

I
AUTUMN-WINTER AD 47





I



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 Ezeni 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.

'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.

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?’

‘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 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.'

She should not have said that. The fourth stone was not fully forgotten and Caradoc could read her as well as she could him. He asked, 'Does the coming battle feel bad to you?'

'No more than it ever does. And it doesn't matter. There are enough in Mona's council who know what to do if we do not survive.'

'Thank you. I will fight better believing they will not be called on.' He kissed her, a brief press of dry lips on her cheek, and then, quickly, 'If Ardacos can do as we need, fewer may die.'

‘We can hope so. Take care of Cunomar. I can find the she-bears on my own.’

Away from the river, the hillside was alive with warriors painting themselves and each other, weaving their warrior’s braids and fixing at their temples the kill-feathers that gave notice to the gods of the numbers of enemy already slain.

Ardacos’ she-bears formed a circle on the western slope of the mountain, sheltered by late-berried thorns. The night was alive with the clatter of bear claws played on bone-white skulls and it was hard to hear anything beyond the soft, insistent absence of rhythm. The sound was a river that washed into the mind and soul and carried them to places Breaca had never been, or wished to go. Older than the ancestors, it spoke directly to the gods, promising them blood in return for victory and demanding courage and something greater than courage as its price.

Knowing exactly the limits of her own courage, Breaca nic Graine, known throughout the tribes as the Boudica, bringer of victory, stepped forward into the firelight.

The men and women of the she-bear made a circle around her. In daylight, she could have named each one. They were her friends, her closest comrades, warriors for whom she would die in battle and who would, without pause or question, die for her in return. Lit by the leaping flames, those who circled her were barely human and she could not see Ardacos at all.

‘Warriors of the she-bear, we have need of you.’
‘Ask.’ The voice was a bear’s, carried on a wave of drumming. ‘The bear lives to serve, but only one whose heart is great enough to know the risk may ask.’

‘The gods will test my heart as they test yours.’ The words, like the rhythms, were the ancestors’, old beyond imagining. Pitching her voice above the rattling claws, she said, ‘We who fight battles in daylight ask the aid of those who hunt men by night. There is a task for which no others are suited. There is danger beyond that which any others can face. There is need of one who can track and one who can hunt and one who can kill and leave not a single one of the enemy alive. Can you do this? Will you do it?’

The dance throbbed. The drums tugged at her soul. Waves of passion, of regret, of love and loss and pity scored her heart. Fighting for outward calm, she said again, ‘Warriors of the she-bear. Can you do this? Will you do it?’

A single bear-robed figure shuffled forward. It could have been man or woman, both or neither. In a voice Breaca had never known, it said, ‘We can. We will. We do.’

‘Thank you. May Nemain light your way, may Briga aid your fighting and the bear guard the honour of your dying. I am grateful – truly.’

The last sentence was hers alone, not given by the generations before. Breaca stepped sideways, leaving open the place before the fire.

On a soft, husking cough, the skull-drumming

stopped. The circle opened and disgorged into its centre a decurion of the Roman cavalry and two of his auxiliaries. As if under Roman orders, the three marched to stand before the fire.

The officer stood a little ahead of his men and was more richly dressed. His cloak was a deep liver red, striped at the hem in white, and his chain-mail shirt caught the moonlight and made of it stars. His helmet gave him a little extra height, but did not bring him close to the stature of the two warrior-auxiliaries who flanked him, each a hand's length taller. Beneath their helmets, the face of each was painted in white lime; circles around the eyes and knife-straight lines beneath each cheek made them other than human. All three smelled, overpoweringly, of bear grease, stoat's urine and woad.

They made a line before the fire. Each bowed a little and gave something himself, or herself – at least one of the disguised warriors was a woman – to the flames. The offerings flashed as they burned, giving off the greens and blues of powdered copper and the whiff of scorched hair. When the fire was quiet, all three turned and lifted their cavalry cloaks so it might be seen by their peers that, beneath the chain mail of their disguise, they were naked and that the grey woad that was their protection under the gods coated all of their skin. A small incision on the left forearm of each bled a little into the night, black against the silvering grey. The skull-drums chattered a final time in recognition, approval and support. When they

stopped, a measure of magic departed the night.

It was hard to move, as if the earth had become less solid a while and, returning, the pressure of it bruised the soles of the feet. Breaca moved further away, giving room before the fire to the drummers and dancers; they had further to return and would feel the strangeness more strongly. The enemy decurion followed her.

‘Am I Roman?’

The man tipped his head slightly, and by that, by his voice and by his lack of height, Breaca knew him. She smiled. ‘Ardacos, no, no-one could imagine you Roman. But by the time the enemy are close enough to realize it, they will be dead.’

She laid her palm on the hilt of his sword, the only part of him another could touch without desecration until he had killed his foes or died in the attempt. ‘You know that if it were possible, I would go in your stead.’

‘And you know that there are some places where the Boudica excels and others where the she-bear is all that will suffice.’

Behind the skull paint, Ardacos’ eyes were bright as the stoat’s that was his dream. He had been her lover for a while between Airmid and Caradoc; he knew her as well as any man, knew the weaknesses, real and imagined, that she took pains to hide from the greater mass of warriors.

He said, ‘I couldn’t lead the warriors down the hill tomorrow if their lives and mine depended on it. I couldn’t stand with my back to the sunrise and speak to them with the voice of Briga so that they

believe themselves touched by the gods and fit to defeat any number of legions. I couldn't dream of riding alongside Caradoc in battle, weaving the wildfire so that the weak and the wounded find new heart and can fight where before they thought themselves dead.' Less soberly, he said, 'The gods give to each of us different gifts. I could not be the Boudica, but also I do not wish it. You should not wish yourself a she-bear. Be grateful you don't spend your life with the stink of bear grease in your nostrils.'

She wrinkled her nose. 'Do you think I don't?'

'No. You think you don't, and I know you don't know the first part of it.' He grinned, showing white teeth. He, too, was forbidden to touch anyone but those with whom the night's oaths had been spoken until at least the first of the enemy was dead. Deliberately, he kept his hands folded across his sword belt. 'We must go while the night is still with us. The Romans are soft and they drink wine in the darkness to give themselves courage.' More formally, he said, 'Be of good heart. We cannot fail.'

'And if you do, the bear will take you.'

'Of course. It is the promise we make. But it is made gladly.' He turned, sending his cloak spinning. 'Wait by the fire. We will return not long after dawn.'