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TALES OF ROME

A CAPTIVE
IN ROME

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SPCK

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To Rhona, with thanks for all your help and advice

THE BATTLEFIELD



It was the day of the great battle. Long before sunrise, I was awakened by the noise and bustle in the camp. Excited voices, the neighing of chariot horses, the scrape of blades being sharpened . . .

I scrambled out from my sleeping place on the ground under our cart. My father and brother were up already. They had stripped off most of their clothes, shivering in the chill morning air, and they were smearing each other with blue war-paint. It made them look wild and ferocious, changing them from ordinary people into bloodthirsty warriors.

Oh, why wasn't I allowed to join them? Conan was just fifteen, but he was counted as a man and a fighter. I was ten – too young. I could only stand and watch, along with my mother and sisters.

Conan guessed how I felt. 'At least you'll see everything,' he said, trying to cheer me up. 'You can tell your grandchildren you saw the last great battle, when we got rid of the Romans for ever.'

'But *you* can tell your grandchildren you actually fought in it,' I said enviously.

‘What if I get myself killed? Then there won’t be any grandchildren to tell.’

But he was only joking. He didn’t seriously think he would come to much harm. After all, we had ten times more fighters than the Romans had. How could we possibly lose?

Everyone wanted to see this great victory. That was why so many men had brought their wives and children along with them – normally we would have had to stay at home.

I thought of the Romans in their camp on the hilltop. They would be getting ready too. They were trained soldiers, with armour, helmets and heavy shields. But armour hadn’t saved the Romans in cities like Londinium. Our army had captured the city and burned it to the ground.

The Romans were probably praying to their gods, but that wouldn’t save them either. Our gods were more powerful than theirs, and the druids had made offerings so that our warriors would be protected.

The scarlet edge of the sun rose above the treetops. It was angry-looking, like a blood-filled wound in the sky.

Looking up at it, I hoped we would see plenty of blood before nightfall – Roman blood. Then we would be rid of the enemies who had conquered our land. No more taxes to pay. No more fear. No more hiding of swords in haystacks and grain jars. (The Romans thought they had removed all our weapons, but they were wrong.)

I picked up Father’s sword and looked at it longingly. I tried to imagine how I would feel if I could carry it into battle.

‘Hey, Bryn! Put that down!’ said Conan.

Father put his hand on my shoulder. ‘Your turn to fight will come soon enough,’ he said. ‘Don’t run to meet trouble before it arrives.’

My little sisters, Enid and Bronwen, were awake by now. I climbed onto the cart beside Enid, who was staring all around at the men in their battle gear.

‘Look! That’s Queen Boudicca,’ I said to her.

‘Where? Where?’

Around us a great cheer went up, and men waved their swords in the air. Out beyond the shouting warriors, the queen’s chariot raced across the open hillside. The charioteer reined in the horses, and the queen stood up tall and proud, her red hair streaming in the wind.

‘Now she’ll make a speech,’ I told Enid. We were too far back to hear her words, but we could see how fiercely she waved her spear. It was easy to guess what she was saying. Death! Death to all Romans! Freedom for the Celtic tribes!

And the different tribes for once stood together like one nation, forgetting their old quarrels. They yelled their battle cries. Death to all Romans!

Suddenly, above the shouting, I heard another sound – the blast of a trumpet. On the hilltop, the sun glinted on metal. The Romans were on the march.

Many times I had seen Roman soldiers marching. They all looked alike, wearing the same uniform, keeping the same pace – left, right, left, right. Orders were given and they obeyed, as if they couldn’t think for themselves. They would march for miles on the long, straight roads they had built across our land. Left, right, left, right.

The Romans lined up in rows near the top of the hill, where thick woods protected them on each side. The front line of soldiers lifted their shields to form a wall, and the rows behind held their shields above their heads like a roof. It was quite impressive, I had to admit. All you could see was a long line of shields and spears.

Enid laughed. ‘They look like a giant centipede.’

‘Yes, and we’ll stamp on them and squash them like centipedes,’ I said.

Our army had no trumpet giving orders. That wasn’t the Celtic way of fighting. When the queen’s chariot turned towards the enemy, a wild shout went up, and all the warriors surged forward, eager for the glory of the fight.

In the lead were the chariots – not as swift as usual, for the hill was steep. Then came the great mass of swordsmen on foot. They had no heavy armour to weight them down. Some had small, round shields, but their main protection was their courage and skill with the sword.

I would have given anything to join them. I didn’t have a sword, just my knife. But that was sharp enough to slit open a fish . . . or a Roman.

‘Bryn! Stay where you are,’ my mother told me. ‘I’m not having all my menfolk getting killed.’ Her face was white and anxious.

‘Don’t worry,’ I said to her. ‘We’re going to win this easily. Nobody’s going to get killed.’

‘There never yet was a battle where nobody got killed,’ she said, and I could tell she didn’t want to be here. She thought we should have stayed safely at home, missing everything.

Our chariots had almost reached the Roman lines when the trumpet blared again. Hundreds of javelins came hurtling out from behind the shield wall. At that range, they couldn't miss. Horses screamed and reared up; drivers fell wounded; chariots collided at speed. I could hardly bear to look.

But now our swordsmen threw themselves against the Roman shields, like a great wave thundering against a rock. Here and there, the Roman line appeared to break. Not for long, though. Men from the rows behind stepped forward to fill the gaps.

'The Romans are good fighters,' Bronwen said nervously.

'Yes, but we have a far bigger army,' I told her. 'We'll wear them down in the end.'

The trouble was, the Roman leader had chosen the battlefield carefully. Because of the thick forests on either side, our army couldn't encircle his. We could only attack from in front, up the hill. Half our men couldn't even get near the enemy.

'Where's Father?' asked Enid. Even on tiptoe, she couldn't see very far. I was taller, but in that heaving mass of fighters it was impossible to make out anyone I knew. 'Is he all right?' she said.

I tried to tell her that Father would be safe, but the words seemed to stick in my throat. For I was seeing what a battlefield was really like. It wasn't like the songs of the bards, full of brave deeds and mighty heroes. It was just a confused mess.

Terrible sounds filled the air. Swords clashing, drums rattling, war horns blowing – those were the noises I'd

expected to hear, but they were drowned by the cries of wounded men. People fell and were trampled underfoot. Horses screamed in agony.

Where was Father? And Conan, and the others from our village?

Once more, the trumpet sounded – and Roman horsemen came charging out of the woods to right and left. They took our army completely by surprise. Now our men had to fight on three sides. Slowly they gave ground, and the battle began to move downhill towards our camp.

Enid, looking scared, scrambled down from the cart. My mother grabbed Bronwen.

‘Bryn, get down,’ she ordered me. ‘It’s not safe here.’

I shook my head stubbornly.

‘I’m telling you – get down. We’re getting out of here,’ she said.

‘No! We can’t leave now! I have to see what happens.’

I suppose she knew she could never persuade me. She didn’t waste time trying, but gathered up my sisters and hurried off through the camp. I hardly noticed them go. My eyes were fixed on the battlefield.

Things were going badly for us. That long line of Romans was on the move down the hill, pushing our men backwards. And there was nowhere for them to go. Their path was blocked by lines of carts and wagons on the edge of our camp.

How could this be happening? We were being herded like sheep!

Our men at the front were still fighting fiercely, but they couldn’t hold back that steady, merciless advance. At the rear,

people were being crushed in the crowd. They escaped through the gaps between the wagons, or even crawled underneath them – but not fast enough.

Like a heavy millstone pressing down on grain, the Romans pressed closer. I felt the cart move beneath me, then tilt and tip up. I was knocked to the ground, under the trampling feet of an army on the run.

Two or three times I tried to get up, struggling and shouting. Each time I was knocked down again.

Then something must have hit me on the head, for everything went black. That's all I remember.

SURVIVORS



‘Bryn. Bryn! Wake up!’

Someone was shaking me. The shaking sent waves of pain through my skull.

‘Oh, Bryn, come on! They’ll kill us if we stay here!’

I struggled to open my eyes. My brother’s face was close to mine. His war-paint was smudged and streaked. His eyes were red, as if he’d been crying.

Conan crying? Suddenly I remembered. The battle – the Romans . . .

With a great effort, I managed to sit up. ‘Where’s Father?’

Conan didn’t answer. He looked up the hill, where dead and dying men lay like fallen leaves . . . hundreds of them, too many to count.

The fighting had moved on. There were no enemies in sight: no living ones, that is. Faintly in the distance, I heard the sound of a Roman trumpet.

‘Where’s Father?’ I asked again. ‘Is he wounded?’

Still Conan said nothing.

‘Is he dead?’ I whispered.

‘Yes. He’s dead. And we’ll die too if we’re still here when the Romans come back.’

‘No!’ I couldn’t believe it. He couldn’t be dead – not my father, so tall and strong!

‘He died a warrior’s death,’ said Conan. ‘He took three Romans with him. Look, I have his belt and his sword, and one day . . . one day I’m going to get revenge on the Romans for this.’ His voice trembled.

When I saw the sword, I knew it must be true – Father was dead. I would never see him again. I would never walk beside him, learning his skill at hunting and farming and fighting, never hear that laugh of his which seemed to shake the house.

He was gone, gone for ever. I felt as if a great storm had blown away the roof of our home. We were left huddled in the ruins, with nothing to protect us from the raging wind and the rain. Who would look after us now?

‘Bryn, we have to be strong,’ said Conan. ‘We have to take care of Mother and the girls. Where are they?’

‘I don’t know. They went off through the camp – that way.’

A trail of destruction led through the camp. There were more dead, this time women and children as well as warriors. The Romans seemed to have slaughtered anything that moved.

I felt sick. Would Mother, Bronwen and Enid be lying somewhere among the dead?

We began to search, but soon gave up. ‘This is hopeless,’ said Conan. ‘If they’re here, we’ll never find them.’

‘Maybe they got away,’ I said. ‘Maybe they ran off into the woods.’

‘That’s what we should do – get away from here as fast as we can.’

But first Conan began digging around in the wreckage of our cart. He found some clothes, a loaf and some dried meat. As he got dressed, fumbling awkwardly with the fastening of his cloak, I realized that he was hurt. He had a deep gash across the back of his sword hand, with blood still oozing from it. I wanted to bandage it, but he wouldn’t let me.

‘There isn’t time. The Romans will come back to their camp before nightfall.’

He hurried me into the woods. We would be safer in the deep forest, even if there were wolves there. Better to meet wolves than Romans.

I kept looking around, hoping to see the rest of our family. But there was no sign of them. We saw a few other people slipping between the trees. Here and there lay wounded men who had escaped from the battlefield but could go no further. There was nothing we could do for them, so we hurried on.

At last, exhausted, we stopped to rest and eat something. We were on a hilltop where the trees were thin. The forest stretched out below us, with cleared areas where villages stood among fields. In the distance, we could see the long, straight line of a Roman road.

‘If Mother and the girls did get away,’ I said, ‘where would they go?’

‘I think they would try to go home. But it might take days for them to get there.’

‘So we should go home too?’

He nodded. ‘If we can find the way,’ he said, looking uncertain.

I had always looked up to Conan. He was five years older than me and better at everything – fighting, running, hunting, storytelling. But now I saw that he was still not much more than a boy. He wasn’t old enough to make decisions. Father always used to do that.

‘Can’t we just go back the way we came?’ I asked.

‘What, along the Roman road? Don’t be stupid!’

Our home village lay to the south-east, only a day’s journey away – if we used the Roman road. But we didn’t want to meet any soldiers, not with Conan still in his war-paint. He had washed off as much of it as he could with water from a stream, but his face was still a pale bluish colour.

Our only hope was to go across country, taking our direction from the sun. All that afternoon and into the evening, we walked and walked. Soon we would have to stop, for the sun was going down, making long shadows between the trees. And at night the forest was not a good place to be. Wolves hunted there, and nameless fears lurked in the darkness.

I was glad when we came to a clearing. Across the fields we could see a village very much like our own – a huddle of round houses with roofs of thatch. If the people belonged to our tribe, the Iceni, they would shelter us for the night.

But there was something odd about the place. As we got closer, it was eerily quiet. No dogs barked at us. No children played around the doors. No cows mooed as they were brought in for milking. No smoke drifted up from the rooftops into the evening sky.

Conan lifted the curtain at the nearest doorway. I don't know what I thought we might find – more dead people, murdered by the Romans? But the place was empty.

'They must have heard that we lost the battle,' said Conan. 'They've all run away.'

We looked at each other. Would we be safe here? But neither of us felt like spending the night in the forest. In the end, we decided to stay where we were.

Weary as dogs after a long day's hunting, we lay down on the straw bedding of the hut. But for a long time, I couldn't sleep. I couldn't stop the memories of the day going round and round in my head.

When I fell asleep at last, I dreamed that everything was all right again. The battle had been won, not lost, and my father was still alive. The whole family was safe at home, with a great feast about to begin.

Then I woke up to a strange house and a cold hearth – and the pain of knowing that I would never see my father again, except in dreams.

CAPTURED



All the next day, thick, grey clouds filled the sky. Without the sun to guide us, we couldn't find our way through the forest – we might end up walking round in circles. So we stayed on in the empty village.

The owners had taken their most valuable belongings, their sheep and cattle. A few hens had been left behind to peck and scratch around the village. We hunted for eggs, which had to be eaten raw, as it would be too risky to light the fire. We also found a big pot half full of cold stew, so we didn't go hungry. But it was a long, silent, miserable day.

The open wound on Conan's hand was looking ugly. He kept brushing flies away from it. Mother would have put salve on it to help it heal, but Mother wasn't here. I washed it and bound it up with rough strips of cloth cut from the edge of a blanket.

I couldn't forget the sight of all those women and children, butchered by the Romans. If only I knew what had happened to my family!

'Do you think they managed to get away?' I asked.

The Romans lined up in rows near the top of the hill, where thick woods protected them on each side. The front line of soldiers lifted their shields to form a wall, and the rows behind held their shields above their heads like a roof. It was quite impressive, I had to admit. All you could see was a long line of shields and spears.

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