

IT WAS THE festival of Beltane. On a lonely farmstead in a corner of south-east Britain, the ritual fires had been lit, and Cuda and the other girls of her clan had decorated the trees with flowers. Cuda's clan was part of the Trinobantes tribe. This year, as well as to welcome the arrival of spring, the tribe had another reason to feast.

Outside the chieftain's roundhouse the women cooked in a great cauldron while the men squatted about the fire, painting blue patterns on their bodies. Bran, the bard, picked up his harp.



'Cuda, come here, my child,' he called.

Cuda ran to him. 'Yes, Father?'

'You know we ride to battle tomorrow?'

Cuda nodded eagerly. 'You're going to help the Iceni tribe avenge the terrible things the Romans did to Queen Boudicca.'

'That is so.' Softly Bran plucked a string. 'Tonight, after I have sung, you will sing in the way I taught you.'

'But, Father, can a girl sing on the eve of a battle?'

'Why not? The older girls are going to chant our war cries in front of the enemy. And if I don't return, you must know how to remind our women and children of their history and their heroes. Can you do that?'

Cuda raised her chin. 'I can, Father.'

Bran stroked her long red curls, which gleamed as brightly as the flames. 'Well done, my child. You are as brave as your mother was.'

'Can she see me from the Otherworld?'

Cuda asked.

'Of course. And if I am sent there in this battle, she and I will both watch over you.'





Arn, the clan chieftain, rose to his feet. Dark blue scrolls and circles covered every inch of his chest. Round his neck a golden torque glinted, and his hair and his long moustache, which curled down below his chin, were dyed the colour of the sun.



'Listen, my people,' he said. 'The Romans, who have cruelly beaten the queen of the Iceni, are the same invaders who built a temple to their god on the fort of Camulos, our most sacred place. Tomorrow, we join the Iceni to win back Camulodun and drive the

Romans from the shores of Britain for ever.'

The drinking horn was passed from hand to hand, and the warriors called for their bard.

Bran rose. First he chanted the names of all the past kings of the tribe. Then he sang a song about a hero who killed his enemy after a fight that lasted three days and three nights.

As the warriors cheered and asked for more, Bran held up his hand. 'Now my daughter will sing for you,' he said.

A hush fell as Cuda stepped forward. She wore a yellow tunic, and her amber necklace glittered and winked in the firelight.

'Sing, child,' Arn said, throwing back his head and swallowing a hornful of mead.

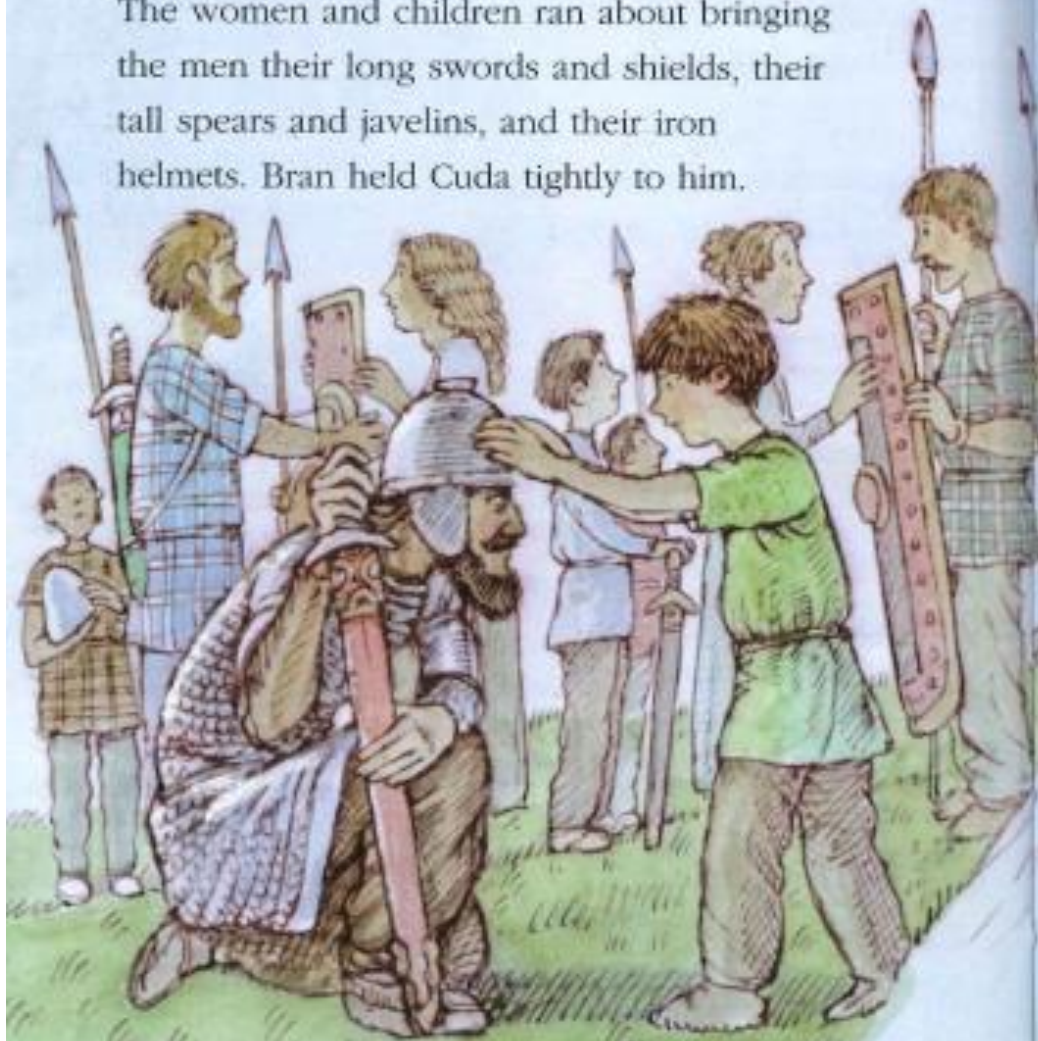


Cuda ran her fingers across the strings of her harp. Even though this was the first time she had sung for the clan, she was not afraid.



Starting softly, she sang of a goddess who could change into a tree or an animal. Her voice rose into the night as clear as the cry of a plover on the marshes. Even the hardy warriors wept.

Next morning, the clan was up before dawn. The women and children ran about bringing the men their long swords and shields, their tall spears and javelins, and their iron helmets. Bran held Cuda tightly to him.



'Be brave, daughter,' he whispered. 'You are now the tribe's memory. Whether in this world or in the Otherworld, we shall meet again.' Then, mounting his shaggy pony, Dubh, he galloped off after the war chariots.