

Opening extract from

Boudicca

Written by

Sian Busby

Published by

Short Books, London

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

PROLOGUE

The Time of Brightness
North Wales; May, 140CE

"Don't be stupid! A girl can't be a hunter!" jeered Cadman the fighter at his big sister, who stood in the yard throwing seed to the hens. Their father had just announced that he would take the annoying brat hunting for the first time the next day, and Cadman was swaggering about the yard like a mighty warrior just home from a successful raid.

"But father promised he'd take *me* next time," cried Gwendoline, she of the white brow, and the tallest by far of all the girls in the village. "Why should you get to go? You're two years younger than I am!"

"Girls are supposed to stay at home with their mothers and spin yarn," scorned her brother. "They aren't strong enough to throw spears, or shoot an arrow at a deer! Girls bake bread while they're waiting for the men to come

home hungry from the forest!"

Gwendoline burned scarlet and threw the basket of seed onto the ground. The chickens clucked and gobbled at her feet.

"Hey you!" she yelled at Cadman, as he stuck his tongue out at her. "In the olden times the women of our people were governed by a great Warrior Queen," she said, tossing her long, red hair.

"Ugh," sneered Cadman, "she must have been very ugly! Just like you!"

Gwendoline felt anger surge through her veins. "She led a great army into battle with her chariot! And I'm going to be just like her!"

"Liar! Liar!" jeered Cadman.

Gwendoline saw red; she threw herself at Cadman and grappled him to the ground. The chickens squawked as the two of them wrestled in the dust of the yard. Being bigger and stronger, Gwendoline soon had the better of Cadman, who was thrashing his arms and legs about uselessly.

"Gwendoline! Gwendoline! Stop that at once!" The sound of her mother coming from the door of the villa stopped the girl just in time. "Get up off the ground, you wicked child!"

Gwendoline was in disgrace, and not for the first time. She stood up reluctantly.

"I sent you out here to feed the chickens," her mother

was saying, "not fight your little brother!"

"But it's not fair!" howled Gwendoline, her grey eyes like a stormy sea. "He called me a liar! He said girls can't be queens and warriors."

Her mother held up her hand to halt the flow of protestations. "I'm not interested in hearing your excuses," she declared. "It appears that Grandmother has filled your head with all sorts of nonsense about the past," mother continued coldly. "It would have been better if she had taught you about the great men of your family; your father was a Primus Pilus, in charge of an elite cohort of Roman soldiers. And your grandfather supervised the building of the great white road."

From behind their mother's skirts Cadman was pulling faces at Gwendoline. She felt her temper rise up again.

"You are not," her mother continued, "some common fishwife who brawls in the market-place. As a punishment you will go and clean out the pigsty. Perhaps then you will learn not to be so proud and ill-tempered."

Gwendoline felt such a strong sense of injustice that she almost sat down on the ground and cried. But, she told herself, that was not the sort of thing a warrior queen would do. Gwendoline was not sure what a warrior queen would do instead, but she knew someone who would know for sure.

Gwendoline was still fuming when she arrived at the tiny, old-fashioned roundhouse where her mother's

mother's mother dwelt. It was on the very edge of the village, close by where the great white road leads over the hills to the next village and beyond. She found the frail old woman in the dark of the thatched building, stooped over her cauldron, where a thick cawl bubbled and filled the little dwelling with a delicious aroma. Through the heat haze of the cauldron the old woman seemed to be shimmering like an apparition. She was leaning upon a crooked hazel stick, and her fingers, as they clasped it, looked like long, spindly twigs.

"I know you," she said, peering through the smoke. The girl jumped and swallowed hard, trying not to look scared. "I know you by your grey eyes and your high, white forehead," continued the old woman. "I know you by your bold expression." It was plain to anyone looking from Gwendoline to the old woman that they were each made of the same noble blood and fine bones, and they had the same pale skin and rich auburn hair.

"What are you afraid of, child?" the old woman asked sternly.

"Nothing," declared Gwendoline stoutly. "I'm not afraid of anything."

"You must be frightened of something," she said at last, "or you would not be so angry." Gwendoline frowned, puzzled. "Well then, let us start the other way around," said great-grandmother. "Tell me, child, what are you so angry about?"

"My brother said I was a liar, and that girls can't be warriors and so I fought him, and mother said I had to clean out the pigsty, and it's not fair, so I've run away and I want you to tell me how I can be a great warrior queen when I grow up," said Gwendoline.

"I see," said the old woman thoughtfully. "Well, I can tell that you are afraid of a good many things."

"No I'm not!" said Gwendoline tossing her hair.

"Firstly," her great-grandmother continued, "you are afraid that your parents love your brother more than you; secondly you are afraid that nobody will believe you even when you speak a great truth; thirdly, you are afraid that, because you are a girl, you are doomed to a boring life of feeding chickens, instead of the one filled with the adventure you so desire. Well, these are certainly very big fears."

Gwendoline stopped sulking, and blinked in silent astonishment. She was surprised to hear all of this, and had to admit it was all true. "How did you know?" she began, feeling a tingle of fear creep up her spine.

The old woman nodded slowly to herself. "Well, now, come child. See that bowl of mixture on the floor there by the hearth? Why don't you sit on the floor beside the fire and make some little cakes for me? Take pinches of dough and squash them flat in between your palms, and place the little discs upon the bakestone set in the fire there. And while you are doing that I will tell you all about the warrior queen. It is our sacred duty to learn from the past, after all.

And I am a Bard. It is through me that the stories of the past must live on into the future."

Gwendoline was feeling a little afraid, but her desire to hear the story of the Warrior Queen was also very strong. And so she did as she was bid, and her great-grandmother settled herself on a stool beside the cauldron.

"I shall tell you about the ancient days of our people," she said in her story-telling voice, which was more singing than speaking. "A time long ago many of the tribes from these islands – which had for so long warred against each other – joined together under one mighty queen to fight the Strangers."

"What did she look like?" asked the girl.

"She was magnificent," answered the old woman, "tall and strong-boned, with thick red hair. Her eyes were grey and sharp as flint. That day of all days she seemed invincible as she stood on the battlefield, her roar urging her army on."

As she placed the first of the little cakes on to the bake-stone, Gwendoline tried to picture the beautiful Queen.

"But," said the old Bard, her voice dropping ominously, "to the Strangers waiting to do battle on the far side of the plain she was no valiant goddess of war. To them she was a screeching, blood-caked demon. Imagine her in a mighty chariot: horses galloping towards you; the blood-stained blades fixed to the hub of the great wheels, turning, hacking through everything and everyone that stood in their path."

Gwendoline felt her heart pounding at the thought of this fearless woman, galloping towards her through the mists of time.

"That morning," continued the old woman, "the Roman centurions mocked the men under their command, trying to shame them into courage. 'What? Are you afraid of a mere woman?' they laughed. 'Legionaries, stand firm, stand firm!' And then a hush fell upon the ranks, as the Legate Suetonius Paulinus himself addressed them. He swept his arm in the direction of the Queen's army ranged on the plain below. 'Look at them,' he sneered. 'Nobody steeped in the discipline and order of the Imperial Legions could possibly call that an army.'

"'Look at them,' the Legate commanded his men, 'and ask yourselves, what is there to fear? Look and you will see there are more women than warriors.' The legionaries swallowed hard and looked upon their foe, whose half-naked and painted bodies were contorted into wild dances."

"So the Romans were afraid of the Queen? Even though she was a woman?" asked Gwendoline, hugging her knees tightly.

The Old Bard nodded slowly. "Oh yes, the Strangers were very afraid of the Queen, and with good reason. But the Legate was a powerful commander. 'They are not worthy to be our enemy, they are our slaves!'

He told his cohorts: "The Britons will surrender the moment they see your javelins raining down upon them.

Remember that you are Romans, and that together we have conquered half the globe with our courage, whereas the Britons are lawless savages, little better then beasts."

"The the men of the XIVth and XXth Legions tried not to think of dying. Instead, they thought of their mothers back home; of the balmy air and lemon trees of Amalfi; of the deep blue of the Mediterranean gently lapping golden sands. They muttered prayers under their breath, asking their gods that this might not be their last day on earth.

"Imagine what they thought," her great-grandmother continued, "in the moments before the command to charge, those terrified Romans. They tried not to think of the gibbet, the stake, the fire and the sword; the human sacrifices made to strange gods: their brother legionaries impaled, roasted alive like oxen, boiled like pigs' heads."

"Yuck!" cried Gwendoline. Her father was a Roman, and she didn't like to think of him being barbecued.

"Well, that was the way back then, you see," said her great-grandmother matter-of-factly. "The Strangers feared those ancient customs more than anything – well, almost anything." The Bard lifted her old head, noble and proud. "What they feared most was waiting for them out there on the plain; standing aloft in her blood-stained chariot, the one we called Queen Boudicca."

"Queen Boudicca!" whispered Gwendoline.

The old woman smiled strangely at the girl. "It was said that there were seven sights in her eyes, and that she had the

power to be all around you and everywhere at once, like a mountain mist."

Gwendoline was completely transfixed by the idea of a queen so formidable that even the Romans were afraid of her. "She must have been fantastic!" she breathed, staring deep into the flames licking around the base of the cauldron. "And did she win?" she asked, her pale skin flushed with excitement. "Oh, great-grandmother, tell me, tell me: did she win the battle?"

The old woman smiled. "Child, child!" she said. "Let me tell you the whole story, and when I am done, if you are as clever as I think, perhaps you will find the answer to your own question." And settling back on the little stool, the hazel stick clasped firm in her bony hands, the Bard closed her eyes, and in her sing-song, story-telling voice she began.