

EMPIRE OF THE HARE
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The trouble started with Father's will.

He divided the wealth of the Iceni and gave a mere half to the Emperor Nero. The other half he left to his Queen, with the understanding she should rule in his place when the spirits finally claimed him. It might have been the way things were done in my grandparents' day, but it certainly wasn't the way our conquerors ruled. Classicianus, the Prefect's tax collector, had been most anxious I should understand our position upon Father's death. "Submit as Roman women do," he advised. "Then Nero will allow you to stay in your home. The only thing you'll lose is your titles - a small thing, surely, compared to what he has the power to take from you should you cause any trouble."

I knew it would be no use talking to Mother or my sister. So while the castle slept beneath the moon goddess Serapha's silver eye, I crept to Father's bedside, fell to my knees on the damp stone and begged him to reconsider.

He tried to lift the plait that hung heavy as a bronze rope across my face, but he could not do it. "It's too late, Ralla my child. The scribe has come and gone. Your mother would have it no other way. Don't worry. I'm sure when the great Emperor Nero realises I have no son to inherit my lands, he'll make an exception in this case." His words erupted in coughs. He leant into the shadows at the far side of the bed, and there came the sound of retching.

Though a chill sat beneath my heart and I could feel demons waiting in every corner, I did as Classicianus had taught me and reached for my inner light. "Please, Father!" I said. "You could call another scribe. Classicianus says Mother's crazy if she thinks Nero will let her rule, but that if you were to let him, he could word it in such a way that we'll be allowed to stay here under a Roman representative."

I had gone too far. Father rose up on one elbow. The imported linen of his night robe was spattered with blood, and Serapha chose that moment to withdraw her blessings from the room. The demons shrieked in triumph as they whirled towards the bed.

"I love you, Ralla," he whispered. "I love your sister. I love your mother. When I walk with the spirits, I need to know you'll still have a roof over your heads, meat on your table, and the respect of our conquerors."

"But that's exactly what we won't have! Mother won't work with the Romans as you did. She offers sacrifices to Adraste whenever you're away. She makes me and Kwelona watch. She talks to the Druids in secret, and she's stolen gold from your coffers to fund their cause."

"Ralla, I don't want to hear this."

"Classicianus is right. She's crazy, Father. I've seen her dance naked in the sacred grove, and"

"Ralla!"

"I've seen her drink blood."

His back arched on a scream. I thought his spirit had gone. But when he fell back, his breath bubbled in the darkness.

I felt for his hand, clutched it tightly and bowed my head. "Please Father, you don't understand! If you give her this power, she'll make the Iceni worship Adraste's spear, and -" I couldn't see how I would bear this "- she'll stop me seeing Classicianus."

He whispered something then, just before he died. Maybe something about love and sacrifice. But the blood broke his words and Adraste's demons carried the pieces away.

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Even with the Romans' new roads and fine ships, it's a long way from Camelodunum to the Narrow Sea which separates this land from Classicianus' home, and even further across Gaul and into the warm sea called Mediterranean that washes the shores of Nero's great city. Classicianus once explained it in the strides of a hare: one for the lands of the Iceni; ten for all Britannia; twenty for Gaul; but a thousand huge leaps to cross Nero's Empire. So it was that while the messages were travelling by horseback and ship, we had time to bury Father, time to mourn, time to feast, and time to be afraid.

I could not understand why someone with so much land already would want ours too, but I knew Classicianus' warnings were given in good faith and I dreaded Nero's reply.

Meanwhile, Mother revelled in her new freedom. She invited the Druids to join our feasts, even though they were outcasts after the last edict from Rome, and quite openly defied the Prefect's representatives who called at the gates to demand audiences. She ordered one particularly obstinate man who had tricked his way into our hall to be trussed like a deer, and dragged him through the streets of Camelodunum behind her chariot. She was drunk at the time, but that was no excuse. The representative died. I felt awful in case he had been a friend of Classicianus'.

Kwelona stared at the filthy, bloody body stripped of most of its clothing, chewed on her knuckles, then giggled. "Look, Mother!" she said. "He's got a big worm hanging between his legs!"

"Idiot," I hissed. "You know what that is. You've been to the sacred grove. Stop laughing, it's not funny."

But even as I spoke, I knew Kwelona had not connected what she had seen in the grove with reality. With the Druids' masks and costumes, their smoke and their drums-that-beat-in-the-head, what she saw there must have been like a tale told to frighten children. I bet she thought the blood of the sacrifice Mother drank to bind her spirit to Adraste was nothing more sinister than blackberry juice.

The way Kwelona laughed reminded me of Mother in her crazier moods. I took hold of my sister's shoulders and shook her. "Stop it!" I shouted. "Stop it now!"

Whereupon Mother seized my hair from behind and slapped me before all the guests who had piled out to watch the fun. "That's enough," she said, her voice like iron in spite of all the mead she had drunk. "Remember you're a princess of the Icenii! Now spit on the foreign filth and get in the chariot."

There was a hush. Kwelona stopped giggling and went back to chewing her knuckles. In the torchlight, her hair burned and the golden threads of her best gown glittered. But the hem was splattered with mud, and she had lost one of her slippers in the sewer. I turned my face away from the dead man. "I will not," I said quietly.

Mother tugged my plait harder. "Roman sandal-licker," she hissed into my ear. "Your pretty Gaulish tax collector will be next. Or maybe we should keep him for something special? To read the portents, perhaps?"

I turned cold. I knew what she meant. The Druids have many ways of divining the future. Some involve animals, others certain herbs picked by Serapha's light, but the ceremony she was referring to involves plunging a dagger into a man's heart and watching the way his limbs thrash as he enters the world of the spirits.

Mother laughed at the expression on my face, leapt into the chariot and grabbed the reins. The mare shied, and for a moment the platform teetered on one wheel. Mother laughed even louder. "All right, Ralla! Have it your own way and walk. Coming, Kwelona?"

My sister shot me a look over her knuckles, then edged around the dead man, spat quickly at his trussed ankles, and jumped for the moving chariot. Their laughter echoed in the dark streets long after the hoof beats and the rumble of wheels had faded.

To my shame, as I walked home alone that night with the demons chasing me and my dagger in my hand to discourage the rabble from thinking I was an easy target, I actually wished Emperor Nero would cross the thousand leaps of the hare and take away Mother's power, even if it meant we had to live in one of the hovels clustered around the grand marble buildings the Romans had erected in the centre of Camelodunum - though I did not seriously believe he would make a queen live in a hut. I still believed in Classicianus' inner light, and that this light would one day shine in every corner of our land. To tell the truth, when Serapha shone on the centre of the town, and I saw how our castle brooded in black contrast against the sky, I rather fancied living in one of the marble palaces that had taken so much of the Icenii's wealth and labour to build.

Yet even as I dreamed, the hare was busy leaping.

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The soldiers came at dawn with an edict proclaiming Mother guilty of the crimes of harbouring Druids and irreligion, decreeing public punishment and confiscation of all her lands and riches.

They caught the men with sore heads, the hall in disarray, the dogs fighting over scraps, and Mother snoring. They broke down the gates, marched into our chambers with drawn swords and took

us from our beds. Mother, they stripped naked and marched through the streets of Camelodunum to the market place, where they whipped her until she fainted. They were trying to force her to sacrifice a goose to their dead God-Emperor Claudius, whose statue had recently been erected in one of the grandest palaces, but she of course was far too stubborn to do such a thing. She cried out only once. A shout full of defiance that made me tremble in my captors' grip and sent the sun god Bala fleeing, red faced, behind black clouds.

"Adraste avenge your handmaiden!"

There was a crash in the sky and the townspeople, who had gathered in reluctant groups to witness the flogging, screamed.

The soldiers tightened their grip on my arms. They had made me and Kwelona watch the whole thing, barefoot on the marble steps in only our thin bedrobes, but I was shivering more for the look on Kwelona's face than from the cold or the fear they might whip us next. Her eyes - the gold-flecked green inherited from our mother - were full of disbelief, and I knew what she was thinking. Mother was invincible. Why didn't she break her chains and strike the soldiers down with her sword? When Mother's body slumped against the post in a river of blood and bright hair, and no vengeful goddess came to help her, Kwelona screeched like an owl and kicked the shins of the soldiers holding her. In answer, they dragged her to the nearest hovel, chased out the family who huddled inside, and carried my sister, still shrieking and kicking, inside.

A coldness ran through me. They had put the goose Mother had refused into my hands and thrust me on to my knees before the statue, obviously intending that as eldest daughter I should make the public sacrifice in her place, but my fingers were numb and the bird escaped. Through the softly falling feathers, I stared at the hut where they had taken my sister. The flap of sacking at the door was closed, but I could still hear her screams. The soldiers were making no attempt to muffle them.

"Prefect Paullinus will hear of this," I whispered. "She's just a child."

My captors laughed. One of them grabbed my hair and twisted until his armour dented my cheek. Then he began to drag me backwards down the steps. I heard Classicianus' name mentioned, but the soldier holding my hair chuckled again. "Don't see him here defending her honour, do you? He was only wooing the slut for her title and lands, anyway, and she's just lost both. Before tonight, she'll have lost something else too!"

I shut my eyes at that point, and did not open them until it was over. I assume they took me into one of the hovels as well so there would be no witnesses. But had they done it there on the steps beneath the cold marble gaze of their God-Emperor and before the frightened eyes of the townspeople, it could have been no worse. They took nothing from me that I had not already given freely to Classicianus in the castle stables, but this was different. I tried to reach for my inner light, but the darkness pressed around me, crushed me, and then - like the Druids' sacrificial blood - invaded me.

Afterwards, I found Kwelona by following the humming. I recognised the lullaby I used to sing to her when she was a baby. She was sitting with knees drawn up to her chest, arms wrapped tightly around them, hair dishevelled and eyes wide open. She did not blink, even when I pushed aside the sacking, crawled through the broken pots and hugged her close.

"Shh, shh," I said. "It's over."

She was rigid in my arms, but her humming broke off when I spoke.

"They put their worms inside me," she whispered.

"I know, but they've gone now."

"They're eating me alive."

"Oh, Kwelona - I know that's what it feels like, but they're not. Can you walk? We have to get someone to help us with Mother."

I tried to pull her up, but she pushed me away, then suddenly began to scream. Louder and louder, clutching at her stomach and gasping in-between.

"Kwelona, don't! You'll hurt yourself."

"Worms! Kill the worms!" she shrieked, and tore at herself with her nails until fresh blood ran to join that already crusted on the insides of her thighs. I grabbed her wrists in alarm, but just as suddenly she quietened and fixed her unblinking gaze on the wall. "When's Father coming back?" she said in a

little voice. "He promised to bring me a new bracelet. My old one's too small - look what it did." And she fingered a bruise on her arm.

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I begged the Druids for help. I didn't know what else to do. I didn't trust any of the soldiers to take a message to Classicianus, and the ones Nero had sent were busy ransacking the castle, so we couldn't go back there. They had left Mother chained like a criminal to the whipping post, the townspeople were too frightened to talk to me, and our small band of men at arms glanced over their shoulders continuously as they worked to free Mother's unconscious, bleeding body.

We wrapped her in a cloak and took her to the sacred grove. I swear Kwelona never blinked the whole way, though I could not see her face properly through my tears. No one could have imagined that the bedraggled band who camped in the leaf shadows that night surrounded by the wet smells of broom and hawthorn and oak, jumping at every rustle and every dark flick of a bat's wing, was the beginning of the greatest army in the history of the Icenii. I know I didn't. Had I been able to see the future then, would I have tried to turn the hare? I do not know.

The hare is an old Druid trick. First they trap a large and impressive animal, then they enslave its spirit with their foul smoke, their chants, and their drums-that-beat-in-the-head. They read the portents in the direction it runs when they let it go - and to make sure it runs well, they chase it. I could not help feeling sorry for the poor creature as it crouched in its wicker basket, ears flat, staring out at our salivating dogs. The hare knew death when it saw it.

Meanwhile, Mother spoke to those who had assembled in the grove. It was a fine speech, full of unfair taxes and false gods and forced labour, but it was just as much an excuse as Nero's edict had been. I saw her eyes when she touched Kwelona between the legs and brought out her finger smeared in blood. She gave me a look of pure hatred, as if it was my fault for not stopping the soldiers, then told us both to wash in the stream and to remember we were Icenii princesses.

"We should go to the Prefect," I whispered to her when I finally got her alone.

She stared at me, and her lips curved. "Indeed we will, Ralla. After we've burned every Roman town from the face of our land and driven every sandal-licking foreigner back into the sea where they belong."

"Please, Mother. Be sensible. They'll kill us next time."

"Better than what they did! We'll die in battle, and Adraste herself will welcome us to the world of the spirits."

"The men will never listen to you."

"Oh, I think they will."

I could see it was hopeless. I shook my head and turned to leave, but she grabbed my damp plait and pulled me back. "If you interfere with the hare, Ralla, I'll kill you myself. Understand?"

Thousands of lives lost over the whim of a terrified animal. I remembered Classicianus' words as I watched it dart from the basket, and found myself counting the flashes of its white underbelly as its great strides ate up the ground. One - the Icenii. Two - The Trinovantes. Three, four - before the hare reached the Narrow Sea, the dogs were on it. There was a snarl, flying fur, a spray of blood, and a ragged cheer from the men. Mother stood on a fallen log, her sword at her hip and a faint smile on her lips. Behind her stood Kwelona with blue whorls on her cheeks, bruises on her arms, gold in her hair, and that terrifying blankness in her eyes. Mother flashed a triumphant glance my way as she drew her great sword and swung it up into the sunlight, double handed.

"Adraste says we fight!" she shouted above the noise of the dogs. "The portents are good. The foreigners will die. Our land will be free of the conquerors' yoke!"

The cheers were more enthusiastic this time. The Druids beat their drums, horses whinnied and tossed their heads, and the men's blood rose at the sight of the flashing blade.

"Boudicca!" they chanted. "Boudicca! Victory!"

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Mother approved of the name. She used it from that day on, discarding her old self as if she had left everything that was woman, wife and mother chained to the whipping post in the ashes of Camelodunum. "Boudicca!" we yelled as we swept down upon Londinium and burned that too. "Boudicca!" as we rode into Verulamium, and a third great fire drove men, women and children

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screaming into the forests. We had most of the Trinovante warriors on our side by then, morale was high, and Mother seemed unstoppable. But I could not help thinking of the poor hare.

One- the Iceni. Two - the Trinovantes. Three, four- and the dogs were on it.

"Mother, we have to talk."

I picked my time carefully. Just after the battle, she would be drunk on blood and power, driving her chariot like one crazed through the ranks of prisoners, seeing how many she could cut down with the scythes she had ordered attached to the wheels. While she drove, Kwelona knelt on the back with a spear and stabbed any who managed to roll beneath the blades. Later, when the slaughter was over and the bitter stench of blood and burning hung like clouds in the sky, Mother would be drunk on mead and the noise of the drums. Between, there would be a short period of lucidity when I feared her more than I did at any other time. For this was when she would take her dagger to the throats of the surviving prisoners and offer their spirits to Adraste.

"Mother, it's important!"

I knew she heard me. She was forcing me to come closer, to see the expression on the face of the man bound to an oak facing her blade. She taunted him with a few shallow cuts, then seized my wrist and forced the dagger into my hand, holding my fingers closed about the hilt. Her calluses scratched my knuckles.

"You haven't met my eldest daughter, have you?" Still holding me, she ran a finger down the prisoner's cheek. "This is Ralla, lover of foreigners. She loves them so much, she'll let anyone have her - tax collectors, the entire Roman army, maybe even you."

My cheeks burned as the prisoner's eyes turned to my face. But there was no contempt in them, only a flicker of hope, like the flash of the doomed hare's belly.

"Shall I arrange it, Ralla?" she said to me. "Give you the potion that brings love and let you dance with him before we send his spirit into the dark?"

I shuddered. The Druids have a potion for everything. Some are rumoured to make the body dance in spite of the wishes of its owner, and I'd certainly seen evidence enough in the groves.

"Or will you do your duty tonight as a princess of the Iceni, and despatch this spirit to Adraste?" She forced my hand closer until the tip of the knife pricked the prisoner's throat. He swallowed and met my gaze. Mother let go - physically. "Go on, Ralla," she whispered. "Do it. Then we can talk all you want, because you'll belong to Adraste."

Air would not come. The noise of the victorious army, the horns and drums and the heady scent of the Druids' fires, the shrieks and laughter, the odour of roasting boar and venison - all this was happening as if behind a dark mist. I looked for Kwelona, but she was in the thick of the celebrations, and I knew she could not help me.

"There has to be a Druid present," I whispered.

"There are plenty in the grove. Adraste is waiting."

"And then you'll listen to me?"

"If you wish."

I tightened my grip on the dagger and released his spirit as quickly as I could. I had killed plenty in battle, but this was different. This took the light from my heart and replaced it with darkness. Mother's shout of triumph made every hair on my body rise, and a dark wind rushed through the grove, stripping the leaves from the trees and whirling them around us until I had to grab Mother's arm to keep from falling.

"Now you're truly my daughter," she said, and thrust a bowl to my lips. "Drink."

I had swallowed before I realised what I was drinking. The blood was rich and sweet and burned a path to my heart. She chanted a prayer to Adraste that made my body burn all the fiercer, but I pushed myself from her and staggered away from the oak, clawing my way through the leaves. At the edge of the grove, I risked a glance back and saw her staring after me, fury and frustration in her eyes.

"The hare died on its fourth leap!" I shouted before I fled into the forest.

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She took no notice of my warning, and in the morning we pressed on. We travelled quite openly now, drunk on victory. Drunk on Boudicca. Mother drove her own chariot with its gory scythes on the wheels, and Kwelona and I rode in the back. None of us spoke, but for different reasons. Mother stared straight

ahead, planning the next battle. My sister gazed at nothing, smiling slightly, and I shuddered to think what she saw. Meanwhile, I searched the edge of the forest we were passing with a cold, creeping terror in my heart. The Druids' potions and smoke can open up the path, enabling those who accept the trance to leap ahead of the hare, and I think something of the sort must have happened to me that night I drank blood, for long before we came to the crossroads, I knew he would be there.

He stood alone, shrouded by a thick cloak with a hood that hid his face; one man, barely more than a boy, to stop an army. My body turned rigid, my heart pounded and my ears roared. For a horrible moment I thought Mother would trample him into the mud, but she flung up a hand and wrenched the mare into a rear. Behind us, men and chariots and horses and pack ponies and hangers-on sighed and creaked to a halt; a column that stretched back into darkness between a steep ridge and the ancient trees, further than I could see. Suddenly it seemed a very bad place to stop.

"Turn back!" called the hooded man. "Suetonius Paullinus waits ahead with ten thousand men. If you lay down your arms and surrender, he'll be merciful to your families."

Mother threw back her head and laughed. "Do you know who I am?"

"I know you like to call yourself Boudicca, but you're a woman under that armour and you bleed like anyone else."

Mother hissed and waved her hand. I cried out a warning, but too late. Men had already hurdled the scythes, seized the messenger and ripped back his hood.

I think Mother must have been as surprised as any who recognised the Prefect's soft-handed tax collector, because she said nothing, though I sensed the air between them crackle.

"You all know who I am." Classicianus' voice grew louder but remained calm. "I've come personally to deliver this warning because I've no wish to see your lands and homes destroyed and your wives and children sent to Rome in chains. I can't promise you who have killed so many won't be punished. But if you surrender now, your children will be allowed to live in peace under the governance of the Prefect and the Empire."

This set off mutters behind, as those who heard passed his words back down the column. Horses chewed their bits and stamped their feet. Mother looked at me, a smile playing on her lips. "Ralla," she said. "Take out your dagger and offer this lying foreign spirit to Adraste."

I shook my head.

"Ralla! In Adraste's Name, I command you to do as you're told!"

Her words brought the darkness back, until I had to clutch at the rail. But Classicianus' presence strengthened the flicker of light in my heart, and I removed my hand from my dagger. "Never."

Mother's face twisted. "Kwelona, you do it."

My sister drew her dagger, climbed down from the chariot and walked towards Classicianus. The men had ripped his cloak and tunic to expose his heart, and as I watched his pale breast rise and fall, the final bonds on me fell away. I leapt after Kwelona and grabbed her arm. "No!" I cried. "You can't. There's no Druid here."

It was true. The cowards would not appear again until the battle was over. The men holding Classicianus glanced at each other. Behind Mother's chariot, others heard my words and began to mutter afresh. Kwelona, however, was beyond reach. She shook me off and raised her blade.

"The worms!" I yelled, desperate. "They're inside you, eating you alive!"

Several things happened then, so quickly I don't remember the order. I know my sister blinked. Her blade wavered, then before I could stop her it flashed down and plunged into her own belly. Mother screamed, whipped the mare into a gallop and launched her spear at Classicianus. The men holding him, seeing the scythes glittering towards their legs, jumped for cover. A white light cracked around Classicianus, and the spear flew wide. The mare's shoulder knocked me down. I hit my head on a rock, and there was a whistling as the scythes kissed my ear. Hooves, wheels and feet thundered by in a blur. Then came the familiar clash of iron, screams and thuds, and loose horses galloping everywhere. Classicianus had not been as foolhardy as I thought. The ten thousand men led by the Prefect had been hiding behind the ridge all the time, and they had our column trapped against the forest. Terrified horses galloped into the trees and chariots overturned as they struck the trunks. It was a massacre.

Classicianus put his arms around me, put his cloak over my bright hair, and led me through the confusion to where he had tethered his horse. We left Kwelona staring at the sky, and I like to think she cut the worms out of her body before her spirit left it; her dagger was tangled in glistening coils, and she was smiling when she died. I never saw Mother fall, but those few who escaped the slaughter tell of a woman's shape that rose out of the earth and carried her body away, so that when the Romans came they found only her golden armour, her helmet, and a twisted strand of her bronze hair. She was Adraste's to the end.

And me? I have rediscovered the light here in the Summer Country, on this island that men call Witrin, or Glass, because the eyes of an enemy look right through it, not knowing the trick of seeing the truth. Now things have calmed down, Classicianus visits and gives me the latest news. At first, the revenge Nero ordered on our people made me long to follow my sister's path. But my studies here have opened up a whole new world, and sometimes I can still see ahead of the hare. What I see is white and shining like soft belly fur, and I know that one day this light will shine further than the dogs can run, and our land will once again be free.

THE END

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