Boudica: Dreaming the Bull

Manda Scott

Chapter 1

Only the children sleep on the night before battle and sometimes not even them. On the night before the Roman governor of Britannia took ship and left for ever the land he had conquered, two thousand warriors and half as many dreamers gathered awake on a hillside, less than a morning's ride from the most westerly of the frontier forts. Singly and in groups, as their gods and their courage dictated, they prepared themselves for war on a scale not seen in the four years since Rome's invasion.

Breaca nic Graine, once of the Eceni and now of Mona, sat alone at the edge of a mountain pool. She tossed a pebble in the palm of her hand and sent it skipping over the water.

'For luck.'

The stone bounced five times, shattering the moon's reflection. Shards of broken light scattered into darkness and were lost. The river ran on unheard, the music of its passing drowned beneath the stutter of bear claws played on hollow skulls nearby. The light of a thousand restless campfires gilded the water's edge and smoke hazed the air above it. Only by the river was there solitude and darkness and the peace to ask favours of the gods.

'For courage.'

The second pebble clipped the edge of the moon and was lost. On the unseen slopes behind, the skull-drums reached a crescendo. A woman's voice called out in the language of the northern ancestors. Other voices answered, grunting, and the un-rhythm of the drums changed. It was not good to listen too closely to that; over the years, more than one soul had been lost in the mesh of woven bone-sounds and had never found its way home.

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'For Briga's care in battle.'

The third stone, more accurate than those before it, bounced nine times and sank into the moon's heart, carrying the prayer directly to the gods without the intermediary of the river. If a warrior believed in omens, it was a good one. Breaca, known as the Boudica, sat as the moon settled again and was whole, a crisp half-circle of silver lying still on a bed of moving black.

She picked up a fourth stone. It was wider and flatter than the others and bounced smoothly on her palm. She breathed a different prayer into it, one for which tradition did not supply the words.

'For Caradoc and for Cunomar, for their joy and their peace if I am taken in battle. Briga, mother of war, of childbirth and of dying, take care of them for me.'

It was not a new prayer; in the three and a half years since her son was born, she had spoken it countless times in the silence of her mind in those moments before the first clash of combat when everything and everyone she loved must be put aside and forgotten. The difference now, in the rushing dark by the river, with the chaos of preparation held temporarily at bay, was that she had spoken for the first time aloud and had felt the prayer clearly heard. She was beside water, which was Nemain's, and on the eve of battle, which was Briga's, and the gods were alive and walking on the mountainside, called in by the scores of dreamers whose ceremonies lit the night sky.

After nearly four years of despair, she could feel the promise of freedom just within reach if bone and blood and sinew could be pushed hard enough and far enough to make it happen. Knowing a hope greater than any she had felt since the invasion, the Boudica drew back her arm to throw her stone.

'Mama?'

'Cunomar!' She turned too fast. The pebble skittered over the water and was lost. A child stood on the river bank above her, tousled from sleep and stumbling uncertainly in the dark.

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She reached up and lifted her son by the waist, bringing him down to the water's edge where he could stand safely. 'My warrior, you should be sleeping, why are you not?'

Blearily, he rubbed a small fist in his eye. 'The drums woke me. Ardacos is calling the she-bears to help him. He's going to fight the Romans. Can I watch the ceremony?'

Cunomar was not quite four years old and had only recently begun to grasp the enormity of war. Ardacos was his latest

hero, second only to his father and mother in the pantheon of his gods. The small, savage Caledonian was the stuff of childhood idolatry. Ardacos led the band of warriors dedicated to the she-bear; they fought always on foot and largely naked and surpassed all others in the stalking and hunting of the enemy by night.

The skull-drums were his, and the chanting that accompanied them.

Breaca said, 'We're all going to fight the Romans but, no, I think the ceremony is sacred and not for our eyes unless they call us in. When you are older, if the she-bear so grants, you can join with Ardacos in his ceremonies.'

The boy's face flushed in the fire glow, suddenly awake. 'The she-bear will grant it,' he said. 'She must. I'll join Ardacos and together we will drive the legions into the outer Ocean.'

He spoke with the conviction of one who has not yet known defeat, nor even considered it possible. Breaca had not the heart to disappoint him. 'Then your father and I will be glad to save you some Romans to fight. But in the morning we must kill the ones in the fort beyond the next mountain, and before that Ardacos and two of his warriors must make the land safe for us. It may be he has need of me in a part of his ceremony. If I go to him, you must go to bed first. Will you do that?'

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'Can I sit on the grey battle mare before you go to kill the legions?'

'Yes, if you're good. See, your father's here. He'll hold you while I go to Ardacos.'

'How did you know-?' The child's face was awash with awe. Already he believed his mother part-way to divinity; for her to predict the appearance of his father out of the maelstrom of the night was only another step to godhood.

Breaca smiled. 'I heard his footsteps,' she said. 'There's nothing magical in that.' It was true; more than Cunomar, more than any other living being, she knew the tread of this one step. In the chaos of battle, in the silence of a winter night, she could hear Caradoc walk and know where he was.

Now, he waited at the top of the bank. With the firelight behind, his face was invisible and only his hair was lit. Spun gold flickered around his head so that he looked as might Camul, the war god, on the eve of battle, or Belin who daily rode the mounts of the sun. It was a night to sustain such fancies and the gods would not be offended.

In the voice of men, Caradoc said, 'Breaca? The she-bears have called your name. Are you ready?'

'I think so. If you will take care of your son, we can find out.' She passed Cunomar up to the waiting arms and hoisted herself up by the hazel roots. 'Briga gives me luck and her care should the luck fail. It appears I may have to find my own courage.'

The fourth stone was forgotten, deliberately so. There was no way to predict what the gods might make of it. Breaca could not imagine them exacting retribution from a child for his mother's failure to cast a stone truly and Caradoc made his own fate in battle. She had seen him fight too often to believe he could die before her.

She pulled herself up the last half-length of the bank. Caradoc's face was lined by lack of sleep and the weight of leadership. He hugged her lightly. 'The she-bears

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believe you have courage to spare. Tonight would not be a good time to disillusion them.'

Breaca grimaced. 'I know. To them I am god-filled and can never die. You and I know the truth: courage is too fickle to be held fast from one day to the next. Like sweeping the moon in a fishing net, the water sifts through and the light stays as it was. Each time I ride into battle I believe it will be the last.'

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