

I



The water was cold, and made brown by peat and recent rain.

Breaca of Mona, known to all but her family and closest friends as the Boudica, leader of armies and bringer of victory, knelt alone at the side of a mountain stream and washed her face, hands and the bleeding wound on her upper arm in the torrent. The water ran briefly pink where she had been. She cupped clean water in both palms, rinsed her mouth and spat out the iron after-taste of blood.

A blue roan mare dozed in the shelter of a nearby beech thicket, the end result of a lifetime's breeding and better than anything Rome could offer. She was haltered but not tethered and came to call, her feet bound in soft leather to dampen the sound of her progress. Mounted, Breaca travelled north and a little east, moving up into the

mountains, keeping to rocky trails where Coritani trackers, paid by Rome, would be least likely to find signs of her passing.

If she had scaled the peaks, she could have looked west past further mountains and across the straits to Mona, but she did not. The standard-bearer's warning echoed, disturbingly, with the muted footfalls of her mare and would not be made silent. *You will never win, fighting as one against many.* Vindex was not the first to have warned her of the dangers and futility of fighting alone, or even the second, but he was the enemy and she did not have to trust his opinion.

It was harder to ignore the warnings of those who cared for her; the elders and dreamers of Mona, who watched over her children through her long winter absences, and could not tell them where their mother was or if she had died yet, at the hand of a standard-bearer who was not quite as drunk as he might have looked.

Luain mac Calma, the Elder of Mona, had been first, quietly, to say that the Boudica's life was worth more, and vengeance for one man's life worth less, and he had been followed by a succession of others who claimed to love her and hold her best interests at heart. Only Airmid, dreamer and soul-friend, had always understood why Breaca needed to hunt alone as she did and had never spoken out, openly or in private, against the black feather braided into the Boudica's hair and the winter killings that it foreshadowed.

Airmid was on Mona and Mona was another

world and Breaca chose not to look at it and thereby not to think about it, or its people.

She passed upwards, and the track became rockier. Grey stone lined either side of the tracks, marbled by swirling lichens. She dismounted after a while and unbound the mare's feet, that they might grip better on the wet stones. The rain became less; it had belonged to the night. Clouds on the eastern horizon parted to show the first knife lines of light. Lacking any binding, the wound in her arm slowly ceased to bleed and ached only a little. The officer whose spear had caught her had kept his weapons scrupulously clean, for which she was grateful.

Half a day's ride to the south, at the overnight campsite where a standard-bearer, an armourer and two junior officers of the XXth legion had died, a wisp of greased smoke rose at an angle to the sky. Crows roused and called and began to drift towards the scent of burning men.

The thick-set, grey-haired man stooped over the neck of his horse with his attention fixed on the trail did not appear to notice either of the two slingstones that cracked on the rocks near his head. His horse, noticing both, shied a little, throwing him off balance, and he clutched ineffectually at the saddle. The care of his gods kept his head from cracking on the stones of the path as he fell and a cushion of heather gave him safe landing but he did not rise afterwards, even as Breaca knelt at his side.

‘Where are you hurt?’

He flicked dry, cracked lips. ‘I have the flux. You shouldn’t touch me; you’ll be tainted.’

‘Maybe, but the harm is done now.’ Breaca pushed her good arm under his shoulders and levered him to his feet. She would have given him water but carried none. In its absence, she used the sick man’s horse for support, wedging his shoulder against the saddle. He swayed and made himself stand.

His accent, his horse and the weave on his tunic were all of the northern Eцени. A mark worked in ink in the skin below his collarbone showed the falcon and running horse linked. Breaca ran her forefinger along from horse to falcon and felt the small nodule of amber buried under the skin beyond the falcon’s wingtip that verified the mark’s authenticity.

‘Are you from Efnís?’ she asked, and when he nodded, ‘Why were you following me?’

‘I wasn’t. The mountains are alive with Romans and I would deliver my message from a living mouth to living ears if the flux does not kill me first. I was trying to reach the forests near the coast to take shelter there before crossing to Mona.’

Breaca shook her head. ‘You won’t reach them in time. The men of the fifth cohort are stationed near the coast. The third cohort lost four men last night: the signal fires have been lit since dawn, waking every other legionary into action; they will have ringed the forests long since. I know of

somewhere closer that may be safe if we are permitted to enter. Can you ride another two dozen spear throws?’

‘If there’s shelter at the end of it, yes.’

The cave mouth was a vertical crease in the cliff face set by the gods at such an angle that it was invisible unless approached exactly from the south-east. The hound-sized rock placed by the ancestors to guard the entrance was patched with damp moss and hidden by the grasses that had grown up around it. In years past, it would have been scoured clean when the ancestors were honoured at each old moon and the carved marks swirling on its surface would have been made bold again with red ochre and white lime and ash. In the bleak new world of Roman occupation, those who should have done so were either dead or had taken refuge on Mona and the rock and the cave mouth behind it were blurred with neglect.

Breaca had only passed the cave once, and that the previous winter, but had seen then what others might not, committing its location to memory without any real intention to use it. She probably would not have attempted it now, had not her need driven her to it; the risks of entering such a place without a dreamer were far greater than the risks of death or capture by Rome.

Standing alone before the hound stone, Breaca said, ‘I offer greetings to the oldest and greatest of the ancestor-dreamers. I will clear your dwelling place as I leave, I swear it. For now, the weeds are

my protection as they have been yours. Will you permit me to enter and to bring one other with me?’

A voice beyond the range of hearing said, *Who asks?*

‘I ask, Breaca nic Graine mac Eburovic, once of the Eцени, once Warrior of Mona, hunting now under the black feather of no-tribe. My mark is the serpent-spear which was yours before me and will be yours again when I have gone.’

The ancestor-dreamer said, *So. I endure and you may not. It is good you remember that. Have you come to ask my aid in your vengeance, as you did before?*

‘No.’

She was the Boudica, who led thousands into battle, and her palms were sweating. She wiped them on her tunic. It was far easier to face the legions in the rain and the dark armed with nothing more than a knife and a pouch of river pebbles than to speak to an empty cave mouth in daylight. She remembered Airmid, and the fear in her voice when she had last faced the ancestor-dreamer: Airmid, who feared nothing and no-one.

Breaca looked back down the path to where the dying messenger waited out of earshot. He had dismounted when she did and stood leaning against his horse. As she watched, he slid slowly to his knees, and then toppled sideways to lie curled like a child, breathing harshly.

If she had been alone, she would have taken her chances dodging the legions and stayed out in the open. If she waited, she would be alone before too

long, but the dying man was Eцени and from Efnís and he had given his life to bring a message to Mona. She could not with any honour leave him to die on a mountain path within reach of the legions when there was shelter at hand.

Touching the hound stone as much for courage as for luck, Breaca said, ‘We are two, one wounded, one assailed by flux. We ask only to enter into your protection, bringing our horses, nothing more. The Romans who seek our lives are close behind; I saw them enter the valley as we climbed the mountain. It is my belief that their trackers will have no knowledge of your dwelling place, and that if they did, the legionaries would not dare to cross the threshold. Even they recognize the sacred when they meet it.’

Or if not the sacred, then the simply dangerous. The ancestor’s laughter was the slide of a snake over winter leaves, a sound to erase all peace and the hope of peace. They know I will pierce their dreams, waking and sleeping, and they will die as did their governor, slowly and in madness. They may not fear you enough to abandon the land, Breaca once-Eцени, but they fear me enough to make offerings in secret to quell my wrath.

Breaca had seen the twists of corn and broken wine flasks and, once, the rotting head of a doe as she led the horses up the trail. She had not known them as offerings to the serpent-dreamer and even now could not confirm it. She said nothing. A lifebeat of waiting passed. Then, *Yes, you may enter. I, who may yet destroy you, give you leave.*

* * *

The cave was not as fully dark as Breaca had expected. The horses walked willingly into the entrance and were made safe in a chamber open to the sky, three spear lengths inside. Here, bird lime streaked the walls in layers of white and caked the floor, cushioning the sound of hooves. Hollows in the rock held water and the recent rain had made them clean.

Further in, the sky could not be so clearly seen, but grey light leaked for a while from the towered heights of the roof. On the floor, the skeletons of small beasts cracked underfoot where they had fallen, unwilling sacrifices to the ancestor and the gods. The walls pressed inwards so that the pathway became a tunnel and rock snagged Breaca's tunic at both shoulders.

'We should stop.' The Eцени messenger could barely walk. He tugged on Breaca's sleeve.

'Not yet. There's a turn ahead and then the floor opens into a chamber with a river running through. We can rest there and you can drink the water. You need it.'

He held on to her, staring. In the failing light, she could see the widening whites of his eyes. 'Have you been here before?' he asked.

'No, but I know of it.' She did not tell him that the serpent voice of the ancestor-dreamer drew her on, whispering, nor that it had spelled out the time and manner of his death.

The chamber they entered last was too broad for Breaca easily to map the margins, and entirely

without light. Working by feel, she laid and lit a small fire. Orange shadows drew monsters from the dark, casting ghost-flames on the small river flowing through the northern corner of the cave. Echoes of water thickened the silence. The sound was pleasanter by far than the sibilant hiss of the ancestor.

At the river's edge, Breaca tended the dying messenger. She folded her cloak and his and laid him on both on a bed of flat rock. He had brought his own water skin, long empty, and she filled it and let him drink and then washed his face, neck and hands with what was left.

'You should not,' he said, less certainly than before. 'We were three; two brothers and a sister, each charged with the same message. We had ridden only two nights when the flux took us. It passes from one to the other faster than a cough in a winter's roundhouse.'

Breaca said, 'If I am to die, this place is as good as any; the legion's inquisitors won't find us here to wrench what we know from the last breath of our lungs. If I am to live, then you can rest tended in safety. What happened to your brother and sister?'

'I don't know. We took separate roads when we met the legions. Each of us was to ride for Mona. With three, there was hope one would live to reach the ferry and deliver our words.'

Ask him his message. The ancestor's voice cracked off the walls. In her own place, she sounded far louder than the dying man.

‘When he has peace.’ Breaca spoke aloud and the messenger was too near death to notice.

She had tended the dying times without number on the battlefield, but only rarely with other sickness, so that it took some time to do what was needful. She bent over him, trying to see past the tallow-grey skin to the life and the mind beneath. His face shrank onto the bones of his skull. His eyes had fallen deep into the folding flesh of his face and his hair was slick with sweat and the water with which he had just been washed.

Ask!

Touching her palm to his forehead, she said carefully, ‘This is your resting place. Briga will take you from here and the ancestor will guide you safely to the lands beyond life. I will return to Mona when it’s safe to travel. Is it your wish that I carry your message with me?’

‘It would be, but I can’t give it while not yet on Mona.’ The man grimaced, trying to rise, and failed. ‘I’m sorry. It would kill both of us if I tried. Efnís laid a geas on all three messengers. If I tried to speak, my tongue would swell in my mouth and block my breathing before the words were out. More, the one to whom I spoke would die, if not as suddenly, then as surely. If caught, we were permitted to say that much to whoever tried to press the question.’

Breaca smoothed the hair from his brow and poured on a little water to cool it. ‘Efnís is wise. If you had been captured, it would have been good to die swiftly, knowing your message safe and

Rome's interrogators condemned to a slow end.'

The man struggled with that, frowning. 'But not so good now when I am dying in the company of a warrior and friend. I will take my message safely into death and Efnís will never know of my failure.'

'He will. No-one passes to the other worlds but the dreamers know of it. Even so, I may have an answer. Would I be right to believe that your message was to be given to the Elder of Mona, Luain mac Calma, or, failing him, to Airmid of Nemain, and that it concerned the Boudica?'

It was a risk. Neither of them knew the margins of the curse. The messenger smiled faintly and tested his answer silently twice before, nodding, he said, 'You would be correct.'

They both waited. In the moments that followed, his breathing was not impaired, nor did his tongue swell any more than the flux had already swollen it.

Breaca let out a breath. 'So then if I were to tell you that my daughter, second child of my heart, soul and flesh, is called Graine after my mother and that my father was Eburovic, smith and warrior of the Eцени, would your mouth remain unblocked and your tongue unswollen as you delivered to me your message?'

His eyes had fallen shut and did not open when she finished. Waiting, Breaca did not know if he slept, or if the shock of her identity, however obliquely revealed, had carried him beyond speech.

The relief when he reached out and gripped her hand left her without words. He opened his eyes and tears wavered on the rims, cast in copper by the firelight. His voice was a fine thread, drawn tight by pain and effort. ‘You are the Boudica? The Warrior of Mona?’

She nodded, smiling. ‘Yes.’

He shoved himself upright, wheezing. ‘Why then are you here, unbraided, wearing the black feather of no-tribe and hunting alone in lands held by Rome?’

She had not expected his anger, nor the sudden energy it gave him; he knew nothing of the soul-stripping meetings between the Boudica and the dreamers she served, of the battles fought amongst friends with words the only weapons. He did not choose to hide the accusation in his voice or the hurt in his eyes. He laid himself down again, but his gaze, challenging hers, could have been mac Calma’s, or Dubornos’, or Ardacos’, or any one of her children’s.

Rising, Breaca laid a fistful of heather roots on the fire. Fresh flames sparked green and a violent blue where the earth burned before wood. Staring at the colours and not the man, she said, ‘I have been killing Romans, as you saw. The four dead of the third cohort were my kills, and two the night before last.’

The messenger was an intelligent man. Watching her, he said, ‘So you hunt alone because the risk is too great to expose others to the danger and Briga will take you into death when she feels

the killing is enough. Do the elder dreamers of Mona consider that a good risk?’

‘Not at all.’ Breaca smiled, surprising them both. ‘But it is not for them to forbid it. My life is my own and I believe it is a good risk. It’s nearly winter; the time for fighting is over but the legions must still forage far beyond their forts for food and firewood. There’s more damage done to their minds with four men dead in the night than with forty dead on the battlefield in open warfare. Each death leads to desertions and those left behind dream of a time when they can leave and sail for Rome. An army that comes to the field without heart fights to lose, you know that.’

‘I do. And a people lacking the leadership of the gods does not fight at all.’ An old anger flickered, and a more recent fear. Each died away, leaving only the fatal weariness that had cloaked the messenger when he first fell from his horse.

Carefully, Breaca said, ‘The Ezeni do not lack leadership.’

‘They do now.’

He was dying fast; both of them could feel it. Words unspoken weighed on them, sucking breath from the air. Choosing the path that offered least damage, Breaca asked, ‘Can you tell me in what way your people and mine are leaderless?’

‘I don’t know. Saying that much might kill us both.’

He gathered himself and then, against her protests, pushed himself to sitting. His gaze devoured her face and then moved down to the

reddening wound on her arm. The spear's head had not, after all, been so clean. Blood seeped a little from the gash, but the arm around was angry and hot, and had begun to smell unclean. He reached out to touch it and they both felt the flesh twitch under his fingers.

He said, 'Perhaps Efnís was wiser than either of us knew and you are dying anyway.'

Breaca sluiced water over the wound. 'Perhaps. I have felt closer to death than this, but they say Briga often comes when least expected.'

'Not for me.' He smiled and the shape stayed on his lips long after his mind had gone elsewhere. In a while, he said, 'Efnís crafted his words for Airmid, dreamer of Nemain, but the tales have always said that she holds one half of your soul and Caradoc the other. If that is true, then it may be that, in the gods' eyes, I am speaking as if to Airmid and I can speak to you safely. I am willing to try, but my death is certain. I have nothing to lose. You could have many more winters of hunting Romans alone. Will you risk the loss of that, to hear my message?'

Breaca closed her left fist, feeling the brush of pain in her palm that was the memory of a sword cut. It did not ache to warn her of danger. The spear wound in her upper arm throbbed alarmingly, but other wounds had been as deep and gone as bad and she had not died of them.

She looked across the fire into the darkness of the cave but found no help there; the ancestor-dreamer was uncharacteristically silent. As at all

the most important decisions in her life, Breaca was alone. There was a freedom in being so.

She said, 'There is not so much pleasure in killing Romans that I would want to miss a message from Efnís that has cost the lives of three warriors. Yes, I will share your risk.'