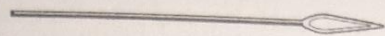


Chapter Four



The slave boy

Up among the trees, the three young warriors held their breath. They saw Beogard get up and stand directly in front of the raiders, one against six.

He was bigger than every one of them by a hand's length, but outnumbered. A great bear facing a pack of wolves.

Sigwyn could stand it no longer.

"I'm going down there."

"No! He made us promise to wait," hissed her brother, holding her back.

Kenhelm was about to speak too – but just at that moment, a farm boy appeared

on the path behind them.

The boy was dark haired like Kenhelm, but long-limbed and scrawny. He was younger than all three of them – maybe by a year – and dressed in rough cloth, without weapons except for a plain seax knife.

A bundle of sticks was tied and balanced across his shoulders.

He stopped suddenly, sensing that something was wrong.

Looking through the trees towards the farm he saw the strangers with their weapons, and Rowena and her family huddled together.

Then he turned and noticed the three young Saxon warriors staring at him.

He dropped the sticks and ran.

Bron sprinted up the hill, weaving through the trees.

His first thought was to get away from the

raiders. His second was to reach a weapon and to sound the alarm.

His master – for Bron was a slave – had a steel sword that he always kept propped beside the door of his forge. It was never used except as a sign of the metal worker's trade.

Bron would use it now, although he'd been forbidden ever to touch it.

Slave or not, he would run to help Rowena. And his master could call for the village men to come running from the fields.

Bron sprinted hard, but then a heavy blow landed on his back and knocked the breath out of him. He stumbled and fell. And before he could rise again a weight fell on him, forcing him to the ground.

Bron fought by instinct. He lashed out with his fist and tried to scramble free. But an instant later he felt the sharp edge of a knife at his throat.

"Do not move boy."

He made a grab at the knife. Anger gave him strength. But the blade pressed harder, cutting his neck.

"Keep still now or believe me I'll kill you."

He looked up at his attacker – up at the Saxon warrior who had out-run him – and saw that it was a girl. She was only slightly older than himself, dressed in mail, with a richly decorated cloak and a fine war-helm. The armour gave her weight, which pushed down on him.

He felt a stab of shame.

Her two friends had run up beside her and were looking down at him as well.

"Look at his rags. He's just a slave, not one of the raiders," said the dark haired one.

"He's no warrior," agreed the fair haired one.

"Those men back there are not warriors, they're cowards," replied the girl. She flipped up her knife and pushed it in front of Bron's face.

"And what about you? Are you a coward too?"

Bron felt himself blush.

"I am no coward. I was running for my sword."

She laughed.

"Slaves do not carry swords."

He glared at her.

"Neither do girls."

Chapter Five

The storm passes

Beogard stroked his grey beard and laughed, but he kept his eyes fixed and unblinking on Hrotha.

"So, you were invited to my family's feast too? I did not realise it."

Hrotha laughed.

"We like a feast but we were just leaving."

"Already? Before my sons arrive?"

"Yes. We must catch the tide."

Behind Hrotha, Beogard noticed the other men relax – a stir, a breathing out – their leader had decided not to fight.

"Then go," he shrugged. "I'll not stop

you."

The old warrior took a step back but his hand still gripped his sword.

"I am only sorry that we did not meet earlier today."

If Hrotha understood the threat he pretended not to notice it.

He nodded: "Next time then."

And he turned and walked ahead of his men towards the trees.

"Come!"

They followed, disappearing towards the great river.

Beogard watched them go. He stood very still and kept listening – until at last the silence was broken by little Willa.

"But uncle! Where are all your sons?" she said. "They're really slow aren't they?"

Beogard turned at last and laughed.

"My sons? Ah, little one, they're not coming today, I was just playing a trick."

Suddenly his shoulders slumped. He looked tired and bedraggled. The brief summer storm

had passed and he was no longer the god Thunor.
"Help me get out of these wet clothes," he
grunted. "Before I catch a fever."

Soon men came running from the fields and
a crowd gathered at the farm. They began
to point at the three young strangers – Sigwyn,
Edwyn and Kenhelm, who had rushed down to
the farm as soon the raiders had left. The farmers
glanced suspiciously at the three friends' swords
and their Saxon-style clothing.

Wigstan, Rowena's husband, arrived looking
pale and angry. He was still holding the scythe
he'd been using to cut hay.

A stocky, short-haired man came beside him,
the village elder-man, Paega.

"Who are these strangers?" Paega demanded,
pointing towards the three young Saxons. They
now stood with their shields raised, as the villagers
began to surround them.

"Saxons," said Wigstan, embracing his wife.
"Did they hurt you? If so they will pay for it!"

"No! Leave them," exclaimed Rowena.
"These Saxons protected us. They chased off the
raiders..."

"It was uncle Thunor! He saved us!" called out
little Willa. "He did it with his famous sword!"

And she pointed to the farmhouse where
Beogard was sitting, his great bulk wrapped in a
woollen blanket.

Paega and Wigstan looked, noticing the fine
warrior's gear laid out on the ground at Beogard's
feet: the gold belt buckle, the ornate sword hilt,
the decorated war helm and shield.

"Lord, if you have helped my wife, then I am
grateful to you," said Wigstan

Beogard shrugged.

"No worries lad."

There was a moment's silence and the farmers
looked at each other. Wigstan cleared his throat.

"Well then... will you eat with us?"

"I'm hungry, I'll not deny it," replied Beogard.
"And thirsty too."

"Then you must feast with us tonight," said
Paega. "You and your followers."

The farmers' spears were lowered.

Sigwyn, Edwyn and Kenhelm put down their shields and now Jute children crowded round, keen to see their strange Saxon clothes and fine weapons.

At the edge of the group one figure stood unnoticed. The slave boy Bron wiped at the bloody scratch on his neck. The Saxon warriors had forgotten all about him now.

He turned to go. It was time for him to return to his master's forge with his bundle of wood. He'd have to collect them all together again where they lay scattered on the ground.

Chapter Six

A feast at the farm

All work in the fields was abandoned. Tools were stacked, gates were shut and animals tethered. A fire was laid in the pit in front of Rowena's farmhouse.

Elder-man Paega and his wife brought a pig to roast, enough to feed all families from the nearby farms. And everyone gathered, sitting on the ground and on benches, while cups and bowls were laid on a trestle board.

Wigstan and a group of the older men went to look for the raiders. Paega rode ahead on a pony and a couple of the men

took swords but most went with spears or just farm tools. They soon returned.

There was no sign of Hrotha or his gang.

By now the air smelled sweet with roasting pig and wood smoke. Ale cups were passed around and Paega brought out a decorated drinking horn. Children were chewing on warm bread and some of them began singing.

"You've good land here," said Beogard. "But you should keep better watch. You're too close to the sea."

Now the men sat around, their eyes bright. They were keen to hear him. In the light from the fire Beogard's war-helm shimmered and on it the golden beasts and dragons seemed to dance in flames.

"We do keep watch," said Wigstan, shaking his head. "But this month we're all busy with harvest. This is not when trouble usually comes."

"Trouble can come any time."

Paega snorted.

"These cursed men from the river – do they not have crops of their own to gather?"

"Yes elder-man. But they'd rather steal yours," said Beogard. "And it's not grain they wanted. I think they were looking for plunder. And for slaves."

Rowena passed him the drinking horn, now full.

"We owe you our lives, lord."

Beogard smiled and raised the horn.

"No lass, you owe us nothing. This feast is all a weary traveller could want."

"But where are you travelling to?" asked one of the farmers. "And what are you Saxons doing in the land of the Jutes?"

Others around the fire murmured and nodded.

Beogard took a long drink and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

"Some of us here are Saxons, it's true. And some of us are Jutes. Some may also be British folk whose families lived in this land long before us. But tonight we are all friends beside the same fire.

"To tell you the truth, I've travelled around so much that sometimes I can't remember what I

am – ” he laughed and put his great hands on his knees.

“But why I am here you ask? I’ve come a long way and it is a strange tale. I can tell it to you if you want...”

A murmur of excitement went around the fire.

“Yes, tell us,” said Paega. “We want to hear.”

“Very well.”

A harp was produced and passed around until Edwyn took it and began playing a Saxon tune that all the Jutes knew too.

Everyone looked at Beogard, waiting for him to begin.

Nobody noticed an extra figure squeeze in at the back of the crowd.

Bron had slipped away from the forge where his master, the blacksmith, now lay snoring. Tomorrow he would have a slave’s work to do again. But tonight he would listen to warriors’ tales.

Chapter Seven

The visitor to the hill

Bron wrapped his arms around his knees and waited.

Beogard stood. And instantly, from his very first words – deep, slow, almost chanting – Bron was spellbound. He had never seen such a fantastic figure.

With sparks and smoke rising around him, the great warrior looked like giant, dark against the sky. He placed his hand on his sword-hilt and began.

“I am Beogard, heir of Hengist and Lord of the Weald. My hall lies in the wild forests of the south, and a year ago – *a year this very*

night – I almost died in my bed.

“I would have died, there as I slept, but for one thing. I was suddenly woken in the dead of night by a sound that chilled my blood: a howling and yammering as if from a great hound. The sound woke me and I lay sweating in the dark with my eyes wide and the hair rising on my scalp.

“I am an old man and not much frightens me these days. But that dog’s howl did.

“I found my courage, took up my sword and led my warriors to the door of my hall.

“They all crowded behind me as I pushed the oak aside, just the merest crack, and peered outside. And there it was! A huge grey hound, staring straight at me.

“I looked back at it. Our eyes met, and then the strangest thing happened.

“Before I could take another step a sudden wind blew up and shook the trees all about my hall. I knew at that moment that it was Woden himself riding through the sky, leading his hunt.

“The storm raged around us until one of the

trees snapped and fell through the roof. It landed on the very spot where my bed was, and smashed it to pieces – just like this – ”

Beogard snatched up a stick from the fire and snapped it suddenly in two, making everyone jump.

“We stood there terrified, clutching each other. Then storm passed as quickly as it had come, and the dog stopped howling. It took one last look at me and trotted off into the forest.”

Beogard took a swig of beer from the horn and wiped his beard.

“And I understood. The creature had been sent to warn me. If I’d been asleep in my bed I would have surely been killed.”

The children stared at him wide-eyed and the farmers nodded at each other approvingly. The tale had begun well.

“The very next morning,” the warrior continued, “I looked for the hound. But

there was no sign of it. Not even a paw mark in the earth. I spent whole the day with my folk repairing my roof and mending my bed. And I kept glancing at the forest, hoping to see the beast. But I did not see it. I didn't see it again until exactly one week later."

"You mean the hound returned?!" exclaimed Paega.

"Aye, elder-man it came back. And in a moment I will show the creature to you – here at this very fireside!"

Now everyone stared at him amazed. Bron glanced over his shoulder towards the surrounding trees and the younger children huddled closer together.

"Fear not," laughed Beogard. "The hound saved my life, remember? It was sent by the gods to help me not harm me."

He took another drink and continued his tale.

"This is how it happened. Exactly a week after Woden's storm another visitor arrived at my hall, a mighty warrior in a fur cloak.

"I come from the East Saxons," he said. "Sent by King Bricgnytt to find Beogard, Lord of

the Weald.' 'You're in luck then lad,' I replied. 'I am Beogard, the keeper of Dragon-Flame, the sword of Hengist.' And I lifted this very sword to show him, slipping it just a little from its sheath. Seeing this, he bowed and asked if we might speak together. He told me that his name was Sherwyn and that he had an urgent message. 'I'll hear your message gladly Sherwyn,' I said. 'But first we'll drink.' And I asked my daughter to bring out two cups of sweet honey-mead."

Now Beogard leaned forward, and whispered in loud voice to the children.

"It's very nice for me to taste mead in the morning as my daughter does not usually allow it."

"Why not?" called out Willa.

"For no good reason," replied Beogard.

"Except that she is bossy."

The children laughed. More wood was brought and laid on the fire.

The old warrior stood and continued his tale.

And now it seemed to Bron as if he was actually there, in the far away feasting hall, on the high hill, watching the two men talk.

"The messenger drank his honey-mead and he licked his lips. And I did too.

"I eyed him, wondering what King Bricgnytt's message to me was – I had fought beside the king's father many years ago but Bricgnytt himself I had not seen since he was a lad.

"I soon had my answer. The messenger cleared his throat, put his hand on my shoulder and told me what he had come to say. King Bricgnytt wanted to meet me. He wanted me to visit him at his stronghold at Robrivis.

"As soon as Sherwyn told me this I laughed. 'Why in the Mother's name should I make such a journey? Can't you see how old I am? I have no wish to leave my home and go roaming the country.' But I could see that the messenger was troubled.

"He lowered his voice and spoke now so that no one else could hear. 'I'm afraid war is gathering Lord Beogard,' he whispered. 'A war such as we have never seen. A great battle is coming between the Saxons and the Jutes and many good folk will die. But you might help. With your famous sword Dragon-Flame you

might find a way to keep the peace...' 'Me?' I asked. 'What can I do?'

"Men will listen to you,' he replied. 'Even kings. Come and speak to Bricgnytt.'

"And suddenly my heart missed a beat. For *that* is when I saw the hound again, at that very moment. Because Sherwyn leaned forward and handed me a gift: a golden brooch from his king – this one here..."

Beogard pointed to the rich ornament clasped to his cloak.

Bron watched as the warrior unpinned it and tossed it across to the other side of the fire, to where the children were sitting open-mouthed, listening to his every word.

"Pass it among you," he said. "Look at the creature shown in the gold. See its shining eyes? Its flashing teeth? Well that is the very same hound – the one that I saw in the night outside my hall!"

The children gasped. Bron leaned forward, trying to catch sight of the brooch for himself. He managed to glimpse the gold, a dog's head

encrusted with jewels, and then it was passed on.

The old warrior pulled his cloak around himself and shivered.

"So now I had to think hard. This treasure was a sign from the gods, I was sure of it. The hound was warning me again. It was commanding me to leave my safe hall and make the journey to the king."

