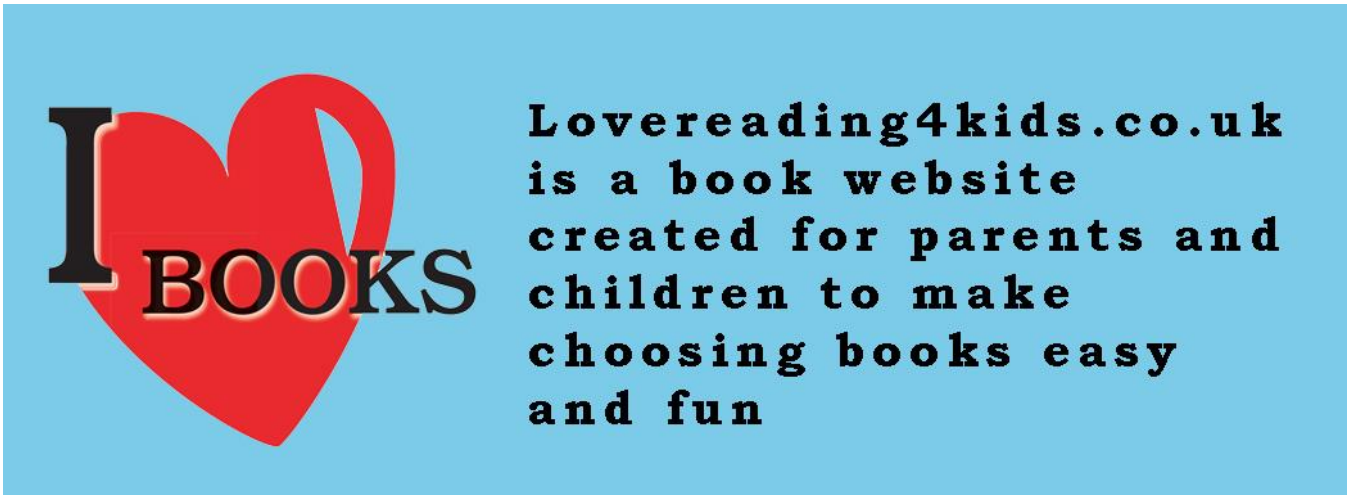


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Beyond the Wall

Written by

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I



Snow lies deep. Bitter cold days. Dark nights, when the veil between this world and the next grows thin. A time to shelter. To sit close around the fire. To rest. To remember.

I am a dreamer of visions. A shaman. A singer of songs, a weaver of words, a spinner of sights and sounds. Of stories.

Hear me now. Listen.

The tale begins with a birth.

Does it not always?

A birth. Or a death.

Sometimes both.

There was rain that year: so much of it. For a full six months it fell without pause from a leaden sky. The preceding summer had been unusually dry and so Mother Earth drank deep, sucking the water into her belly.

But at the turning of the year – in the very dead of winter – she could stomach no more. Instead, she spewed water out of the ground, which mingled with the rain until the whole country seemed awash.

This was Britannia. A land defeated; occupied by enemy forces these last three hundred years.

The estate of Titus Cornelius Festus – landowner, merchant, purveyor of stone to the city of Londinium and esteemed citizen of the Empire – was built along classic Roman lines. A great rectangle had been hacked out of the undulating land: order imposed on chaos. Now there stood a villa with straight walls, square rooms, regular columns. Around it, gardens with paths that neither bent nor swerved but crossed each other at crisp right angles. Vegetables stood in lines like soldiers ready for inspection. Fruit trees were staked to walls – every shrub was clipped into perfect symmetry.

At the heart of the estate was a spring where water gushed from the earth, cool and sweet, even in the height of summer. During the villa's construction a pool – tiled and paved and perfectly square – had been dug to contain it. A statue of Neptune stood in the centre for, though the current emperor was a Christian, who knew if his successor would follow the modern fad? Here, in the furthest, darkest, dampest corner of the Empire the old ways lingered on. Titus Cornelius Festus would not ignore the gods who'd bestowed good fortune on his family for generations.

But that year neither Roman gods nor Roman discipline could withstand the ancient, elemental power of water. The land was so sodden that the spring shifted and began to gush forth from a point five hundred paces away – high up the hill, behind the house. One night it cut a new stream through the soft chalk, winding in curves around the beds of harder flint before cascading into the gardens. Running unimpeded along those straight paths, it toppled Neptune's statue and carried the god away across the gardens. It poured into the villa, through the room where the master's wife sweated to push out her first child. The noise of the flood could not drown out her screams.

She was not the only woman who laboured that night. A short distance away, in the slave huts, another was silently enduring the pangs of childbirth.

A deer makes no sound when she drops her fawn in case her cries alert a predator. So it was with Cassia's mother. Shortly before dawn a girl-child slipped into the smoke-filled darkness of a roundhouse, and so quiet was her coming that the rest of its inhabitants neither woke nor stirred.

The hut in which Cassia took her first breath was built in the native style from stone and mud, wood and thatch. Its doorway faced the rising sun, its back pressed firm against the hill. Small though it was, it curled around its occupants like a parent's arms and steered the flood waters away from the newborn infant.

By the fire's glowing embers Cassia's mother took a bone needle and a pot of pigment, and pricked her daughter's wrists and ankles, marking her with the same pattern of whirls and dots with which her own mother had once marked her. And then she held her baby to her breast for the hours of darkness, weeping all the while for she expected that later, when the infant was examined by the steward, it would be killed as her other daughters had been. Why would Titus Cornelius Festus go to the expense of rearing a girl-child when full-grown women could be got so cheaply at market? None of Cassia's sisters had lasted the length of their first day. Their tiny bodies lay in the burial plot at the edge of the estate.

When the sun rose over the wreckage of the villa's gardens, the months of rain finally ceased. The flood water stilled, lying over lawns in sheets that reflected the sky so the whole world was turned crimson and gold. At its centre, the statue of Neptune was face down like a drowned man.

Titus Cornelius Festus looked out across his estate. The destruction of the shrine, the gardens, the water washing through the room in which his wife had given birth, seemed to portend something. But what? Were the gods angry? If that was so, he must pay for sacrifices to be offered at the Temple.

Yet there lay Neptune, overturned. Fallen. How was he to interpret that?

Perhaps he should also consider offering a few prayers

up to the Christian god? It could surely do no harm to appease both?

He shifted uncomfortably. His bladder was full to bursting, but he was reluctant to relieve himself. For months he'd been troubled by an agonized burning sensation every time he passed water.

A personal matter, some might say: hardly a fitting subject for a storyteller!

I agree. And I would not speak of such a thing were it not for the fact that his condition and Cassia's fate were intimately entwined.

Titus Cornelius Festus was grateful that the healer had at last effected a remedy, but the pain he'd suffered was seared into his memory. As was the cause of his infection. The local brothel. A new whore, lately brought from Gallia. Gods! She was so young, so fresh. She'd almost been worth the discomfort that had followed. He was recalling her in lurid detail when the steward came to report that a girl had been born in the slave huts.

Just then, his newborn son wailed aloud. An idea took root which grew and blossomed within a few heartbeats.

To the steward's surprise, the master did not at once give the command for the infant's death. Instead Titus Cornelius Festus went himself to the slave quarters to inspect this new child. Seeing that she was sturdy and straight in limb, hearing that her lungs were hearty and sound, he declared she was worth preserving.

For was it not significant, he thought, that this girl should have been born the selfsame night as Lucius – his son, his heir, a lad who would carry the family name like a legion's eagle into the future? Yes … this is what the gods had been telling him! They had washed the world clean the very moment the children's lives began. Their fates were surely linked: this slave girl would be his son's playmate. She could keep Lucius amused while they grew and then – when he reached maturity… Every man has appetites that must be satisfied. But – as Titus knew only too well – brothels were insanitary places, and the women so often harboured some dreadful disease! It was the same at the market: one could not tell, no matter how carefully one looked, whether a woman carried contagion or not. Well then, when his son was grown, Cassia would be his. The gods surely intended her as a gift for Lucius: a gift who could be watched over and kept pure, clean and free from infection.

And so it was that on the very first morning of her life Cassia was marked by her master as a concubine. A mistress. A whore.

II



Things did not work out the way Titus Cornelius Festus had intended. His son Lucius was a thin, sickly baby who became a fretful, ill-formed child. He learned to walk unusually late and when he did finally get to his feet, he moved slowly, painfully, like an old man.

He and Cassia did not become playmates. The boy was too weak to take pleasure in the ordinary amusements of a child and the mistress, taking Cassia's good health as a personal affront, banished the girl from her sight. While Lucius remained confined within the villa's painted walls, Cassia was sent to work alongside the men wherever the steward saw fit. As soon as she could walk she was fetching and carrying – messages from the fields to the woods or the quarry, food and water for the animals, logs to the villa, vegetables to the kitchen. She grew strong and sturdy, warmed by the sun, cooled by the wind. The work was

hard: grindingly so, from sunup to sundown. And yet her life was not entirely without its pleasures.

Cassia was five years old, or thereabouts. It was the Saturnalia – the midwinter feast – the one day of the year when slaves were allowed to drink and make merry. They had certainly made the most of the opportunity. After an hour or two of riotous delight the majority were lying insensible in the weak winter sunshine.

She was watching the adults' inexplicable behaviour with bemusement when a hand clamped over her mouth. Cassia felt a moment's fear before she registered that the fingers were too small and slender to be the steward's. A voice in her ear whispered, "We're for the woods. Coming?"

Silvio. Two years her senior. A fellow slave. A friend.

After nodding – with some difficulty given his tight grip – Cassia was released. She followed in his footsteps as Silvio darted between the roundhouses and into the woods beyond. There, the smells of fox and badger caught the back of her throat. Silvio ran for perhaps half a mile in silence with Cassia struggling to keep up. He stopped only when they reached a small clearing.

The sun stabbed beams through the canopy, hitting a stream that curled through the glade. Fractured by the water, splinters of light darted from trunk to trunk and from stone to mossy stone. She had thought spring was a long way off, but there in the woods bright shoots of

green were already puncturing the earth. A week or two more and the snowdrops might be in bloom. The birdsong seemed louder here, more joyful, and the ground beneath her feet felt different.

Cassia was lost to sensation. Nothing grew between the roundhouses and along the roads that she daily walked. The rutted earth baked hard in summer and was a slop of mud and puddles in winter. But here it was covered in a carpet of leaf litter. There were things creeping and crawling all around her, the whole place pulsed with life.

Cassia's mother had often whispered about spirits and now – suddenly – the girl saw they were there in the trees. That flowing stream was as alive as she was. Mother Earth's heart was beating beneath her feet, her breath ruffled her hair, kissed her cheek. She would have been happy to stand looking, wondering. But Silvio had plans.

Suddenly he knelt before her. "My queen."

Baffled, Cassia said nothing.

He looked at her. Hissed, "You're Boudica. You know who she was, don't you?"

Boudica, defeated queen of the Iceni. Dead for near three hundred years, yet her name still burned like a flame.

"I'm your warrior," explained Silvio. "Ready to fight the Red Crests?"

The gang of boys divided into two. The strongest, the most daring of them, opted to be Cassia's men. The weaker,

the less popular, were forced to be Romans. Brutus, a lad so desperate to be liked by Silvio that he would do anything, was given the part of the Emperor. And then they went to war.

Brutus stood in the middle of the clearing, his army surrounding him while the Britons melted into the woods. Silvio strode into the trees dragging Cassia behind him. When they had gone maybe fifteen paces he hit the ground so suddenly she thought he'd tripped. But then his hand shot up and he was tugging her down. His face was in hers, his breath hot, his voice fevered with excitement.

"See him there?"

"Brutus?"

"That's not Brutus. It's Claudius. We're going to get him. Him and all his men. We've got to creep, Cassia. Wriggle on your belly, like a worm. Like this."

Obediently, Cassia copied him.

"We've got to surround them, understand? You come at him from behind those rocks. Don't let him see you. If he sees you, you'll be captured. Crucified."

For a moment she looked unsure, so Silvio hissed. "You're our queen. You're not going to let a stinking Roman beat us, are you?"

"No. Never!"

"Good."

Brutus was reclining on a flat rock, resting on one elbow, as if he was at a feast.

Cassia had been told to approach him from behind, which meant crawling through the stream and then through a patch of brambles that clawed at her knees and tore her clothes. She was scarcely aware of it. Only the attack mattered, only the victory. She edged forward, little by little, creeping then freezing, taking care not to break a twig, not to rustle the dry leaves.

But the other boys didn't have her patience. There was only so much creeping and freezing any of them could endure. Cassia wasn't even within striking distance when, without warning, a group of her warriors burst noisily from the cover of the trees. She was on her feet at once, wielding a stick in her hand like a sword, ready to fight.

In the clearing, two lads went down rolling, wrestling. Brutus was one. The other was Silvio. The rest stood in a circle to cheer them on.

To Cassia, they were no longer Brutus and Silvio. The Roman Emperor was battling her finest warrior. And the queen of the Iceni couldn't stand and watch. Brutus was astride Silvio, pretending to cut his throat. Cassia leaped onto her enemy's back, her arms tight around his neck, squeezing with all her strength. He was twice her weight. Twice her size. But her ferocity was enough to pull him backwards. He fell on top of her, punching the breath from her lungs before rolling sideways and landing on his back. She gasped for air. But then she was on her feet. Stepping onto his chest. Standing over him. Triumphant.

It was over as suddenly as it had begun.

The boys were laughing then. Playing. Tussling like puppies. It was all a game to them.

But Cassia had been in deadly earnest and the taste of that brief fight stayed fresh and strong on her tongue. In that moment she had *been* Boudica: a warrior queen not vanquished by the Romans, but one who'd driven the invaders from her land.