

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 cloak brooch, piercing the drape of wool at Mergith’s shoulder. The 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 at his stanchion, stalwart as any warrior, knowing the Iceni 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 Iceni leader. Otherwise, the gold torc around her neck meant nothing.

Her mother’s sharp features, her iron-gray gaze, and long, auburn hair radiated 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.

Morrigan had Mergith. Neither she nor her mother had anyone to stand at their sides this day.

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 Iceni 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 the 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.

Bulging in the column's middle was a cloth-covered box carried by eight slaves. Surrounding them strode a guard of bare-chested men whose long hair draped like capes down their well-muscled backs.

Every soldier carried a large, red, rectangular shield with a yellow-winged pattern and wore a sword called a gladius banging against his thigh. Their long, red capes swayed with each measured step. Cavalry rode, almost like an escort, on horses also

decorated with silver that sparkled in the afternoon sun.

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. His odd-looking guards accompanied him 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 leader 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 a white crest, divided with five black sections, that arced across his helmet from ear to ear.

"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 the men."

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 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 Boudica. "Churl said to wait."

Morrigan braced to a halt.

"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 bellowed. "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.”

Her mother scooped a handful of dirt and then 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.”