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Dedicated
to

‘Could you lay the table, please?’ Mum asked.
‘Lunch will be ready in ten minutes.’

Reluctantly Thomas got to his feet, collected a handful of cutlery from the drawer and set out five places. Scarlett fetched some glasses and filled a jug with cold water.

It was Saturday, and the twins and their parents had brought lunch to their



grandfather's house: lasagne, garlic bread and salad, to be followed by chocolate pudding and vanilla ice cream.

Mum was worried that Grandad wasn't eating properly.

Grandad had always been a bit of a mess. His clothes were dirty, his hair stuck up all over the place, and he often forgot to shower or shave, but recently he had been looking even scruffier than usual, and he appeared to have lost weight.



'You're not getting any younger,' Mum reminded him. 'You need to look after yourself.'

Grandad told her not to make a fuss, he was fine, he was just working so hard that he didn't have time for showering,

shaving or washing his clothes.

'Or eating?' Mum asked.

'Sometimes I forget,' Grandad admitted.

Right now, Grandad was in his workshop, doing some more work before lunch.

He lived in a quiet forest, more than a mile from the nearest neighbour. Opposite his house was a large barn, which he had converted into his workshop.

Mum looked out of the kitchen window at the closed door of Grandad's workshop. A handwritten notice warned in big letters:



'I wish I knew what he was doing in there,' Mum said. 'When is he going to tell us?'

Thomas and Scarlett gave one another a glance.

Mum noticed. 'Has he told you?' she asked.

Thomas shook his head. 'No, Mum.'

'He says it's a secret,' Scarlett added.

Mum sighed. 'I don't know why he has to be so mysterious. He won't even allow me past the doorway. He promised he'd tell me what he's doing as soon as he can, but he's been saying that for years.'

Thomas and Scarlett nodded, and tried to look as if neither of them had any idea what Grandad might be working on. They felt bad about lying to their mother, but they were in a difficult position. Their grandfather had sworn them to secrecy, so they either had to break their promise to him, or lie to their mother. Both options were bad, obviously, but which was worse?

Once Thomas and Scarlett had laid the table, and their parents had made the salad, they were ready to eat.

Mum said. 'Can one of you go and get

Grandad?'

'I'll go,' Thomas said.

'Shall I come too?' Scarlett asked, but her brother had already gone.

Scarlett returned to her book and continued turning the pages, learning about the Roman empire, looking at pictures of Roman senators in long white flowing robes and the extraordinary architecture of ancient Rome: the circus, the temples, the forum, the catacombs and the Colosseum.

She and Thomas were studying the Romans at school. Their teacher, Miss Wellington, had asked them to research some facts over the weekend about Boudicca, the British queen who had fought back against the Romans.

Scarlett was so absorbed in her reading that she didn't even notice how much time had passed, but a few minutes must have gone by because she was snapped out of reverie by her mother saying, 'What on earth is taking them

so long?’

‘I’ll go over there and give them a shout,’ Dad said.

‘I’ll do it.’ Scarlett put a bookmark between the pages of her book, and hurried out of the room. She left the house, crossed the yard and entered the workshop, ignoring the sign pinned on the door. She saw her grandfather and her brother standing beside the enormous machine which took up most of the workshop. This was the project which had occupied many years of Grandad’s life.

‘Lunch is ready,’ Scarlett said.

‘Give us a minute,’ Grandad replied.

Scarlett realised immediately what was going on. She couldn’t believe it. ‘What do you think you’re doing?’ she asked her twin brother.

‘I would have thought you’d be pleased,’ Thomas replied. ‘You’re always saying I should care more about history.’



‘I wish you did care more about history,’ Scarlett said. ‘But this isn’t the right moment to research the Romans. Lunch is ready. Mum’s about to take the lasagne out of the oven.’

‘This is a time machine, dumb.’

‘That’s not a nice way to talk to your sister,’ Grandad said.

‘Sorry,’ Thomas said. ‘But I’m right, aren’t I? When I come back to the present, no time will have passed. Mum will still be taking the

lasagne out of the oven.’ Thomas nodded to his grandfather. ‘Let’s go, Grandad. I’m ready when you are.’

‘I’m coming too,’ Scarlett blurted out without thinking.

‘I thought we didn’t have time for this?’ Thomas said.

‘We don’t,’ Scarlett replied. ‘But I’m not letting you go without me.’

She kicked off her shoes. Her T-shirt and shorts might look a bit strange to anyone living in the past, but her trainers would look utterly extraordinary so it was better to leave them in the present. Thomas was barefoot already.

Grandad fixed a tiny transmitter to the back of Scarlett’s front teeth, and inserted a little translator into her right ear. Thomas was already wearing identical devices. Now they could understand and speak any language that had ever been spoken on Earth.

‘You’d better not forget these,’ Grandad

said. He handed each of them a device about the size of a phone. When you pressed the button in the middle of the device, you would be returned to the present, where not a single second would have passed.

Grandad had explained the workings of the time machine to both Thomas and Scarlett, but neither of them had understood him very well. The explanations involved quantum mechanics, theoretical physics and a lot of complicated equations. What they did understand was this: the time machine activated a wormhole, which somehow connected together two different points in time and space, so you could travel between them as easily as walking from one room to another.

Even Grandad wasn’t quite sure how it actually worked, and he said the wormhole seemed to have a mind of its own, so the results of the time machine weren’t always exactly what he was expecting.

‘I’ve given each of you one of these devices in case you’re separated,’ he said. ‘Obviously it would be safer if you stayed together, but you never know what might happen.’

Thomas and Scarlett carefully placed the devices in their pockets. Once they had stepped into the time machine, that device was the only way that they could get home.

‘What year are you going back to?’ Grandad asked the children.

‘Don’t ask me,’ Thomas said. He turned to his sister. ‘When did Boudicca live?’

‘You should listen to Miss Wellington,’ Scarlett told her brother. ‘You might learn something.’

‘Very funny. Come on, tell me. When was it?’

‘Boudicca fought the Romans in the year sixty-one,’ Scarlett replied.

‘Perfect. Let’s see. If I go all the way back to zero,’ Grandad mumbled to himself as he

turned the dial on the time machine. ‘Then to fifty. Sixty. Sixty-one. There you go.’

He clicked the main switch from OFF to ON. A low hum filled the air. Some brightly coloured lights flashed.

‘Are you both ready?’ Grandad asked.

The twins nodded, stepped forward and stood by the doorway that led into the time machine, which was juddering by now and making some strange and surprisingly ugly noises.

Grandad pulled a couple of levers, turned some dials, made some further adjustments on the screen and tapped several commands on his keyboard. The noises got even louder, and the machine began to whirr and shake so strongly that the ground trembled under their feet.

‘Now!’ Grandad shouted at the top of his voice.

As soon as they heard his command, Thomas



and Scarlett stepped through the doorway and into the darkness on the other side.

The workshop vanished, and so did Grandad, replaced by the blackness of space and the brightness of a million stars.



2

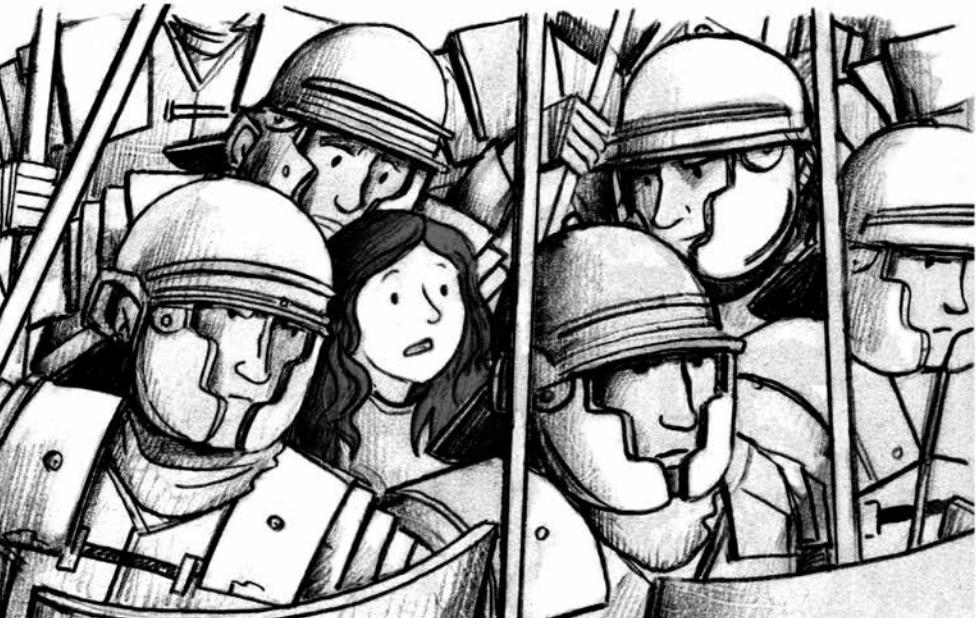
Scarlett saw a soldier on her right.

Another on her left.

More behind, more ahead.

Soldiers everywhere.

Each of them carried a spear in his right hand, a shield in his left, and a sword and a dagger strapped to his belt. Helmets protected



their heads, chain mail and armour covered their bodies, and they had sandals on their feet, giving them a good grip on the slippery grass.

They had been standing shoulder to shoulder, pressed together, but somehow a girl had appeared from nowhere and squeezed between them.

One of the soldiers started asking a question: ‘What are you . . . ?’

Another asked at the same time: ‘Where did you . . . ?’

Before either of them could finish their sentences, they were cut off by a loud voice.

‘Silence! Face the front!’

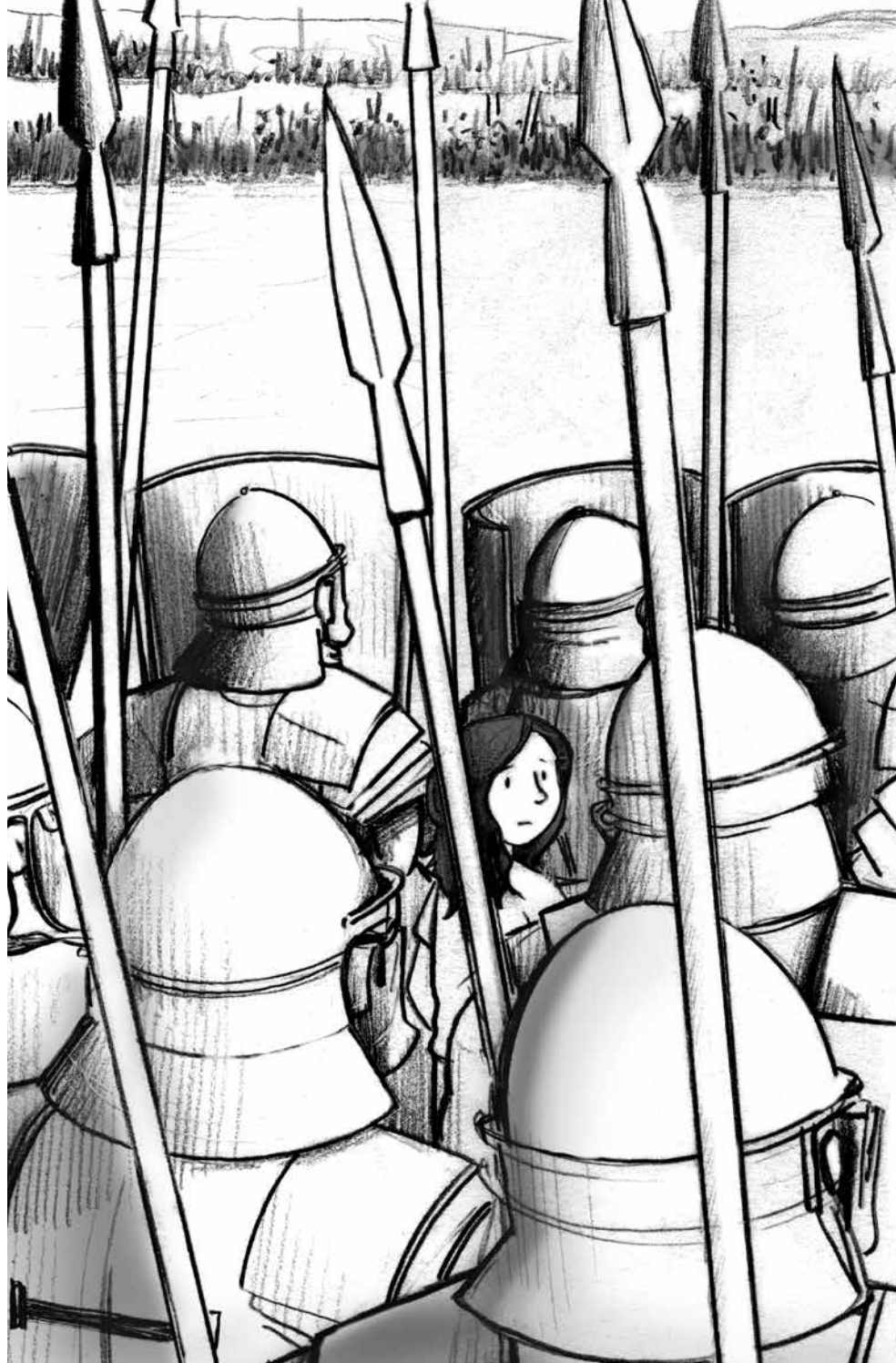
The soldiers obeyed their centurion, ignoring the intruder who had suddenly come between them, and faced forwards, looking down the hillside at the enemy.

The time machine had deposited Scarlett into a line of Roman soldiers. She might

have been only a kid, but she was hardly any shorter than many of them. She was, however, dressed very differently, wearing shorts and a T-shirt, whereas these men wore uniforms and carried weapons. In different circumstances, they might have laughed at Scarlett, or interrogated her, or even attacked her, but right now, preparing for battle, following the orders of their centurions, they barely even noticed her. All their attention was focused on the conflict ahead, and the enemy awaiting them.

‘Steady the line,’ came the voice from behind them. ‘Wait for my word.’

The soldiers stood in silence. Disciplined and focused. Looking down the valley at the great mass of men and women who would soon be charging towards them. The two armies were surprisingly close together. Further than the length that a spear could be thrown, but that was all. Near enough that they could see



one another's faces.

'Keep your position,' came the voice again. 'For the glory of Rome. For the Emperor.'

The centurion was shouting in Latin, which Scarlett could understand, because her grandfather's device translated any words instantaneously.

She could also understand the men surrounding her, whispering to one another, a few in Latin, the others in different languages, speaking a mixture of tongues from all around the empire.

'They're a rabble,' someone said.

'We'll smash them to pieces,' agreed another.

'The hillside will run with their blood,' said a third confidently. 'They haven't got a hope. If they had any sense, they'd turn and run right now.'

Scarlett wondered if the men really believed what they were saying, or if they were speaking so bravely to hide their nervousness.

She could see a chariot at the front of the enemy. A driver sat at the front, a whip in his hand, ready to spur on the horses. Behind him, a woman stood at the back of the chariot. Scarlett couldn't see the woman's face, only her long red hair, flowing down her back.

The woman raised the spear clasped in her right hand, and yelled a command.

The noise died down.

The valley was quiet.

Nothing could be heard but the gentle



twittering of a few birds. A buzzard mewed. The breeze shuffled leaves in the trees.

The woman started speaking. Her voice rang across the valley.

Was that Boudicca? Could it be her?

The warrior queen - that was what Miss Wellington had called her.

From this distance, Scarlett couldn't hear what the woman was saying, but she could see the effect of her words on the men and women surrounding her. They stood taller. They gripped their weapons and shields with more ferocity and determination. Their blood was hot, their spirits roused, ready for the battle ahead.

At the same time, Scarlett could feel the tension in the men around herself. These soldiers might have been heavily armed, brilliantly trained, and almost certain of victory, but they couldn't help feeling a tremor of fear at what was awaiting them.

3

Thomas was lying on the wet grass. Above him was a wooden floor. No, not a floor, the base of a cart. He could see wheels on either side of him. Planks above him. Up ahead, the legs of two horses, which must have been tethered to the cart, ready to pull it away.

He rolled over and looked around.

In every direction, he could see legs.

Hundreds and hundreds of legs. Some bare, others clothed in simple wooden trousers. Many were barefoot, although others had simple leather shoes or sandals.

If he wanted to see the rest of this huge crowd, and discover who they were, and what they were doing, and where the wormhole had

deposited him, he'd have to crawl out of this space, and show himself.

He heard a voice.

Coming from directly above him.

A woman.

Shouting to be heard.

The translator in his ear allowed Thomas to understand every word.

'The Romans were proud,' the voice called out. Loud and clear and full of passionate intensity. 'The Romans were arrogant. The Romans thought they could conquer us.'

People booed and catcalled.

'The Romans thought we were weak,' the voice continued. 'The Romans were sure we would roll over and give up and do whatever they say. Were they right?'

Shouts around her: 'No! No! No!'

'The Romans thought they would never be beaten by a woman,' the voice went on. 'A mere woman! They laughed at us. They scorned us.'

They said a woman could never lead an army against them. Were they right?'

More shouts. 'No! No! No!'

'We attacked them, and fought them, and beat them. My friends, we burned their towns to the ground. And now we shall drive every last one of them out of our land.'

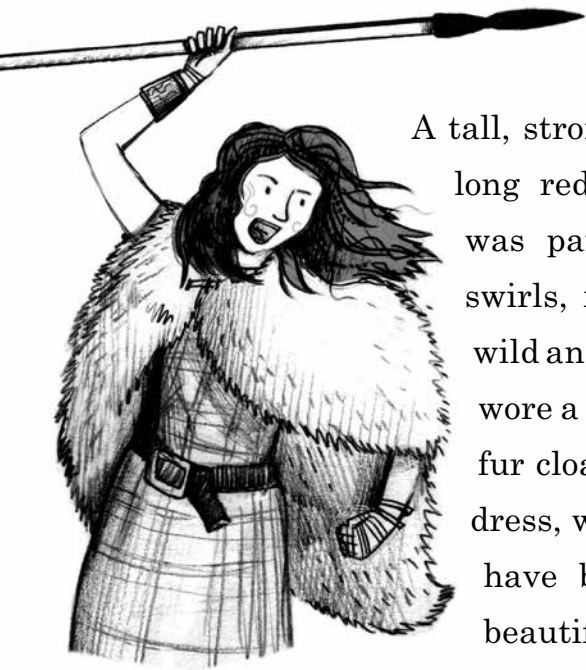
A great cheer went up.

Thomas took advantage of the distraction to crawl out from the end of the cart, skitter across the grass and stand up, joining the crowd.

Looking back, he realised that he hadn't been under a cart, but a chariot, drawn by two horses.

Around the chariot had been hung decorations. No, trophies. Ears, fingers, bones and skulls, presumably from warriors who had been slaughtered by whoever had ridden this chariot into battle.

On the back of the chariot stood a woman.



A tall, strong woman. With long red hair. Her face was painted with blue swirls, making her look wild and dangerous. She wore a magnificent long fur cloak over a grubby dress, which might once have been smart and beautiful, but was now smeared and splattered with blood and dirt. A spear was clasped in her right hand. She was the person giving the speech. The leader of this vast army.

Boudicca!

Surely this must be her.

She looked fierce, passionate, determined - and not scared of anyone or anything.

‘This is our land!’ Boudicca cried out to her army. ‘We are a free people. We don’t want to be ruled by Romans, or anyone else.’

From his vantage point, standing beside the chariot, Thomas looked around at Boudicca’s army. Of course he could only see the nearest of them. He was in the middle of a vast crowd that stretched in every direction.

They all looked different. They had no uniform. A few had metal helmets and breastplates, many more had no armour to protect themselves and wore simple leather jerkins or even just smocks.

There were some warriors armed with spears, swords, axes or knives with sharp metal blades. Then there were archers with bows and arrows. Many had more basic weapons: Thomas saw axes made from a heavy stone tied to a stick; branches which had been sharpened to a point; and many men carrying nothing more than a stone clasped in their fist.

He spotted a few men wearing antlers on their head. Others had painted their faces like Boudicca, dyed their hair, or woven beads and



jewels into their beards. Some had strange tattoos on their arms and bodies. A group of musicians had drums hanging round their necks.

Thomas could see men of all ages - from old men with bald heads and grey beards to boys who must have been even younger than himself - but not many women. He wondered why. Where were the girls? Where were the rest of the women from these tribes? Hadn't they been inspired to join their leader in the battle?

'We gave the Romans a simple choice,' Boudicca shouted. 'Either they could leave our country, or they could die. They have chosen to stay - so let us drive them out of this life and into the next.'

When she said these words, a great cry went up. The drummers beat a wild rhythm. The men in antlers danced on the spot and chanted a wordless song. Many of the warriors

shrieked and yelled, filling the air with a terrifying noise.

Boudicca let the noise continue for a few seconds, looking around the crowd as if she was drawing energy from their wild enthusiasm. She glanced at Thomas. When their eyes met, she seemed surprised. She looked at him for a long moment. Then she gave him a quick, encouraging smile.

Almost as if they knew one another.

Don't be silly, he told himself. Surely she gave the same smile to all her warriors, wishing them luck in the battle ahead. Filling them with strength and confidence.

Boudicca lifted her head, allowed herself one last look at her army, then turned round and issued an order to her driver. He flicked his whip and spurred the horses onwards.

The vast mass of people surged forward, cheering and shouting, whooping and hollering, charging up the hill, following the chariot –

and Thomas did too. He felt energised, even inspired, by the queen's smile. He might not be wearing any armour or be carrying a weapon, not even a stick or a stone, but he didn't care. He was going to fight by her side.