

The Celtic Rebellion

by Ella Kitton

All was quiet, aboard the *Nova Aetas*. Moonlight washed the slowly swaying wooden deck of the Roman galleon, highlighting the silhouettes of two men standing in front of the railing at the ship's bow. Above the murmuring of the calm sea, the muttering of the pair was audible. "Stop, before your treasonous words ill become you" The speaker's voice was cold, measured, and expressionless, though his words were barbed. His voice had a ringing edge to it, that seemed to hover in the air long after his words had been blown away by the soft wind.

"Sir, please accept my apologies. I didn't mean it like that- I was merely pointing out the fact that Britannia is rather... lacking? Shall we say, in resources. Surely it would be far more... productive, to focus on invading a wealthier country, closer to home, say, Graecia, instead?" babbled the shorter man, fumbling for words.

"Are you questioning Claudius's orders?" cut in the first speaker, as more of a threat than a question.

"N-no sir, I.."

"Was afraid, perhaps?" His voice sliced through the cold night air like a knife. "You should know by now that cowardice cannot be tolerated."

"No sir, well, I do know but, sir, please" The second speaker's voice carried the raw desperation of a man that knew he had made a terrible mistake. "I understand."

"Thank you, sir, you don't know how much this means to-ahhh"

The taller man withdrew the short dagger slotted between his comrades ribs, regarding the dark blood dripping from the wickedly sharp blade with mild disdain. With a grunt, he hauled the body over the shallow railing, and, with a splash that sent salty droplets, rather like tears, flying up to glint like diamonds in the starlight before racing back down into the endless fathoms of inky black sea. The first man looked down into the calm, forever-rolling midnight blue of the water below, the water that had swallowed up that treasonous man without question. He could do with someone like that; someone who would do as they were told, no matter what. "General, is everything alright?" a soldier queried, awoken by the slight commotion aboard the ship.

"Everything is perfect, thank you, Tribune. In fact how would you feel about being promoted?" and with that, the tall man turned, the light of the thin crescent moon glinting off his set of full roman armour, sending bronze fracturals into the full crimson plume of his helmet. "We have an opening for the position" smiled Aulus Plautius grimly.

"Iona! Stop daydreaming!" Brigid called. Iona poked her head up from amongst the forest of corn stems. A strand of auburn hair fell into her wide eyes. She couldn't help but feel guilty. She was *supposed* to be checking the young corn plants for disease, but it was so boring and the tall, bright, stems looked healthy enough to her. "Sorry ma!" she called, and went back to checking the endless green sea of plants.

She rocked back and forth on her heels, sipping from an earthenware mug. Her fern-coloured eyes were trained on the flickering strands of red, orange, and yellow that danced in a circlet of slate pebbles, sending wisps of smoke gliding through the small hole in the roof of their roundhouse.

But that was all before Da was taken by the Romans. She tore her eyes from the twirling flames, suddenly angry that something so beautiful and something that had once been so common in their house could still exist, even though Da was gone, probably injured or, even worse, dead, by now....

Stop! She told herself, screwing up her eyes as she irritably tried to stop the flow of tears that were streaming down her face, leaving tiny silver tracks, fragile and insubstantial like the memories of Da would be when she grew old. A strangled sob escaped her clenched lips, and she choked back the rest; she must be strong, for Ma. And, in the unlikely event he did come back, for Da

II

It had happened one cold autumn night in October, three years ago, sitting round the fire outside, talking and laughing and eating roasted chestnuts as they were tossed from the fire, into their hands, when, suddenly, a large group of heavily armed men, clothed in huge, bulky suits of bronze metal, that, despite the few bloodstains and tears, gleamed like a wolf's fangs in the trembling firelight. They'd spoken, with painstaking difficulty and strong accents, the words, "give us your men and no-one shall be harmed."

At first, the villagers had been too shocked and outraged at this strange demand, spoken by the strange men from afar in their scintillating protection, like the scales of a dragon from the myths, to realize what they meant. So, when all the men raised their swords and burning torches and started charging, in perfect synchronisation with no signals visible, down the steep hill toward the village, looking like a pack of loping wolves, or a flight of deadly dragons, they were not in time to stop the first of the houses setting alight. It was nothing like the fires Iona had seen before, tame and joyful and frolicking, but like a huge, wild, bird swooping down and devouring the wattle-and-daub huts in a roaring inferno. All at once, the people clustering around the dying, forgotten fire started shouting and waving their arms, running towards their respective houses like fleeing rabbits. Iona had stood there, heart pounding like that of a mouse trapped within an eagle's unforgiving talons. She felt a wave of strong certainty wash over her, an awful feeling that had nothing to do with the howling flames of the bronze dragon's breath. Da. That was when she'd run. She blamed herself for what happened next. If only she'd been quicker, she could've reached him in time. As it was, she only caught a glimpse of his anguished face as he was dragged into the trees by the soldiers, the fading echoes of his shouts, "Stay, it'll be alright! Look after Ma!" ringing in her ears. She didn't know how long she stood there, waiting, watching, for him to come back, long after the last house had been extinguished.

III

Their hut had been one of the only to escape the fire. Sometimes though, she wished it hadn't. There were reminders of him everywhere. The firepit. The woven box by her bed. The tools propped up in front of the house. His very spirit seemed to be in the walls, the walls he and Ma had made out of wattle and daub.

The ke-wick of a female tawny owl, calling for her mate, snapped Iona back to the present. She had to get some sleep, as she had to be up early to keep up with the day's endless chores. So, wearily, she padded over to her straw mattress and slid under the scratchy blanket with relief. That night, the nightmare came again, the reason she dreaded going to sleep. She stood in the center of the Brigantes village, though it was not *her* village, busy and bustling with people going about their daily lives. It was eerily, deathly, quiet, and devoid of life, except for the lone figure with his back to her. Even though she knew what would happen next, knew how horrific it would be, she took a step towards Da, the noise bouncing off the empty walls around her. "You did this to me." The accusation was little more than a whisper. Suddenly he turned around, and all the houses burst into flame. "You did this to me!" he yelled this time, and began running towards her. "You!"

The pale rim of the sun was just peeking over the horizon when she awoke. A quick glance over at her mother's bed told Iona she was still asleep. She placed her feet carefully on the dry straw, careful not to let it crackle and wake her mother-Ma needed her sleep these days. She slung the basket of chicken feed over her shoulder, the very same one she had collected the chestnuts in for their bonfire that fateful night....

No! Not thinking about *that*. She sprinkled the seed on the muddy, churned up patch of ground they put the food for the chickens out on-no point putting it in the coop. They don't go there until she locks them up at night to protect them from foxes. Iona went to fetch some water for the cows, but when she got to the bucket of rain water they stored for watering the animals, Iona found it was empty. She groaned inwardly. She'd meant to fetch some well water last night to top it up, but she hadn't remembered. Now she had to go to the well, instead of doing the other chores she had scheduled for the morning. At least it meant she could go for a walk. Picking up the rusted metal bucket, she took the narrow path winding through the tall grass along the edge of the forest in the direction of the village. As she passed their neighbour, Angus Brady, she heard soft murmurs coming from the opening in his hut. "I really love you but... Iona. I don't know what she would think."

Upon hearing her name, she crept closer. She didn't like to make a habit of listening in but if someone was talking about her....

IV

"I don't want to keep this from her!" It was her mother's voice, agitated and raised. Iona's blood boiled. No one had the right to make her mother feel like that now! Then the oddity of the statement caught her attention, and she realised that both statements were her mother's. Rage, hurt, and shock bubbled up inside of her rising high-it was a miracle that it didn't explode out of her. She felt the mad, uncontrolled urge to burst into the room and scream at them, but somewhere, the rational part of her brain, buried under fury, told her that would only make things worse. How dare Ma! When Da could still be alive....

She stumbled, blinded by her anger, back up the path to the house. She chucked a small knife, meagre provisions of food, a blanket, and the small, wooden bird her dad had carved for her when she was young onto a pile, pulled their only leather bag off the hook and placed each item in. She made it to the woods before she broke down. Tears streaming down her face, she kicked the bases of the trees, heedless of the stabbing pains shooting up

her legs from the impacts, and screamed into the fading light.

Ma couldn't! What if Da came back? What would Ma do then? Does she not love him anymore? Or has she simply given up hope that he'll return? She didn't know which was worse. Then the question hammering away at the back of her mind screamed down her ear.

What are you going to do now?!

She took deep, gulping, breaths, frantically trying to get herself under control. She hadn't thought this through. However, as she calmed down, her lava of confusion and doubt hardened into a steely resolve. She *could* do it.

V

The dappled light from the overhanging trees cast shadows of black and gold over the path, concealing the lone girl crouched in the shade of a tangled emerald-green bush. Iona had been walking down the dusty, disused, road to the next village, when she had heard the crunching of unhurried footsteps and trundling cart wheels. In a moment of panic, she had dived into its prickly branches for cover, where she lay on her front, propped up on her elbows, face smeared with mud, listening and alert. Being on the run had changed her. She was no longer the naive, emotion-driven young girl who had fled from her mother upon finding out she had a new boyfriend, but a suspicious, logical-thinking enemy of the roman empire- hiding most her life did that to a person.

From her hiding place in the bush, she watched as leather booted feet walked past her face, and caught the tail end of a whispered conversation. "I won't have you running off and getting yourself killed!" whisper-screamed the shrill voice of a woman.

"I'm doing this to protect our family against the threat of the romans. Look, Boudicca of the Iceni tribes' husband, Prasutages, was killed by the Romans. She knows what she's doing." replied the deeper tone of a man. When they turned the next bend, Iona crawled out from under the thorned bush, wincing as they caught in her long auburn hair. She stood in the middle of the path, the light filtering through the trees overhead casting shadows of gold and black-green over her face. Slowly, a wide grin spread across her features. The celts were rebelling! And she would be there to help.

VI

The Iceni village was packed with people, all clustered around the chief's. Armed guards stood at every corner. She weighed her options. She could try and sneak in, but to get in without being detected.... Besides, if she was seen going in, that would be suspicious, and they were unlikely to let her join. Go talk to them it was then. She could always try her other option if this one didn't work. She climbed down from the embrace of the oaks sheltering limbs, and began striding purposefully over the stretch of open ground towards the village. Almost immediately, she was spotted. "Halt! Who goes there?"

"I am Iona Byrne of the Brigandes, here to join your cause." The guard burst into fits of hysterics.

"You? You're but a girl!" He wheezed through fits of laughter.

"Let her through" came a calm, commanding voice. The guard stopped laughing, looking up guiltily.

"Yes, commander."

"Now, what did you say your name was?" Boudicca turned to Iona.

"Iona Byrne, of the Brigandes". The tall, red-haired woman nodded thoughtfully.

"You'll do nicely." Iona held her head high, daring anyone to question her presence in the

camp. It didn't look all that different from her village, although bigger, busier, and there were subtle signs of conflict everywhere. For a moment, homesickness dug its venomous fangs into her chest, making her ache with momentary longing for her old life. Hastily, she shook the feeling off- it wouldn't help her.

There were people everywhere, farming, building, and training. Her heart rate sped up, her blood sparking through her veins like lightning in anticipation, eliminating all traces of lingering regret. Finally, she was somewhere that she could make a difference, no matter how small.

VII

She watched the blade of the knife flash in the wavering light of the flames as she tossed it up and down, catching it deftly in one hand. Then Boudicca started talking, and she slipped it into the leather sheath at her belt. She had been fully welcomed into the rebel army, outfitted in a hip-length, forest green tunic, a hand-me-down from someone in the village, nettle-fibre leggings, her short, sharp dagger, and even her holed leather boots were replaced.

She listened intently, memorising every detail of the plan. First, they were to launch an attack on the Roman town of Colchester, killing as many Romans as possible. If all went well, they would then march on to London, and later St Albans. The cities would be razed to the ground, leaving no one alive in any. Fire again. The part of her that was still Iona Byrne, young daughter of Brighid and Caedmon Byrne, felt her stomach squirm at the thought; surely not all Romans deserved to die? Until she remembered what they did to all these people, her father, and, by extension, her and her mother. She felt something solidify inside of her, something that had been slowly hardening ever since Da was taken, something keener and deadlier than the sharpest sword, something forged in the fires of suffering, tested in the darkest of waters, something that would stop at nothing to achieve justice for all the wrongs committed in this twisted world. Her fingers tightened on the handle of the dagger.

By the next day, her resolve lay dormant inside of her, not in use, but just as strong as the night before, waiting to be called into action. She spent most of the morning practising with a slightly battered metal axe, not her weapon of choice, but in a proper fight she would be too short to be much good with a spear or sword, not compared to a six foot roman legionnaire. The drum sounded for a last-minute strategy check, another of which was bound to follow later, and hurled the axe at a tree, smiling as it struck with a satisfying thud, lodging in the bark. She'd retrieve it later.

VIII

Iona crouched in the dark, her axe held, ready, at her side. She peered out, over the curling fronds of the elder bush, waiting for the signal that would proceed the battle. It was a black night, only a sliver of moon peering fearfully down at them through a dense cover of cloud. Perfect conditions for a stealth mission. Iona glanced over at where Boudicca was squatting, surrounded by her guards. She was proud that she'd been chosen to go in her battalion, but also wondered if Boudicca didn't think she could look after herself.

Without warning, a crimson glow appeared on the horizon, spreading like a flying bird over the dark mass of the cowering city. Fire. The other battalions had started the attack, hoping to draw the legionaries to one side of the city. "Charge!" came Boudicca's cry, harsh and

fierce in the eerily quiet night. In one movement Iona and the other warriors were on their feet, streaming down the sloping hillside like a river of fire, shouting and yelling, brandishing weapons high above their heads. Now that they were closer, she could hear the screams. At first, she dodged and sliced and ducked with her fellow warriors, pressing ever onwards. Until the Romans realised they were being attacked from both sides. "Split up!" Boudicca's command was barely audible over the clash of metal on metal, steel on skin. Iona ducked under the soldier she was fighting's arm, and hared away down an alleyway. The whole battle, she grimly ignored the horrified side of her, doing what she had to to survive fight after fight. Her heart pounded in her throat, her blood raced through her veins, seemingly trying to complete a lifetime of circuits, and, as she took in the bodies, lying in the dirt, the screams of the dying, cut short, she had to resist the urge to throw up.

A roman spear flew over her head, whistling to a stop in the ground, head embedded deep in the earth. She turned around, gripping the haft of her axe so tight that her knuckles turned blue. Her attacker was a roman soldier, armour gleaming under a layer of rapidly congealing blood. She took in the battlefield with one glance, and her anger rose up again. Throwing herself forward, she fired blow after blow, raining her axe down on him. It was clear that he was a more skillful fighter, but against an axe, his sword was little more than a toy. His foot came up. His metal boot dug into her relatively unprotected ribs, hurling her backwards where she landed with a gasp of pain. Spots danced in front of her eyes. "Hmmm" spoke the soldier, in very bad Gaelic. "What shall I do with you, young lady? Kill you, or take you to the other prisoners in the town centre?" Prisoners. In the town centre. She had to keep going. With a grunt of pain she launched herself at him, stabbing her weapon under his breastplate, into his Aorta. He toppled over, onto the ground. That was it. She promptly threw up, all over his polished boots. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she ran. She was small, so when her axe was strung to her back, none paid her any attention. The prisoners were mostly unguarded; most the soldiers had been called into the fight. She froze. These were not Celts, but romans. Why were they chained up? Then she knew. They were celts. Stolen Celts, who were refusing to fight. She drove her axe down on the chain tying them all together, again and again, ignoring the fierce ache in her arms. It smashed to splinters. Agony. In her back. She looked down. A Roman spearhead protruded from her stomach. She kneeled over, onto the ground. With trembling hands, she yanked it from her body, heedless of the pain. Blood was a funny colour. Darker than poppys or roses. She looked up, and her fathers face filled her vision. "Tell them.... Tell ma, I'm sorry"