

Use carnyx before battle

[Boudicca](#)

[Boudicca](#)

[Iceni](#)

60 CE, iceni tribe

I run, breathless to her tent, the news forming tight knots in my stomach. I tripped over more than once, more over anticipation than clumsiness. The fire crackled in the evening air, illuminated by a waning moon. Villagers milled about, settling down for the night and tucking their children into bed. Their lives were about to be upturned. I silently wished that things could stay this way forever. For the children; safe and warm.

My searching eyes skipped over every house until my eyes landed on the grandest. *Hers*. boudiccas. After taking a deep breath I barged inside, startling several of the women who lounged about. Staring around wildly, my eyes found her, her famous red hair alive with power and ferocity. Her eyes bore into mine, her face reading my unspoken words and realising why i had come, they widened in realization.

“Faelan?” she whispered my name with years of tenderness behind it, her voice cracking, searching for answers. Burt she already knew. I saw it in the way her eyes closed in temptation. To scream and shout in vehement satisfaction. But no. She could not show emotion around all of the village. *Her* village. Even if it is joy where there should be sadness. There will be no crying tonight.

I hear my own voice, cracked with disuse, murmur back. It sounds foreign and far-away/.

“It's Prasutagus”

I swallow the bile rising in my throat.

“The chief...your husband hes-”

I pretend to be struggling for words (though not with sorrow, but with triumph) if only for the benefit of the villagers. Fake tears stream silently down her face, her mouth set in a grim line and her eyes hide her bittersweet bliss. If I didn't know her better I would mistake it for grief. I finish, willing it to be over. I speak softly, my next sentence dangerously quiet.

“He's dead”.

The next morning the new queen rises from her tent, red rimmed eyes filled with a look so fierce it could scare any army who fought her. Her emotions seem so real, I would believe them myself, if I did not know how much she hated him. How much he had screamed at her and mira and cass. How his drunken nights had kept the whole village awake. How terrible he was. How much *I hate* him.

*It's his birthday. The whole tribe was required to celebrate. I was tired of it. He's with a few other men. Those who were willing to be in his company to gain a seat on the council. They may as well not be doing anything, he won't remember in the morning. He barely remembers his own name.*

*I'm staying with the girls, six weeks after my father's death. I knew that he had to come back to the house sometime, but had hoped I wouldn't have had to see his face. That **face**. I don't hate him. The place in my heart that used to be is gone. Spun like gold and smashed pieces so small they fall like sand between my fingers. That space is gone. Dark. devoid. So I filled it with hate. The only emotion I can muster.*

*A bang. He's in the house.*

*Another bang. He's in the room.*

*The very room I'm in. That monster is in the room.*

*A crash this time. He's knocked over something.*

*It's so dark. The room is filled with thick smoke that obscures my vision. I can't see anything.*

*It's so dark*

*The crunch of pottery.*

*Ah, so it was a pot he broke.*

*I wonder. Was my father's life like this? A piece of broken pottery that gets stepped on because he wasn't looking. A smoke filled room. He can't see. He's screaming for help. He gets stepped on. Again. Again. Again. He's shouting. He can't see. His last moments are alone and afraid.*

*But my father was not a piece of pottery and we are not on the battlefield.*

*He walks over to where I can see Cass' shadow, lying on her side.*

*I thought he would hug her goodnight*

*Whisper to her a story of olde.*

*Or to simply smile at her and brush her hair from her face.*

*I don't see his snarl.*

*Or the smell of beer on his breath.*

*I didn't know then.*

*I was so young.*

*Now that I looked back, i shouldve.*

*I shouldve*

*I didn't.*

*It was so dark.*

*My throat was closing up.*

*I couldn't see.*

*I couldn't see.*

*I couldn-*

*He slaps her across the face and stumbles to his room.*

*No one says a word.*

*We don't need to.*

*Something happened that night.*

*Something that cannot be fixed with soft words and kisses.*

*Something that cannot be broken*

*A promise*

*A sacrifice*

*To fight*

I feel tears threaten to spill over in my memory. They fall freely. People will think it is for the dead leader and I let them. I have fought for so long and now I can celebrate. But it is bittersweet.

My thoughts drift to Cass. Cass, the warrior sister. The one who was brave. She shouldn't have had to be brave. You'd think that he wouldn't hurt his daughter. That your children

would be the ones you'd protect against all others. No. She always took his moods into stride, protecting Mira. Always protecting Mira. Oh, Mira.

Blood rushes to my cheeks at the thought of the other daughter, though I try to hide it by burrowing my head further into my jacket. The people may let me off for a few tears, blushing is a whole nother matter. Still, my head spins. I have not seen her since last night, after delivering the news. She must be jumping for joy.

She might have avoided his drunken states, that didn't mean she could defend herself from his harsh words. So. Many. Words.

I walk in, my eyes immediately finding Miras. She offers a soft smile in return.

Next to her, sat Cass, back just as straight, but hair betraying her tornado insides. I smiled. Cass had always refused to tie back her hair, always wanting to show who her mother was. *Boudicca*. I could see she was sharpening a dagger on her knee. Sharpening her heart. A silent warning to anyone in the hall.

I suddenly felt guilty. I knew Cass too well and, judging by her refusal to focus on anything but the dagger, she was angry. I should've checked on her last night. Cass was explosive, but she usually kept her emotions in check. Usually. I could see it in the way she huffed that she was teetering on the edge of having an impromptu knife throwing competition. Into the crowd. The only difference between her and I. Both warriors, in every sense of the word. But when she was snarls and knives, I am ice and calm. They didn't know that ice hurts more than fire. That it kills you slowly and without mercy. Ice is cruel.

I am ice.

Mira may be the one who makes my cheeks flame, but Cass is the one who looks at me with eyes that say *i understand. I hurt too*. And blushes are not the same as understanding. And, after all, she is the only one who could match me in training, and I can't deal with one of her berserker phases today.

Passing by the head chair, I take a seat to the right of Mira, quirking an eyebrow in Cass' direction, conveying a silent message.

"*You ok?*". Our secret language

She responded with an eye roll and a not so subtle nod toward the head councilman.

"*No*". Ah, so that was it. They were being *mucan* again, pigs as always. I softened my eyes and gave a sympathetic nod. I turn my attention towards the throne. It was hard to miss, being seven feet tall.

Boudica sat upon her new throne, although I should be calling her *banrigh* now, as she is queen. I ready myself for her words as the noise in the hall dies down. I can't help but notice

a few envious glances toward her. I almost snort. Everyone is a snake, and they are merely waiting to strike.

Boudicca clears her throat, and a hush descends upon the hall. Her eyes scanned the room, seeming to meet everyone's face and conveying a silent message; *do not test me*.

Despite her recent "grief", her voice is strong and unwavering.

"Men! She sounded powerful.

"We have lost a man of great power and intelligence, my husband, our *Ceann-cinnidh*, our leader".

I hide my laugh into a cough. *Intelligent. Leader*. Both words that should never be used to describe Prastigus. But I know it is all an act. A ruse.

"This will be a hard time for us all. But we must be strong" her hands clench at her sides, deepening the marks that she has made over years of clenched fists. She need not clench them any longer now that he is gone.

"I will be chief until another can be found, decided on by the council and myself"

A grumble of assent ripples through the hall but quickly dies down, seeing the narrowed eyes and deadly gaze of the new queen. Her golden torc catches the sunlight, making her gaze even more fierce.

"There is nothing up for debate."

Her voice has a note of finality that no one dares argue with.

"Now, onto the matter of wealth"

Many men straighten up in their seats. This is what they came for.

"My husband has left us half of his riches, the other half going to the Romans." She grimaces, but continues,

"We must remain - if tensely - *peaceful* with the romans, so as not to provoke an all out war after such a loss"

I grunt. We would be more likely to win a war without him.

"We will gather for his funeral rites tomorrow, to celebrate his life, not to dwell on his death"

I can see her resolve harden and her fists clench

"This is a new chapter"

With that, she turns and stalks out of the hall. Mira and Cass follow behind her, although not without a few backward glances of their own. But the councilmen are not looking, not paying attention. The story of our lives, us four women. An orphan, a leader, a warrior, and a politician. Always underestimated. All stronger than anyone else could ever fathom.

As soon as the door shuts behind them, the whispers start, as I knew they would. This is why I stayed.

"*Boudicca killed her husband.*" They continue "*She hated him!*" and the responses "*who wouldn't?*" they go on for hours, and I make silent notes of who fights back, who does nothing, and who the whispers are coming from. I file it away later. For knowing who will run, who will fight and who will do nothing.

They talk of revenge for their fallen leader, for war. But they do not understand that it is the rule of beasts. I suppose they are not much better. Some would like to claim they are, that they have honour, but they are fooling themselves. There is no honour, even in death. They have not seen the cruelty that this world could deal them.

My thoughts darken. I have. I have seen screaming men and dying men and dead men and men who are alive but shouldn't be and men who wish they were dead. Men who kill for fun. Men who stopped caring long ago. Men who are numb. Men who aren't. I am only nineteen and I have seen more than any person should. Much more than I care to admit.

It started with my parents. I was so young. So young and they were taken away. I had lived on my own since I was nine, in that big house that my father left behind. He had been Prastugas' closest friend, and they always rode into battle together, my father always at his side. And so I spent hours with the girls, and with Boudicca. Which turned into days. Which turned into months. They had become like my sisters, those girls, and Boudicca my mother. She had always cared for me.

More often than not, I slept in their hut, their warm chatter ringing in my ears and the smoke curling in the air like a dragon. It was certainly better than the haunting coldness of my house, with the dusty medals with my father's name like a cruel mantra all over them, an echo of his memory. I couldn't bear being in there when I was younger, haunted by the nightmares. Of my parents and of the night that bonded us together. I still remember the remaining troops coming back, sorrow on their faces, and Prastagus summoning me to his hut, drunk as ever, after mama and papa didn't return...

*He belched loudly, clanging his flask upon the table. He had bleary eyes and ruffled hair. He stood unsteadily to his feet and crouched in front of me, his breath stinking of beer and death.*

*"I am sorry, faelan. Your father was a good man. Your mother was too. Woman, i mean, not man, I-" he blinked, as if trying to remember something. He cleared his throat and tried to focus his eyes. They stayed a swirling mass of uncertainty.*

*"W- we will have the funeral tomorrow, with all the death rites. If you're lucky, there will be chicken!" he giggled to himself, like it was some sort of inside joke. That my father's death was a joke. That my mothers capture a joke. And he has the audacity to say there will be chicken. He tottered back to his desk and sat down, shoing me out.*

*"Go, go on now, go get ready and pretty for tomorrow, although, mind you, many good men died today and it's not just your father y'kn-" his words cut off as he took another swig of his drink. When he was done he looked at me like her forgot why i was here.*

*And that was it. That was all I got. All my father was worth. Cheap words. Cheap words for the countless times my father had defended him in battle when he did nothing, cheap words for every time he took the blame for his wrong doings cheap words-...*

*I wanted to scream and cry and throw my hands up in the air and beg for mercy from the ancient gods.*

*There was no use. The next day, a soldier took pity on me and told me that my father had died when prasutagus failed to cover his flank because he fell off his horse. A man, the man whose life had been saved countless times by my father, had failed to defend his back. What a perfect betrayal. Stab him in the back for every time he saved yours.*

*Something snapped in me that day. Something important. I was only nine. Only nine and the hatred inside me was so potent that it bubbled inside me until I couldn't breathe anymore. It was suffocating. It wrapped my heart in a blanket that promised it would protect me from the world. From my heart. I would not be cut by those broken shards again.*

*The same soldier that told me what had happened had given me my father's long sword, rusted with blood. It was far too big for me, almost as long as I was. I didn't care. It was the only true thing I had left of my father. The soldiers laughed when I tried to wield it. I ignored them. I had gone to the training room that day. And the day after and the day after and the day af-*

I snap out of the memory at the call of my name

"Faelan! FAELAN!" miras familiar voice resounds around the meadow. We often came here to escape from the world, and I barely remembered getting here after the meeting. I just followed the path my feet had taken me a thousand times and then some.

My warrior instincts tighten and I frown. I really need to stop drifting off. Someone could sneak up on me, and I would be defenceless.

Mira, breathless, runs towards me. I worry for a moment, before seeing the ecstasy on her face.

“FAELAN! What are you doing?” she launches herself into my arms, toppling us backwards into the long grass.

I laugh, gently pushing her onto the ground, discreetly glancing around to check no one can see us. To check that no one can accuse her of something she is not even aware she is doing. I plaster a smile on my face.

“Sorry, just lost in thought”

She barely notices my fake brightness and continues.

“He's gone, faelan! HE's gone and he isn't coming back! Don't you know what that means?”

I shush her, my eyes darting around again. The words she speaks are those of treason, and we are in the heart of a dead man's kingdom. That does not make him any less dangerous.

I've rarely seen her like this. She's usually so reserved, keeping her eye on everything, always poised and cool and collected.

“ It means that i'm free!”

I frown.

“Mir, your not... leaving- are you?” I feel the air still around me.

She hesitates. I hold my breath But then her face breaks into a smile.

“ of course not, silly!”

I roll my eyes

“I mean, you're only 18, you have your whole life ahead of you, you still have to-” my voice catches in my throat and I swallow.

*Marry and have children.* The voice in my head finishes. marry to that boy from the trinovantes tribe, I think glumly, to strengthen our. Dumb as they come, but a beast in battle. Respected, strong, powerful... with her at his side, beautiful, and as skilled with words and as he is with a sword, they'd be unstoppable.

I force myself to smile.

“Come on, it's almost dark. I'll walk you back to the house?”



She nods, but I can tell she's deep in thought.

"Thinking about that boy? What's his name- starts with a b.. Brannon!" I shout, nudging her tan shoulder, trying to get her to talk about the boy from the trinovantes.

She looks darkly over at me, mumbling crossly, a fierce blush building its way up her neck

"You know i don't like him, fae" she turns her face toward the sky, staring at the moon, "besides, that name of his is rather stupid for such a big fellow"

"What, little raven? It's not so bad, *luch*."

She nudges my arm playfully, rolling her swirling blue eyes.

" You know i hate it when you call me that!"

"And i will never stop, *little mouse*"

She chuckles again at the childhood nickname, her smile illuminating her face like a lamp.

My heart flutters, just a little.

We trudge to a stop outside.

"I'll see you tomorrow, *luch*?"

She rolls her eyes again.

"Of course, *machan!*"

I mock gasp but secretly I grin at the use of my nickname. The mouse and the bear. Mira and Faelan.

"Don't forget to tell Cass i'll see her tomorrow in training, early as always!" I shouted dne the dusty path, probably waking up half the tribe.

Cass herself pokes her head out the door, eyebrows drawn together in exaggerated anger.

"Tell me yourself, coward!" she shouts, hands cupped around her mouth.

I chuckle and wave one last goodbye and turn on my heel, making my way home.

*No. not home. A house. An empty house haunted by the memories of what was once your family.* I shake the thoughts from my head, trudging back to my house, too old to sleep with them now.

Despite my mist of sadness, I breathe a content sigh.

*Prasutagus was gone.*

*My training was going better than ever.*

*Mi-* No, not Mira. I must keep reminding myself of that. She would never be mine. I was content with what I had. A friendship. And when I reached the door I lay in my bed, my heart full and hopes high. I close my eyes, dreaming of stolen kisses and smoke.

*Smoke.*

I wake up to screams. Terror grips me. Every night since my father's death, without exception, I've been haunted by his death. How it happened, where it happens, changes every time. But there is always smoke, even if there is no fire. *smoke , smoke, so much smoke everywhere. I'm coughing as i stumble aro-*

Someones grabbing my hand and pulling me out of bed shouting at me to move, to run. *Cass.* of course she came back for me. Brave Cass. It's my wake-up-call, jerking me out of whatever fantasy in which i had thought i was dreaming. I grab my sword off the bedside table and look at this house, already starting to be engulfed by flame. It's a hungry beast, always wanting more. I don't care. It is only eating what I could never bear to swallow.

Cass is already out of the door, her wild tangle of red hair fying behind her like a banner.

I shout after her, but the crackling and leaping of flames takes my words for themselves, eating them like they ate my house.

Cass heads towards the large council hall in the centre of the village and looks around wildly. My mind, muddled with smoke, is confused for about a second until i see the fear in Cass eyes. *Mira.*

My head spins. I've inhaled too much smoke and it's clogging up my brain like a dark cloud, a shadow. I'm struggling to get my thoughts in order. Why is there so much fire, and where is Mira. She would not have left without Cass, or me for that matter. Nothing is making sense

The flames are too wild for me to reach Cass now, so i try turning back, my eyes bleary with stinging tears. I have to get out, have to find mira, have to save the village, have to-

And then I know. All the jagged nonsensical pieces slip into place perfectly in my mind, and in that moment, it's like I'm seeing thousands of different things, although the fire is roaring around me. Distantly, someone is calling my name, but it's going hazy.

*“Half his wealth is going to the romans”*

*“...Tensely peaceful....”*

I should've known. Not a fire. An invasion.

And then i kno why Mira is not here. They have her.

I feel sicker than ive ever felt at the thought of the things they would do to Mira, twisted things, cruel things. She had not seen battle the way I had, not seen the hunger in the men's eyes, not seen the delight they took in killing. She was not ready. I could just imagine her face, battered, with blood dripping down her chi-

I dont even hear myself scream, but i was told that every person heard it, that every person knew what i was screaming for, Apparently, that spurred everyone to break free.

I didnt know. All i could see was Mira, dead or worse, and the flames became peaceful, comforting even.

I could see cass from the corner of my eye, shouting my name, but I was too far gone.

*This was war.*

I barely feel the fire now.

*And i will fight*

The only question was.

Would I win?

Epilogue.

Sweet mira.

Fierce Cass.

gone.

On that day we stand, triumph soured with inexplicable grief, so much grief that it courses through our blood. They say pain makes you stronger but I feel shattered and I can't put myself back together; Not without Mira and cass. But they are lost now.

A familiar feeling wells up in me, one I remember as an old friend. It's the void, the void that I can only fill with hate, hate for the ones that turned my family into final words and goodbyes. For fear of losing myself in it entirely, lost in the fathomless depths of the void, the hate is what I cling onto, hardening my heart.. Except now it's ten times stronger. But I feel calm in the knowledge that they have already taken away everything from me. I have nothing to lose. And that only makes me more dangerous.

And so me and Boudicca gather, missing the parts of ourselves we never thought we'd lose, and we sing a song of olde. For the ones we loved the most, for family, for the cruel leader, for the wives and husbands and sisters and mothers and friends and everyone who was brave enough to say that they would not do it like some fool. They fought. It counted. It mattered. They mattered.

Boudicca starts, as only a leader would do, her voice hoarse from screaming in agony from her own black void.

“

*“I look on wood and hill and sky,  
yet without any tears,  
to the warm earth i bid goodbye,  
for what unnumbered tears”*

Her voice rings out across the desolation, an accusation at the deaths. More voices join in, the rites a familiar song to many. Death bands people together in a way that sometimes life cannot. More voices join, our melodies settling across the land that holds the memories of so much pain.

*“So many times my spirit  
went the dark transfiguring way,  
never knew what dying meant,  
deep night or new day”*

The whole forest seems to lean toward us, the haunting melody stretching across the decimated expanse.

Almost every voice joins in now, the last verse as familiar to us as the air we breathe.

*“So many times it went and came  
Deeper than thought it knows  
Unto what majesty of flame  
In what wide heaven it goes”*

The thought.

A question.

What next?

*This is a war.*

I think of Mira and Cass, fighting bravely till the last second, their hands slipping from mine.  
Of my father, screaming for help.  
Of my mother, begging for mercy.

This time I know the answer.

*We will fight.*

*And we will win.*