

A HORDE OF RAVENS

Chapter 6

Conan could not sleep that night. He could still see the black horde of ravens that had massed overhead when he blew the horn. He remembered what the Icenian metalsmith had said about carnyces: that they had the power to summon up gods and ancestors. He wondered whether to tell his uncle what had happened. He couldn't help thinking Turi might laugh at him or think he was imagining things.

When morning came, there was no time for talk. A messenger had ridden over early from the Icenians to tell them that Boudica was rallying her troops and would address them with her plan of attack. The bulk of the Roman army was occupied elsewhere, and now was the time to strike. Drest told Conan they must ready themselves with all the weapons and war horns they had made. Men, women and children would all be joining Boudica's army.

They left their village, a swarm of people like bees leaving a hive. About halfway between their land and Icenian land was a hollow oak. Tribes who were joining the revolt were assembling there so Boudica could explain her battle plans.

Nothing could prepare Conan for the crowds. They seemed to come from every direction: men, women, boys and girls. Their voices were wild and excited, but suddenly, there was a hush and the crowd parted as a light wicker chariot led by two horses sped through them. The horses reared up as they were reined to a sudden halt. Using the chariot as a platform, the tall figure of Boudica stood before them. The spring sunshine shone on the heavy, gold torc around her neck and on the spear that she clutched as she spoke. Her voice was harsh and warlike.

"The fighting between our peoples is over," she told them. "Today we must come together to fight a common enemy: Rome. We fight for our freedom and our independence. We fight for the return of our lands."

The crowds cheered. Some drummed their weapons against their shields, chanting "Boudica! Boudica!".

"The Roman army is strong, but our spies tell us their legions are away on the Isle of Mona, where they are destroying the sacred groves of the Druids. This leaves

Camulodunum poorly defended. There is no time to waste. We must ready ourselves to attack the city.”

Conan saw his father’s face light up. Camulodunum had been their tribal capital before the Romans had seized it and made it a colony. The city lay to the south. In just two days’ time, the Iceni would begin to move their army southwards, gathering other tribes as they went.

Boudica brandished her sword. “We will take Camulodunum. We will destroy the Romans and everything belonging to them. We will free the people they forced into slavery,” she promised them. The crowd began to cheer and chant again.

Amongst them, Conan recognised the Iceni girl Keena. She was chanting Boudica’s name.

“Keena!” he called. At first, she didn’t seem to hear him; she was so intent on chanting and waving her wooden club. But then she lifted the club to her lips as if it were a horn, and pretended to blow into it. Conan tried to tell her about the carnyx he had made, using his hands to show the size, but the crowd was just too loud. She caught his eye and smiled. He smiled back and joined in with the chanting, because although Boudica was not queen of his people, he knew that now they must follow her lead.

As soon as they returned home that night, they began to prepare for battle. Every sword, spear and knife was sharpened in readiness. They mixed chalky lime water to dress their hair in white spikes. They stirred woad to make an inky blue warpaint, brushing it in swirls, scrolls and animal designs over their faces and bodies. The carnyces that Turi and Conan had made stood ready.

“I hoped we would have time to make more of them,” Turi told him. “But the Iceni will bring theirs, and the other tribes will bring more. We must make ours sound like a hundred horns.”

“Uncle, do you think it’s true a carnyx can summon up our gods and ancestors?” Conan asked Turi.

“I think it is our breath that will bring them to life,” Turi told him. “And when they have a life of their own, who can tell what will happen?”

Conan reached up and stroked the head of his bronze raven. Its dark eyes glinted as if it were already alive.