reading them.

James Mace

Author of *Soldier of Rome: The Artorian Chronicles*

Red Fury Revolt

JF RIDGLEY

Book one of the Agricola series

R-Pride Publishing
www.jfridgley.com

All rights reserved.
Copyright J. F. Ridgley 2021
Red Fury Revolt

In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the author or publisher constitute unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use material from the book, (other than for review purposes), prior written permission must be obtained by contacting the publisher or author at:

jfridgley@jfridgley.com.

Thank you for your support of the author's rights.
All characters, incidents, and dialogue are drawn from the author's imagination and are to be construed as fiction. Apart from well-known historical figures, any similarity to real persons living or dead is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

Epub ISBN 978-1-951269-15-9

Print ISBN 978-1-951269-16-6

To Joe,

Thank you for believing in my dreams.

FOREWORD

By James Mace

WHENEVER WE HEAR about known historical persons, in this case Gnaeus Julius Agricola, historians tend to focus on the more sensational events, rather than the persons themselves. We are left to decide for ourselves what type of man he was. Was he a loving husband and father, was he a kind and just person, or was he prone to vices such as avarice and cruelty? We do not know. The most detailed accounts we have of his life come from the historian, Tacitus, who was Agricola's son-in-law. Because of this, it is often assumed that anything written about Julius Agricola would be prone to bias and flattery. Strangely enough, though, Tacitus says little about the man himself, but rather he focuses strictly on his achievements. And like every case of when an author attempts to pen a novel-based around actual events-wherever the histories are vacant, one must use conjecture and no small amount of literary license.

So, when J.F. Ridgley asked me to write the forward for her first book, I confess I was honored, with a bit of trepidation. As an author of historical novels set in Ancient

Rome, it is extremely difficult for me to enjoy reading similar works. This is true of many authors, who will often find themselves inadvertently comparing the book they are reading to their own works. Many of us view this as a great tragedy; that we often lose the joy in reading a genre we love. That being said, what drew me into this novel was that it was quite different from my own Roman works, which tend to be very battle-centric, and more focused on the military aspects of the story. Ms. Ridgley provides here a very compelling and highly emotional human interest story about two very different people, joined together, and subsequently torn apart by the violent events surrounding Boudicca's rebellion.

When she came to me, asking for advice, as well as some good source material, she made it clear that, while the characteristics of Julius and the other protagonists were entirely of her own making, she wanted to make certain she got the actual historical events reasonably correct. Too often, an author will blatantly twist, or outright change known historical fact, in order for it to melt with their story; so, I admired that she was willing to put in the extra effort to avoid this as much as possible. One book that I strongly recommended for her was George Shipway's *Imperial Governor*, which I feel is one of the most underrated historical novels out there. It is a delicate balance that historical novelists attempt to maintain; the telling of the stories that are in their minds and in their hearts, while maintaining a sense of historical accuracy and believability.

MAIN CHARACTERS AND GLOSSARY

Romans

Nero - emperor of Rome

Decianus Catus - procurator/tax collector

Suetonius Paulinus - consul/governor of Britannia

Gnaeus Julius Agricola - tribune and tribune laticlavus/
second-in-command

Essex - Julius's first personal slave

Lugh - Julius's second personal slave

Valerius - Julius's uncle and first centurion-Primus Pilius-
first centurion of the first cohort

Valeria Procilla - Julius's mother and Valerius's sister

Domitia Decidiana - Julius's betrothed

Marcus - Julius's friend and decurion/officer in charge of
cavalry and the official guard

Centurio Felix - first centurion to Julius

Demetrius - retired centurion who cares for wounded.

Iceni- Britanni

Prasutagus - dead leader, husband of Boudica, father of
Morrigan and Rhianna

Boudica - wife of Prasutagus, mother of Morrigan and
Rhianna, leader of the revolt and the Iceni tribe

Morrigan - Boudica's elder daughter

Mergith - warrior and Morrigan's betrothed

Rhianna - Boudica's younger daughter

Myrradin - Druid priest

Neece - slave rescued and adopted by Rhianna

Trinovantes

Diras - leader, father of Calgacus

Marleth - wife of Diras, mother of Calgacus

Calgacus - son of Diras, Rhianna's intended

Tancorix - friend of Calgacus, warrior

Glossary

Auxiliary - non-Roman soldiers from various provinces

Ballistae - any manned weapon such as a scorpion, or catapult

Carnu - upright horn of the Britanni

Cavalry - auxiliary soldiers on horseback under the command of a Roman officer/decurio

Century - ten groups of less than a hundred soldiers who make up one cohort

Centurion (referred to as Centurio) - most experienced soldier on the field. Carries a vitus stick as a symbol of authority...and he can use it

Consul - commander of the province

Cornicen - plays the circular horn 'carnu' to sound the consul's orders

Cohort - ten divisions within the legion

Decurion (referred to as decurio) - cavalry officer in charge of the auxiliary cavalry

Fortress - main housing for a legion

Fort - outside housing for a legion

Javelin - narrow-throated spear that bends upon impact.

Soldiers carry two

Laticlavus - second-in-command to the consul or legate/highest tribune (usually a young officer with no experience)

Legate - commander of a legion

Legion - army unit of Roman soldiers

Marching Camp - mobile housing dug in each night,
filled in each day

Optio - carries the unit's eagle, second-in-command to
the centurion

Principia - main headquarters of the highest officer

Praetoria - consul's living quarters

Signifier - carries the unit's signum/banner and relays
orders to the centurion during battle

Tribune - lieutenant in charge of two cohorts each. Five
tribunes to a legion

Tubicen - plays the 'J'-shaped horn of the cavalry and
sounds the decurion's orders

Red Fury Revolt

Centurions of the Cohorts

Centurions of the Centuries match the centurion of the cohort All wear red capes ,red tunics ,greaves on calves, carries a *Vitis stick*/oak staff



Primus Pilus
First Cohort
Call: Long



Second Centurio
Call: Long



Third Centurio
Call: Long /Short



Fourth Centurio
Call: Long/Long/
Short



Fifth Centurio
Call: Short/Short/
Short



Sixth Centurio
Call: Short/
Short /Long



Seventh Centurio
Call: Short /Long/
Short



Eighth Centurio
Call: Short /long /
Long



Ninth Centurio
Call: Long/
Long /Long



Tenth Centurio
Call: Long /Short /
Short

All legionaries/soldiers - Red capes- Red crests- Red Tunics

Legion Officers

Emperor of the Empire of Rome
Purple/ gold Cape
Purple or gold tunic or whatever he wants to wear



Consul /Provincial Governor
White cape
White tunic/2 wide purple vertical stripes



Legate/legion commander
Red Cape
White tunic w/ 2 wide purple vertical stripes



Praetorian Guard-protects the Emperor
Purple Cape
White tunic w/ 2 narrow vertical stripes



Tribune Laticlavus -Second in Command
White cape
White tunic/2 wide purple vertical stripes



Legion Tribunes
Red Cape White tunic w/ 2 narrow vertical stripes
In charge of two cohorts
1st/2nd 3rd/4th 5th/6th 7th/8th 9th/10th

Decurio
In charge of Cavalry
Red Cape White tunic w/ 2 narrow vertical purple



Praefectus/Admiral
In charge of Navy
Blue cape White tunic w/ 2 narrow purple stripes

PROLOGUE

“**T**RIBUNE GNAEUS JULIUS Agricola, you finally found us.” An arrogant smirk grew on Decianus Catus’s round face as he lounged his thick body back in his chair.

The stink of greed pulsed around Julius as he stood before the tax collector’s desk. Gold dangled from the man’s neck, wrapped both wrists, and encircled each finger of his hands. Even his blue tunic was embroidered with gold threads.

“My apologies, Procurator. I had hoped that, by now, you had received the report that storms delayed my arrival.”

“I did.” Decianus fingered the scroll lying on the cluttered desk. A scheming spark danced in the man’s beady eyes. He leaned forward and laced his fingers in front of him. “I received Suetonius’s orders temporarily appointing you as my tribune. At your uncle’s request, I am sure.” The corner of his narrow lips lifted. “So, I am certain, you are well-trained to kiss ass.”

Julius bit his lip to quell a rebuttal. This, being his first assignment as tribune, he could not piss off Nero’s appointed procurator to Britannia. “Hopefully, my abilities will benefit Rome.”

Decianus chuckled softly and then flicked his finger as if dismissing Julius like a slave. “Get your things in order. We attend the Iceni chief’s funeral tomorrow.”

Prasutagus had died? The Iceni chieftain was one of Rome’s best allies in Britannia, deserving of Rome’s highest regard, especially at his funeral. Yet something about Decianus’s words did not set right in Julius’s gut.

However, that was not his concern now. This was his first assignment with the legion, and this detachment from the Twentieth-Valeria needed his fullest attention.

“Yes, Procurator.” Julius saluted then realized he was saluting a civilian. Decianus was an equestrian—not an officer. Feeling stupid, Julius evacuated the suffocating tent.

The site of Decianus’s Germanic guards lounging before the procurator’s tent bothered Julius like a rash. They were big brutes who reminded him of dumb oxen with long hair, flowing mustaches, and a sneering arrogance that pulsed from their flesh as greed had from Decianus.

His personal slave, Essex, unfortunately had to direct the camp slaves to raise his tent next to Decianus. All across Rome’s empire, the official tents were placed side-by-side in the fort’s center, leaving Julius no choice in the matter of where his lodgings were to be put up.

Julius rolled his shoulders and scanned the marching camp that stretched before him like a busy quilt. Horses grazed in the wide ring of grass encircling perfect rows of tan leather tents of the two centuries from the Twentieth-Valeria. Soldiers drilled near the gates, enduring the stern scrutiny of their centurions. Guards strolled the top of an encircling berm of fresh earth, as they scanned the distant trees beyond the rain-filled ditch outside the perimeter of

the dirt wall. Those soldiers, who were off-duty, stirred their food rations in pots over small, snapping fires before their tents, sharpened swords, or polished armor and shields. Bursts of laughter punctuated the evening air.

At last. This was what Julius had always wanted, the chance to be with the real men of Rome—the legions. Fortunately, his assignment with Decianus was only temporary. Whatever else awaited him had to be left to the gods.



Fragrant herbs, hanging from rafters of the thatched roof, scented the main hall where Boudica's heart lay dead in her chest. Her husband's body awaited his warriors to carry him to his funeral stanchion.

She needed to hear him laugh and to drown in his smile. She needed to see his blue gaze that could challenge the clearest day. But the gods had taken him from her without warning.

She brushed aside his golden mustache, remembering how his hands, his mouth, and his body had feasted on hers through the many years.

A sob cut through her. Her knees crumbled, and she dropped to the bench beside him. He is gone! So suddenly! Why? Why had the mother goddess taken him? Why?

Prasutagus had balanced her. She couldn't deal with the Romans without him because she despised every one that stepped onto Iceni lands. Even now, would the Iceni people even accept her as their leader? No assurance came.

Boudica covered her face and let tears pour into her hands. A soft hand slid across her shoulders. "Mother."

Their youngest daughter sat on the bench beside her. Rhianna's long, golden hair—hair the same color as her

father's—brushed across Boudica's knees. "Mother, I want him back," seeped from her lips.

"As I do, Rhianna." Boudica clutched her daughter's hand. "As do I."

Her daughter's large, blue eyes pleaded for what could never be...Prasutagus's return. "Father seemed so healthy when he returned from the hunt."

"I know. I know." If she had known her husband was ill, she would never have argued with him about granting Nero half of the Iceni lands should he die. It was an old, bitter argument that she could never agree to. This was their land. Not Rome's. The old fury resumed its burn.

Their eldest daughter strode into the hall and melted onto the bench. Rarely did anything crack the shell that surrounded Morrigan, yet tears streamed silently from the girl's gray eyes.

Boudica hugged both—Rhianna, her father's gentle daughter, and Morrigan, the daughter who matched her own looks as well as her hatred for Rome.

Both daughters were betrothed to warriors who would stand with her, an assurance she would need now. Morrigan had Mergith, son of the Iceni. Their union would keep the Iceni blood pure. Rhianna had Calgacus, Diras's son of the Trinovante, whose hatred of Rome remained strong.

Long ago, Romans had claimed Diras's city and renamed it Camulodunum. Like all the other tribes in Britannia, Rome had demanded the Trinovantes' absolute submission. Many hated this Roman yoke as much as she did.

Myrradin stepped into the hall. The druid priest was a sliver of a man and always dressed as a shadow. "Your people

await their new leader,” he said. The sound of his voice held no compassion.

“Has Diras arrived?” Boudica asked.

“No.”

With a weary sigh, she stood, bringing her daughters up with her. “Then it is time. We go now. We must see your father to his people.”

CHAPTER 1

“CRONE. MAIDEN. MOTHER.”
“Destroyer. Beginner. Increaser.”
“Death. Birth. Fruitfulness.”

The druid’s chants commanded the air, as warriors lifted her father to his funeral stanchion. Rhianna clutched the pendant, embossed with a racing Iceni horse that her father had given her for her bonding day with Calgacus. It matched Morrigan’s pendant that now pierced the drape of wool at Mergith’s shoulder.

This same horse image also crowned her father’s helmet, shadowing his face, and his round shield, laying atop the seven-colored cloak blanketing his body.

Only days ago, her father had burst into the main hall, his boisterous laugh lifting to the rafters. He had swept her up in his arms and swung her in circles. “Ah, my beautiful Rhianna. News. Where is your mother?”

During another argument over Rome, he had collapsed in Boudica’s arms. She and Morrigan had bolted to his side, only to hear his dying wish, something Rhianna failed to understand. But her mother had promised she would honor it with her life.

Now, her mother stood alone, beside his stanchion, stalwart as any warrior, knowing the Icení now looked to her to protect them from Rome's greed.

Her mother couldn't do that alone. She needed the Trinovantes' respect, so all tribes would recognize her as the Icení leader. Otherwise, the gold torc around her neck meant nothing.

Her mother's sharp features, her iron-gray gaze, and long, auburn hair radiated that strength. Even though Rhianna stood with Morrigan at the opposite end of the burial mound, there was no doubt her mother felt as alone and abandoned as she did. Neither she nor her mother had anyone to stand at their sides this day. Yet, Morrigan had Mergith.

Unlike Morrigan and Mergith, whose souls had already joined, hers and Calgacus's had not. His constant attention suffocated her. Yet, for the first time, she wished he were there.

She scanned the distant trees as the Icení continued to lay their parting gifts in the pit beneath the burial stanchion. Each person nodded to her mother and then passed to rejoin the others chanting to honor her father. Bronze trinkets, silver bowls, flasks of ale, colorful blankets, and more created mounds of gifts that would see him home. Proof of their love and respect.

Like a winter wind, the air seemed to freeze at the sound of distant drumbeats and the clank of metal from the nearby valley. People's attention shifted to the hide of a silver wolf concealing a Roman soldier carrying a wooden staff that displayed the standard of Rome's tax collector.

Behind that standard rode a Roman officer wearing a black-crested helmet. His red cape draped the rear haunches

of his horse ornamented with silver trappings. Behind him glided a column of soldiers like a long, metal-scaled snake. Every soldier carried a large, red, rectangular shield with a yellow-winged pattern and wore a gladius banging against his thigh. Their long, red capes swayed with each measured step.

Cavalry soldiers riding silver-decorated horses escorted the cloth-covered box carried in the middle of the column. Following them strode a guard of bare-chested men whose long hair draped like capes down their well-muscled backs.

The black-crested officer raised a hand and barked, "Halt!"

A circular trumpet sounded, and the serpent's body stopped. A man, wearing a white tunic with two, narrow purple stripes, appeared from the cloth box. The odd-looking guards accompanied this Roman as he strode up the rise toward her father's stanchion. His gaze fastened on the piles of funeral gifts.

Her mother's sharp glower followed each step until the Roman halted before her. "Who are you, Roman, to intrude this day?"

The man tore his attention from the gifts to focus on her mother. "Decianus Catus. Procurator of Rome."

"If you come to honor my husband, you are welcome. If not, I demand you leave."

"Demand?" A glimmer of mirth lit in his eyes. "And you are?"

"I am the queen of the Iceni. You will deal with me now."

The procurator lifted a hand, a finger pointing skyward. It flicked. "Tribune."

The black-crested officer dismounted and motioned to a soldier with the white crest stretching across his helmet. "Centurio. With me."

Both strode through the guards and joined the procurator on the rise. The man glanced back at the officer. "Circle the stanchion."

Stunned, the tribune hesitated. Even the centurion shifted with uncertainty.

"You heard me, Tribune. Give the order."

The tribune jerked to life. "Centurio, circle as ordered."

The centurion raised the first two fingers of each hand and pointed between the stanchion and her people. One hand circled to the left and the other to the right.

Rhianna's heart clambered in her chest the moment the serpent split and separated her, her mother, Morrigan, and Mergith from the rest of the Iceni.

Outside the silver ring, her people stirred. Men reached for weapons. Churl, her father's first warrior, jerked his sword arm across his chest. "Wait."

The women restrained the men with a gentle touch while children hid in their mothers' skirts. Mergith caught her sister's wrist, stopping her from going to their mother. "Churl said to wait."

"I regret to find the leader of the Iceni dead," the procurator said loud enough for the gods to hear. "Still. I have orders from Rome to collect payments on loans granted to the Iceni."

"We owe nothing to anyone," Boudica announced. "Not even to Rome."

"Records show your people owe much for the loans that built Camulodunum."

"Camulodunum?" Her mother shrieked with laughter. "We owe nothing to your designs, except for what my husband granted your emperor."

The procurator relaxed back on one leg. "What has the leader of the Iceni granted Rome?"

Rhianna could only wonder what thoughts were searing through her mother's mind. Finally, Boudica spoke. "Prasutagus grants half of the Iceni wealth and no more to this Nero." Her hand flicked as if throwing a tidbit at this man.

"And you have papers proving this agreement?"

Those who could hear gasped at such an insult. "Proof?" Boudica huffed loudly. "We have no need for proof. Our word is law. Is not Rome's word equal?"

"No papers?" Laughter bellowed from the Roman's lips. "Tribune, they expect us to accept the word of a woman who calls herself their leader."

The tribune stared at the fool and then said, "The Iceni have never proven false before, Procurator."

"And how would you know that, Tribune?" The man's gaze locked on Morrigan's glare. "See that they don't interfere."

The tribune nodded to the centurion, who pointed to six soldiers to stand beside Rhianna, Morrigan, and Mergith.

Somehow, the druid had escaped. Rhianna found him lingering in the shadows of the distant trees.

Like a tightening noose, she couldn't breathe until the tribune's worried gaze found hers. *Please stop this. Whatever is happening, please make him stop.* She willed her message to him and gasped when he jerked away his attention.

The procurator raised a hand. "Agreed! Half of the Iceni wealth now belongs to Rome, as well as the payments owed."

Fury exploded on her mother's face. She scooped a handful of dirt at her feet and flung it into the Roman's face. "How dare you insult my husband's dying wish with your greed?"

He backhanded her, twisting her mother aside like a bent tree. “By word of Rome, I dare.”

Pain seared through Rhianna as if she had been the one slapped. She cried out and staggered backward. The nearest soldier grabbed her by the waist before she could race to her mother.

In that same instant, the ring of soldiers braced behind their shields, their swords appearing like metal teeth.

“Curse you! Curse Rome!” Boudica screamed and then coated the procurator’s face with spit. Cheers and laughter roared through the Iceni.

The procurator simply lifted the edge of his red cape and wiped his face. The cape dropped, and his finger pointed at Boudica. “Flog her.”

Churl’s arm shot forward, releasing her father’s warriors into the soldiers like a stampede, only they began to fall beneath the locked shields and stabbing swords. The air filled with metal striking metal and cries of pain.

Soldiers barely restrained her and Morrigan, while the Roman’s guards strung their mother to Prasutagus’s stanchion like an animal hide.

“Mergith!”

Morrigan’s scream tore Rhianna’s attention to her sister, where two soldiers jerked their blades from her man’s belly.

Wrenching free, Morrigan fell to the ground, clutching Mergith’s body to her chest. Screams and tears exploded from her, as the man she loved wilted lifeless in her arms.

Rhianna thrashed against the arm wrapping her waist and searched for someone to end this. *The tribune*. “Do something! For the sake of my father, the gods. Stop this. Please!”

The tribune looked skyward as if beseeching the gods, his fists clenching. Meanwhile, the procurator began

removing her mother's silver bracelets, even the comb in her hair and lifted the royal torc for all to see. "Rome's first payment." Then he ripped her mother's gown away and nodded at the centurion. "Begin."

The centurion glanced at the tribune. While glaring at the procurator, he nodded.

The lash fell and then fell again, continuing to destroy her mother's flesh while the remaining Icenii people watched, helplessly confined by the of soldiers.

Rhianna's insides twisted as Morrigan's sobs cut through her, as the lashes sliced the entirety of her mother's body. Lurching free from the soldier's grip, Rhianna bolted for the stanchion to protect her mother. She had to stop this, to do whatever she had to, to stop this horror.

Barely two strides away, an arm clamped her against the leather cuirass of the tribune. His worried expression radiating in his gaze was her only hope.

"Please, don't let him kill my mother. Please."

He thrust her back to another soldier. "Take her. And keep her this time."

The soldier dragged her back to Morrigan. Another soldier had stretched her sister's throat to the sun as she spewed curses on every Roman soul present.

Rhianna glared at the tribune as lash after lash continued, until her mother's body sagged against the ropes. As if called, his gaze found her and his jerked away as if stung. "Halt!" barked from his lips and the whip wilted to the ground.

The procurator wheeled, livid at the order. "What in Hades are you doing, Tribune, giving that order?"

"You want her dead?"

“Do I care if she is...?”

Not only had the tribune stopped the flogging, but he also seemed to welcome the procurator’s wrath with a direct glare.

Relief barely had time to melt through Rhianna as her mother struggled to her feet. “You filthy pieces of shit,” spewed from Boudica’s lacerated lips.

The procurator stormed to the stanchion and then jerked her mother’s face up to his. “No one insults Rom—” Again, she covered his face with bloody spit.

Again, he cleansed his flesh of the insult with his cape, but this time he smiled. “Take them all prisoner!”



When his friend Tancorix stumbled through the trees, Calgacus released the axle of the broken wagon to the ground.

“It’s...insane!” Tancorix gasped. He bent over to breathe. “They’ve taken them...all but the dead...to the fort. The Iceni. Everyone.”

Calgacus and his father rushed toward the warrior. The rest of the Trinovante gathered around them. “What? They what?” his father asked.

Tancorix shook his head and shrugged. “The Romans... also flogged Boudica.”

“No.” Diras ran a hand through his long hair. “They flogged Boudica?”

The warrior nodded. “Yes.”

Fear, hotter than fire, seared through Calgacus. “What about Rhianna?”

His friend’s gaze hit him like a fist. “They took her and all the others.”

“They better not touch her. Rhianna is mine, and I’ll kill any Roman who does.” He scanned the bristling warriors ready to kill every Roman who had crossed their lands. “Enough of Rome’s insults. Let’s go.”

Before he stepped away, his father slammed him against the nearest tree trunk. “Don’t be a fool, son. You know how many Romans are here.” Pain and rage flooded his father’s face. “And you know we don’t have the weapons to fight. Not yet.”

Calgacus didn’t care about weapons. He didn’t care about how many Romans he had to face. “It’s Rhianna. You know what they’ll do to her...and all the other women.”

His father’s grip eased slightly. However, his determined, blue gaze grew hotter. “I assure you, Calgacus... and all of you.” Diras scanned those surrounding him. “The Romans will pay for this and for more. For everything. But not today. This I promise.”

CHAPTER 2

JULIUS BRISTLED AS he rode alongside the Iceni prisoners as they stumbled toward the marching camp, their hatred intensifying with each step. And why not?

After all, Decianus had claimed the king's burial wealth and the Iceni plunder, all carried back to camp in the soldiers' capes. Did the insult stop there? By the gods, no.

The greedy fool had demanded the Iceni be taken prisoner to be sold as slaves for insulting him, gloating that he would have Boudica sent to Nero as a prize.

Obviously, it never mattered to Decianus that recent reports had warned that Britanni tribes were growing restless of Rome's demand for taxes as well as submission to its laws.

Regardless of what Rome did for them, which amounted to stopping their continual warring, financing the building of roads and temples, and establishing sensible laws that increased trade with the Empire.

What was more, this insult to the Iceni could easily become something that the Senate could not afford right now. Everyone knew Nero was depleting the treasury at an alarming rate with his self-serving greed.

Julius sagged under the weight of Decianus's matching imperial arrogance. He could not stop the flogging nor could he stop Decianus from bringing the women into camp. And since Nero's imperial procurator knew that, he could do as he damn well pleased. His orders were only to protect the fool's ass. *Sons of Dis and Jupiter, help me stop this man.*

Felix strode alongside Julius's horse. The centurion's red cape paled to the rage burning his face. "Jupiter's balls, Tribune, you cannot allow the procurator to do this. You well know, women are not to be in any camp. There will be nothing but fights and disorder. More men will be out of commission before dawn than from any battle."

Julius almost laughed. And just how was he to stop the bastard from dragging whomever he pleased into the camp?

The centurion pounded his palm with the polished grape vine—or *vitus*—that all centurions used to enforce an order. And right now, it appeared Felix wanted something to pound.

Julius almost pitied the men. "See that the men are too exhausted to do any more than fall asleep, Centurio. I do not care how you see this done."

Felix almost smiled.

Julius's thoughts shifted to the golden-haired daughter walking beside her mother carried by her warriors. He could not erase the image of her deep, blue gaze pleading for him to stop Decianus. If she only knew how he truly wanted to stop this disrespect to her father. Prasutagus never deserved what was happening, nor did her people.

Yet there she stood so innocent, so alone. When she bolted toward her mother, he had to stop her before the

lash touched her as well. Such horror should never ruin such perfection.

If he found a way to protect her, would the gods recognize his meager attempt? Would it appease their wrath and redirect it toward the true source of this contempt—Decianus Catus? An idea came to him, a pathetic and meager one.

Julius turned his horse toward his friend wearing the red and black crest indicating his authority over the cavalry riding outside the column.

“Decurio, to me,” Julius said, and then wheeled away from the formation. He stopped a safe distance away to wait for Marcus to join him. “The blonde daughter. I want you to get her to my tent before anyone touches her.”

Marcus stared at him in shock. “You? Of all people.”

Julius glared at the decurion. “To appease the gods for what that idiot started back there. By the gods, Marcus, it was the man’s funeral.”

“Right, Julius. Certainly. Come morning, the entire camp will be saying the same. They only fucked the women to appease the gods.”

Julius’s horse felt his frustration and danced restlessly. “Just see this done, Decurio.”



“Tribune, send wagons back to collect what was left,” Decianus said the minute Julius drew his horse to a walk beside the man’s litter. “The mother bitch, keep her alive. Oh, and burn everything.”

Julius slid from the horse so he could talk as privately as possible with the fool. “Procurator, women are not to be inside the camp. I thought you knew that.”

"I do." Decianus shrugged. "but as prisoners; they are prisoners—to be sold to pay taxes they owe Rome. And tell me, just where am I to keep them if not inside the camp? As I see it, the camp is your responsibility, Tribune. So, see that your centurions keep order."

"If I am to keep order in the camp, then I expect to see that the women are kept with the rest of the prisoners and nowhere else."

"Oh, I think not, Tribune. I want them brought to our tent area. My guards and I will see they are well taken care of there."

Julius could barely swallow the mounting bile strangling him.

Decianus chuckled from inside the curtains where he lay sprawled like a puddle of old mush. "What? Are you afraid of their gods, Tribune?"

"No. Of ours." Julius vaulted onto his horse and returned to the front of the column.

Smoke from the braziers cooking the evening meal lingered over the marching camp as he rode through the gates. He dismounted, handing the reins to the attending soldier, and faced Felix. "Call order."

The cornicens sounded. The soldiers on duty scurried into formation before a centurion.

Julius met the gaze of the short, defiant centurion. "Take the Icenii queen to the medic tent."

"Yes, Tribune. The women?" Felix asked.

"Take them the procurator's tent in praetoria. Post guards to see no one leaves. Is that clear, Centurio?"

"Gladly, Tribune."

"And be sure the male prisoners are well secured, where they see little. They will hear enough. Keep the children there."

By the time the Iceni prisoners were shoved through the gate, the camp had jolted to life like an excited beehive. Already, the off-duty soldiers had encircled the Iceni women like hungry wolves, their hands fondling flesh.

Every nerve in Julius' body felt raked. "Centurio, take the men back to the Iceni village for the rest of Decianus's plunder. Leave nothing of value and burn everything. Then double the guard."

A vicious smile beneath the white crest. "Consider that done, Tribune. The more men kept away and busy, the fewer to flog tomorrow."

Now, all he could do was to try to protect the golden-haired daughter from the horror about to explode. Then deal with whatever came at sunrise.

As wives were torn from their husbands, mothers and daughters yanked apart and fondled like livestock, they fought the assault like the Furies. As Decianus's guards forced the women through the camp, lascivious glee mixed with ignored campfires and smells of burning food.

Julius's stomach fully collapsed with no sign of the golden-haired daughter anywhere. "Venus, I beg you, help Marcus get her to my tent untouched," whispered from his lips. "And I will do what I can to see she remains so."



"Be brave, little sister. Don't let them break you," were Morrigan's last words before rough hands tore Rhianna from her sister.

Panic crippled Rhianna's body as the soldier with a red and black crest dragged her toward the camp's center ahead of the others. She fought his grip every step of the way until he tossed her inside one of the larger tents.

The moment he released her, she charged for the tent flaps where two smirking soldiers stood guard. The soldier grabbed her and tossed her back inside.

“Stay here. Do not go out there. Understand?” he ordered.

She understood well enough. Her father had made sure that she and Morrigan knew the Romans’ tongue. “No. Let me go.”

A small man, wearing a slave’s necklace, appeared in the tent. The soldier immediately barked an order, “Essex, tell her to stay here. That she will be safe in here if she does. Tell her. Make sure she understands.”

Safe? She couldn’t breathe. Sweat broke on her skin. How could she be safe? Just beyond the leather walls, shrieks were already erupting with sounds of ripping cloth and coarse male laughter.

“Do not leave this tent or that will happen to you as well,” the slave said in Icenī.

“Liar!”

When Morrigan screamed, Rhianna started for the open tent flaps. The soldier grabbed her by the waist again and threw her deeper into the tent. “Listen to Essex.”

She stumbled between two large storage chests and braced, ready to claw at either man if they came close.

This Essex stepped in front of her. “Daughter of the Icenī, if Marcus says you are safe here, believe him. He does not lie.”

She studied the little man pointing outside, toward the terror rising like a firestorm.

“Do not go out there,” he said, “unless you choose to be beaten senseless like all the rest of your women. Understand?”

CHAPTER 3

JULIUS STRODE ACROSS the walkway of the guard station, above the main gate, while off-duty soldiers swarmed with envy before Decianus's tent. As a centurion approached, they scattered, only to return like flies to a manure pile.

He hoped Marcus managed to get the girl to his tent. He hated to think what would have happened to her if she were not...or to any woman during the night.

Unfortunately, he could not do anything for them. They were Decianus's property—tax payments. All of them, including the blonde-haired daughter. This was all he was able to do to protect her from the ensuing nightmare—hide her for as long as possible.

He needed to check with Felix to be sure the men knew not to touch the prisoners and that enough guards were stationed outside Decianus's tent in case a few escaped. However, the idea of facing the centurion's fury again was not a welcome thought.

Two months back, he had joyously received his first appointment with the legions. While his mother's brother had shared much of what to expect as a tribune, his uncle

failed to tell him about feeling powerless with such men as Decianus.

Julius's thoughts were disrupted as Marcus and his cavalry drove the herd of Iceni horses through the main gate into the grassy areas just inside the dirt wall. Two stallions, a black and a bay, reared and screamed defiance while the mares dropped their heads to graze with their foals at their sides. Then the wagons loaded with the remainder of the Iceni goods lumbered in behind the herd.

Julius welcomed the intrusion and hurried down the ladder as Marcus dismounted by the gate. "All went well?" he asked.

"Nothing is left if that is what you mean. But Prasutagus's body was gone before we got back to the gravesite."

"I cannot say I am surprised." Maybe that would appease their gods. Julius could only hope so.

Marcus slid off his helmet and then tucked it under his arm. "Dealt with the guest in your tent yet?"

"You got her there before Decianus could touch her?" he asked with relief.

"I left her there, but I cannot guarantee she stayed." Marcus smirked. "Bet you cannot wait to enjoy her tonight?"

Julius sagged with frustration. "Like I said, she is in my tent for her protection, nothing more."

Marcus shrugged. "But Decianus will sell them all as slaves. So, what are you going to do with her then?"

The question was direct and true. Yes, the Iceni captives would be sold as slaves. What was he going to do with the blonde daughter? Maybe having her taken to his tent had been irrational. However, he could not bear the idea of knowing men were touching her flesh and using her.

“Nice horses,” he said to change the topic.

Marcus nodded toward the herd. “They are. The Icení are well known for fine horses. I cannot wait to try the bay one.” He looked at Julius, his gaze more intent. “I was wondering. What does Decianus plan to do with the stallions?”

“Line his pockets with more gold than Nero will ever see.”

“Will he sell the bay?”

Julius met Marcus’s curious gaze. “For the right price, I believe Decianus would sell his soul to Hades.”

Marcus slid his helmet over his head. “I think I will see if the bay is worth Hades’ price.”

Julius’s attention returned to the stallions. The black one moved like an agile wind while the bay appeared more substantial. Good breeding either way. He toyed with the idea of riding the black to keep his mind from the beautiful blonde goddess hidden in his tent.

While tying his cheek guards, Marcus nodded at Felix storming toward them. “Glad you have to deal with him and not me.”

“Tribune, the Icení goods have been delivered into this...madness.”

“Excellent, Centurio. How is the queen?”

“Living.” The centurion’s face softened slightly. “So ya know, I went easy on her, as best I could.”

“Praise the gods for that.” Julius scanned the soldiers milling before the brutal insanity exploding inside canvased praetoria. “Find something for those fools to do. Clean the latrine or something.”

“Consider it done.” Felix stepped away.

“And Centurio, at dawn, see that the women are taken to the medics and kept out of sight. I want the tent guarded as well.”

“If any of ‘em live to see the sun rise.” The soldier hesitated and then met Julius’s gaze. “You know their men should be killed.”

“Probably.” If this happened to his mother, Julius knew he would find a way to kill the prick who did it. “But Decianus sees them as tax revenue.”

“Likely sold as gladiators if they make it back to Rome,” Felix retorted. The stocky soldier saluted and wheeled about. “Get off your lazy asses and do something, you horny bastards. Pay attention out there, you pieces of shit.”



Morrigan? Rhianna? Boudica’s brain raged. Rome’s insults had cut deeper than the lashes ever could. Yet that paled to the hell that was happening to her daughters. To the Iceni women. Her anger returned, coiling like a snake.

If the Romans could disrespect Prasutagus’s death and his people this way, what would stop them from disrespecting all the remaining tribes as well? Maybe now the other tribes would fear becoming Rome’s next victim and join her in ridding their lands of all things Roman.

But, somehow, the Romans would pay for what they did to the Iceni, she promised the canvas wall before her.

The tent flaps rustled behind her as someone entered.

“How is she?”

“She lives.”

Words of the Roman tongue sharpened her hearing.

“Good. I want all the women brought here at dawn.”

“Have you lost your mind, Tribune? This tent is not big enough for that many.”

“Then get a bigger tent and see they are dressed and cared for. Understood?”

“By the gods, Tribune. They are prisoners.”

“Orders, Medic, and keep them out of sight. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Tribune.”

Boudica's gratitude opened to the goddess Andraste for bringing the women to her.

I thank you, Andraste, warrior goddess of victory. I beg to you, you who have never fallen, see and hear my plea to lead us to victory over those who insult your people. I ask you to send us your wisdom that we may destroy those who know nothing but greed. Help us return our hearts and lands to you, the invincible, and help us rid our lives of this Roman filth.

I ask that I may be your instrument of Rome's destruction. I ask this for my people and for those who know your might and power. Lead us, Andraste, to victory!

Boudica's eyes opened. Her heart closed. “So, it begins.”