

## Chapter Twenty One

### Walking together

Cleava left Beogard and the Jutes, taking the clay medicine bottle with her but leaving the pony, despite their protests.

"You will need the horse," she said.

"You, I mean –" pointing sternly at Beogard.

Beogard didn't argue. He grimaced, allowing himself to be helped onto the pony. Then the group set off along the road, with Beogard sitting awkwardly and Harnost leading the way.

After a mile the old warrior climbed

down again.

"She's not looking now is she?" he grunted. "I'd rather walk."

"The horse prefers it too," grinned one of the ads.

\*\*\*\*\*

Bron walked on one side of Beogard, carrying his war-helm and pack, while Harnost went on the other side, letting the old warrior lean on his shoulder.

"Your brother was a good man," said Beogard after a while. "I am sorry that we brought him trouble."

"It was not you," said Harnost. "Others carry the blood guilt."

"Still, I am sorry Harnost."

Then he looked ahead.

"I only hope we'll be in time to help those young Saxons. They were in my care."

\*\*\*\*\*

They followed the road east as fast as they could, though it was not quick. Beogard was struggling. After a while one of the lads – Harada – took the pony and rode ahead.

A while later they saw Harada again.

He had tethered the horse to a tree and got a fire going. The sweet smell of roasting meat greeted them as they approached – the carcass of a young deer lay nearby.

Harada grinned up at them.

“What took you so long?”

“Nothing. We’ve been sitting behind that tree,” replied one of the others. “Watching you work.”

Beogard looked visibly stronger as he ate.

Bron noticed the colour return to his face. A skin of ale was passed around.

And then suddenly Beogard began talking.

“I once had a battle with a neighbour,” he said. “He was a very boastful man, big and full of himself. I wouldn’t have minded but he was also stupid. I knew that if I didn’t do something soon I would end up fighting him, just to shut him up...”

“What did you do?” asked Bron.

Beogard took another bite, chewing happily and the men waited.

“One night – after some beer that is – I challenged the fool to a wager. I bet him five silver pieces that I could catch a bigger deer than him – with bare hands only, no bows allowed, no spears or even knives.”

He wiped his hands on his trousers and chuckled.

“That man fancied himself as a good hunter. He was always going on about it, on and on...”

“And you won,” said Harnost.

“Eh? Well no. Not exactly. I’ll tell you as we walk,” replied Beogard, heaving himself up. “Now I think we should press on to Cantwareburh. What do you say Bron, lad?”

“Aye, Lord! We should go.”

Bron had never felt so happy. The warrior was talking to him like a trusted friend.

They stamped down the fire and set off again. Harada rode ahead once more.

\*\*\*\*\*



“Hunting deer takes patience,” continued Beogard. “Have you tried it lad?”

Bron nodded.

“Once or twice, lord. I helped elder-man Paega.”

“Well then you know what I’m talking about. It’s no good crashing around making a lot of noise...”

They were following the road across a wide meadow now – a landscape of tall grass and flowers and the air alive with insects. Beogard breathed deeply.

“...I like this place. It reminds me of home... look lad, beehives.”

He pointed – somebody had set up three hives beneath a pair of lime trees.

The sun was low at their backs and Beogard still had not reached the end of his story, when suddenly they heard hooves on the road ahead.

Harada came galloping back into view. He reined in the pony and looked down at them.

“The stronghold is close, but now you must hurry,” he said. “King Eormenric is feasting with

his lords and your Saxon friends are to be taken before him.”

“Let’s be quick then,” said Beogard.

And a sudden change came over him.

He took his war-helm from Bron and set off again much more quickly. All trace of good humour had left him and Bron marvelled at the change.

With each step Beogard began to seem more like the image of Thunor that he had first glimpsed through the trees at the farm. The warrior strode ahead in silence and his face was set and grim.

The other men followed and nobody spoke.

Now Bron knew.

This was what it felt like going into battle.

## Chapter Twenty Two

### The king's feast

Tables had been set up along the full length of King Eormenric's hall, down either side and across the end, in the shape of a horse-shoe. And the doors had been left open to let in the cool evening air.

Fires burned and the late summer feast was under way.

More than two hundred men and women sat along the benches, or on the floor, or stood leaning against the walls, while the king and his most trusted warriors looked on from the high table.

There was meat and drink enough for everyone. Soon the food would be cleared away and the women would leave. Then the drink would flow and the night would grow wild.

Soon, but not yet.

First Eormenric had a decision to make. He sat smiling and nodding as the feast went on, pretending to listen but really thinking.

He knew about King Bricgnytt's great bridge at Robrivis. His men had reported back, watching as its timbers had been repaired.

And he knew about the Saxon raids on his land – three farms attacked this week alone. Jutrad had told him everything.

And Jutrad had prepared his warriors, ready for his order; ready for much greater numbers to be called up from the fields.

"Attack the bridge and take it now," Jutrad had urged. "Then *we* will be in control, not Bricgnytt. We will raid his lands, he will not raid ours."

It was a bold plan, and it seemed to make sense. But Eormenric had to decide.

He was King, not Jutrad, and he had the most to lose if things went badly.



He looked along the table at his son. Aethelberht was still a young man coming into full strength, laughing and horsing around with friends. One day he would rule well.

*But not if we are beaten in war.*

If Eormenric made the wrong choice now could lose his kingdom, and his son's kingdom and the kingdom of all his sons to come...

"More wine, lord?"

"Of course."

He raised the cups to his lips but drank only lightly.

Maybe not a full war. Maybe a quick raid? Or something else to teach Bricgnytt a lesson?

Yes. Suddenly he put down his cup, and raised his hands for silence.

"Jutrad!" he called.

"Yes Lord?"

The warrior was seated close by, just along the table.

"Bring them in now," said Eormenric. "Bring in your Saxons."

\*\*\*\*\*

An excited hush fell across the hall – and then a riot of jeering and laughing as the three prisoners were pushed in through the door.

They had been stripped of their weapons and even their boots. Their hands had been bound behind their backs with leather cords.

"Kneel before the king!" shouted someone.

And a chorus joined in.

"Kneel! Kneel!"

The young warriors were forced to their knees. A bone was tossed and it struck one – the dark haired one – hard on the face. The blow made his eyes sting and he looked up blinking back tears.

"They'll pay for this," growled Edwyn.

"It's fine... I'm not hurt..." whispered Kenhelm.

There was more laughter until Eormenric finally held up his hands for silence. He waited, stock still, and when he spoke his voice was strangely calm.

"Saxons," he said. "You came to my land to kill and to steal. No man does this without being punished. No man *or* woman."



He pointed at Sigwyn.

"Tell me. Does Bricgnytt send girls to raid for him now? Is he that desperate?"

The Jutes began laughing again.

"I am no raider!" called out Sigwyn. "I am a king's warrior! I came to your land with a message from my lord, not to attack your farms – but your men set on us..."

She was shouting but her voice was lost under a torrent of jeers.

"You are here to listen girl," someone mocked. "Not to talk."

"Well *I'm* here to damned-well talk," another voice bellowed. And a great warrior shoved his way into the hall before anyone could stop him.

"Silence you fools!" he roared. "Bite your flapping tongues and hear me!"

The stranger's great frame seemed to fill the hall and he was shaking with rage. A shocked hush fell as he walked the length of the table and drew his sword. He glared around for a moment and then looked at King Eormenric.

"I don't suppose you remember me, cousin?" he said, calmly. "You were a small boy the last

time I let you hold this sword. You held it well though, a fine lad you were – I told your father, you looked like a little Hengist."

"It... it can't be... Dragon-Flame? Beogard?"

"Aye," nodded Beogard. "Dragon-Flame. And she's as sharp as ever. Here –"

He tossed the weapon, handle first, to the king. Eormenric caught it lightly and stood, gazing in wonder at the blade.

In that moment of stillness, the man beside him – Jutrad – jumped up and drew a knife from his belt.

"I took that weapon from you," he growled at Beogard. "And now you dare bring it here? To this hall? It is death to raise a sword in front of the king!"

Beogard laughed.

"Enough yapping. You tried to steal that sword but you failed. A word of advice lad: next time you kill me make sure I'm actually dead."

Somebody sniggered.

Jutrad blushed and roared in fury at the insult. He lunged forwards – but Beogard side-stepped the blade.



torches were burning brightly and the singing was now full-hearted and loud. King Eormenric found the three East-Saxons sitting with their friend, the skinny Jute warrior, and he embraced each of them in turn.

"You will have gifts of friendship," he said. "For each of you risked your lives to reach my hall."

And Bron could never remember feeling as happy as he did that night.

The Saxons made him sit with them on the bench, and they made a great fuss of him joking and laughing about his warrior's gear.

"The hair-braiding isn't bad for a first attempt," said Kenhelm. "But we'll do it better for you tomorrow."

"Only if you can sit still," said Sigwyn. "And you'll need some new boots. And a decent tunic – that one stinks."

Edwyn nodded.

"Too right. We can't have our new Jute brother looking scruffy."

And while they spoke King Eormenric

crossed the hall with Beogard and they found Harnost, sitting with his kinsmen. The king embraced him.

"Your brother was killed wrongly," he said. "Jutrad is a brave warrior but he will pay for the killing, with blood or with treasure. Tomorrow he stands trial and you will have justice."

Harnost bowed and thanked the king. The law of the kingdom would be followed.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Where will you go after this?" asked Kenhelm.

He was standing with Bron outside the hall, watching as three drunken warriors staggered into the night. One of them tripped on something and the others stood over him laughing. Behind them, in the hall someone was attempting another song.

Bron shrugged.

"I...I haven't thought about it..."

"Back to your village?"

"No, the lad's coming with us of course." It was Beogard. He appeared in the doorway,



his hair even more wild than usual and a drinking horn was slung about his neck on a golden chain.

He leaned against the door post and tried to straighten out his beard.

"Lost a bit of it in that fight...wonder if it'll grow back?..."

Then he looked at Bron.

"We have lots to do...much to see... you can come with me if you want to lad. But like I said, it's your choice. You have no debt to pay, not to me..."

"I do want to come," replied Bron at once. "I want nothing more."

"Good," nodded Beogard. "That's very good...it can be dangerous on the road, I need some protection..."

Then he belched, slid down the door post and slumped onto the floor.

"...now you lads should get some rest... I reckon you've both had too much beer... too much..."

And with that his head nodded and he began to snore.

Jutrad staggered past – but in the same movement he shot his arm backwards, almost too fast to see. His knife sliced across Beogard's mail shirt and cut into his beard. The old man staggered and Jutrad spun and levelled the blade to strike again, this time at his throat.

"Back off lad," growled Beogard. "Last chance. You'll get no more warnings from me..."

But Jutrad ignored him and thrust the knife at his face. Beogard ducked backwards and in one sudden movement grabbed his wrist, twisted it and sent him sprawling with a howl of pain.

Jutrad was up again in a heartbeat – but then a furious shout from Eormenric made him hesitate.

"Sit Jutrad! Sit man! Or I'll have you cut down. This warrior is my uncle!"

Jutrad stood uncertain, glaring still.

"But Lord! This is..."

"I said *sit*!"

Jutrad lowered his knife, still shaking with anger.

"Thank you king," called Beogard. "I see you are feasting but my business is urgent. Can we



step outside and talk? Just for a moment?"

"If you wish. Yes."

Eormenric vaulted across the table. He passed Dragon-Flame back to Beogard.

"I thought you were long dead..."

"An easy mistake. Many have wished it..."

And they laughed.

"All of you, keep feasting!" Eormenric ordered, pointing at his men. "And see that no harm comes to these Saxons."

Beogard paused at the door, where Harnost and his kinsmen were waiting with Bron.

"King Eormenric – this young warrior is Bron," said Beogard. "He has shown great courage. Can he untie the Saxons? They are his friends."

"Yes, do it," said Eormenric. "And let them eat."

\*\*\*\*\*

Bron ran forwards and used his knife to cut through the ropes.

"The slave boy?" grunted Kenhelm, rubbing

his wrists. "How did you come here? I'm glad to see you though."

"Never gladder," grinned Edwyn. "But you could have come quicker."

Sigwyn looked at Bron more closely, seeing his braided hair, and the amulet around his neck.

"He'll tell us his story soon enough," she said. "And look again friends. He's not a slave. He's a warrior."

\*\*\*\*\*

Outside, Eormenric talked long into the evening with Beogard.

While the feasting grew loud in the hall they stood under the covered porch, where the warriors' spears and shields were stacked.

And at last King Eormenric clasped Beogard's shoulder.

"My thanks," he said. "You've given me much to think on."

Beogard smiled. "Good. A leader of men needs to think even more than he needs to fight."

They went back inside and found that the

## Chapter Twenty Three

### First lesson for a warrior

The days that followed were the most magical that Bron had ever spent in his life.

Early the next morning, even as the fire in the great hall still smouldered, King Eormenric's son Aethelberht gathered a group of friends together.

They were going to hunt deer in the lands to the south. And they asked Kenhelm to go with them.

"You like hunting?" the king's son asked the Saxon.

"Of course he does," said Edwyn. "He'll

go with you if you lend him a good horse."

"Any will do me," Kenhelm grinned. "So long as it's fast."

So one was found and the hunting party raced out through the stronghold gates with Aethelberht at the front.

King Eormenric stood by his hall and watched them go.

And then he disappeared inside with his chief men and the doors were barred. Beogard went with them.

Edwyn and Sigwyn looked on, with Bron.

"They go to sit in judgement on Jutrad," said Edwyn grimly.

"I'm glad," said Sigwyn. "May the gods judge him too."

Then she turned to Bron.

"So now we have time to teach you how to fight, Jute brother."

\*\*\*\*\*

Of course Bron had held a sword before – Frumold's rusty old blade – but this was the first



time somebody had showed him how to hold one properly, with a true grip.

The sun was shining down and Sigwyn took him to stand in a wide space beside the hall. He would never forget that first lesson.

Sigwyn gave him a practice blade, made of ash, and showed him how to stand.

"I'll hit at you. You block like this," she swung the sword smoothly and he copied her moves.

"Take care Bron," she said. "It may only be wood but when you get hit it will still hurt."

He nodded, determined to concentrate on what she told him.

After a few minutes he was already out of breath. And then she tripped him.

He sprawled on the ground, just as he had done the first day they met.

But this time Sigwyn reached out and straight away pulled him up again.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It's fine," said Bron, blushing.

But Sigwyn put her arm around his shoulder.

"Enough practice for now," she said. "We'll

find somewhere more quiet. Without an audience."

And then Bron noticed that they were being watched. A huddle of men stood beside the great hall, arms folded. One of them spat and looked away.

"They're friends of Jutrad," said Edwyn under his breath. "Be wary of them."

Bron felt his stomach tighten. The sooner he learnt to use a sword properly, the better.

"Don't worry," said Sigwyn calmly. "We are guests of the king."

And whether Jutrad's men meant to cause trouble they never found out. Because a moment later the hall doors were flung open and Beogard emerged.

It was almost as if the old warrior had known what everyone was thinking. He wiped his nose on his sleeve and walked straight over to Jutrad's men.

There he stood, with his fists on his belt and his feet apart, and spoke with them.

Bron was too far away to hear what was said,

but after a minute Beogard threw back his head and laughed.

Then he clapped the nearest man on the shoulder. And suddenly they were all laughing.

King Eormenric came out now, followed by his chief men. Jutrad walked at the back, head bowed.

His life had been spared, Bron learnt later. But he would have to make a heavy payment in gold to Fornost's kin.

"King Eormenric is merciful," said Edwyn.

"Nay lad," answered Beogard. "He's clever. He still has a kingdom to defend and he needs fighters. Jutrad is more useful to him alive than dead."

\*\*\*\*\*

Two weeks passed. Bron became much better with his sword. The Saxons took turns at teaching him and almost without realising it he began to relax and to fight without thinking. When blows came, he blocked them, and when he hit back he moved more smoothly.

One afternoon, as he practised with Kenhelm

beside the great hall, he became aware that he was being watched. King Eormenric and Beogard were standing nearby.

Bron focused on the fight.

Kenhelm lunged with his shield, then feigned a blow to his head – and at the same time swept a foot to trip him.

But this time Bron stepped back and kept his balance.

Sigwyn laughed.

"My warrior is too quick for you now!"

King Eormenric grunted his approval.

\*\*\*\*\*

The weather changed and the days grew cooler and wetter. Finally, at the start of the fourth week King Eormenric called Beogard and the Saxons to his hall again.

"The harvest is gathered and all is well. Tonight we feast," he said. "Then tomorrow we will leave here. You Saxons will ride ahead. Tell your king that I am ready to meet him at Robrivis."



The young warriors bowed.

"We will take your message lord," said Kenhelm. "And we'll tell our king how you welcomed us in your great hall."

Eormenric nodded.

"Good," he said. "But the bridge that he is building still troubles me. Lord Beogard tells me I am wrong. He says this wooden road can join our people in friendship. What do you think?"

"Lord Beogard is right. I'm sure of it," said Kenhelm.

"We will see," replied Eormenric. "I will meet King Bricgnytt at Robrivis and hear what he has to say. We Jutes do not fear war but neither do we seek it."

He stood and held out his arms to them.

"But that is for tomorrow. Tonight we feast – and I will have gifts for you all."

\*\*\*\*\*

Beogard, the Saxons and Bron piled out of the hall together and stood laughing in the autumn light. Edwyn put his arms around his

friends.

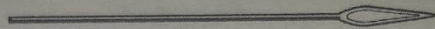
"Our quest is successful. We've persuaded two kings to meet!"

"Yes. And I'm ready to travel again," said Sigwyn. "Now that I've seen the land of Jutes I want to go even further – maybe to the north, to Mercia? Or we could go west to the Weald to see your lands Lord Beogard?"

The others nodded.

"Wait up, not so fast lass," laughed Beogard. "We did well here. But it's not over yet. Not quite."

# Epilogue



**O**n a blustery autumn day, the morning after the harvest feast, a line of horses rode out from Cantwareburh.

King Eormenric left the stronghold with his chief warriors and they passed beneath the old Roman walls, and onto the road. The first leaves were starting to fall, and to bury the cobblestones as they did at this time each year.

Three young East-Saxons rode ahead on fine horses – gifts from the king – and a large man plodded along at the back, uncomfortable on a stout pony.

Beside him rode a young Jute warrior,

straight-backed on a horse of his own.

The young warrior wore a new blue cloak in the fashion of the Jutes, but fastened at his shoulder with a Saxon-style brooch.

\*\*\*\*\*

**T**he king's party stopped twice on the journey. Once in Fefresham, where Eormenric and his son went to speak to a Frankish smith. And while they talked – about weapons, and gold and the latest news from Francia – the smith's sister slipped away.

She went to find the old warrior, and the young Jute, and they spoke quietly together about business of their own.

She gave them gifts, wrapped in a bundle of cloth.

The second time the riders stopped was a short way beyond the town, in a place beside the road. Here a grave was marked with a pile of stones. They stayed for a moment, while the wind tugged at their cloaks and a light rain



touched their faces.

The old warrior stood with his head bowed and offered up a prayer to Thunor, the god of thunder; Thunor his own the god, the god of courage.

\*\*\*\*\*

Finally, they travelled on to Robrivis on the far western border of the kingdom. And they waited in the mud beside the river, where a great bridge of oak timbers stretched across to the other side.

Soon another party arrived. A group of East-Saxon warriors came across the bridge.

And King Eormenric and King Bricgnytt met, and finally exchanged their vows of peace.

"Now let this bridge be a link between you and not a cause for war," said Beogard. "And if enemies attack either of your kingdoms – be they raiders from the river or armies from overland – you will cross it and come to each other's aid."

And saying this, he beckoned forward the

young Jute, holding the bundle of cloth.

And he unwrapped it.

"These are yours," he said. "Keep them as a sign of friendship between your kingdoms. I'll be watching."

And he gave each king a sword, finely made.

Each had a dragon-flame blade and a ring on the handle like the sword of Hengist.

