

Chapter Eleven

The waking forge

Bron went back to the forge. As usual he was hungry. He stood for a moment listening to the dawn birds. Close by, he could hear Frumold still snoring in his hut. The blacksmith would not wake for a while, maybe not even until the sun was fully up, but when he did the first thing he'd do is check what work Bron had been doing. And he'd find some fault with it.

Whatever Bron did, it was usually wrong.

"Why isn't the fire lit boy? Shift yourself, I need it ready... Why *is* the fire lit boy? I'm

not ready yet, you're wasting my charcoal..."

Bron could picture his master heaving himself out of bed and stretching in the door of his hut, chewing on a chicken leg, then walking out of sight – off to the midden pit to relieve himself.

He did the same thing every morning.

Bron stood still for a moment longer, enjoying the peace.

He looked down at his hand – last night he had slept holding tight onto the warrior's amulet – the leather cord with the woven disc tied to it.

He gazed at it. Now, in the dawn light, he could see that it was made of blue cloth with a forked symbol on the front in gold – those were the lightning bolts of Thunor, the talisman of a warrior!

Be true to Thunor and Woden – when the day of battle comes that is where you will find courage...

Beogard's words were clear in his mind and more precious to him any he had ever heard... *even if others doubt you...*

Bron hung the amulet around his neck and made himself a promise. Whatever drudgery lay

ahead of him and however much Frumold nagged and moaned, Bron would think of the warriors. He would remember them always.

Then he began his day's work – clearing yesterday's ashes from the forge and shovelling in a new heap of charcoal. It was the first of many that he would fetch and feed into the forge that day to make the metal glow hot.

Chapter Twelve



The hidden path

Wigstan led the travellers through a series of low fields where cattle and sheep grazed, then they climbed up a steep bank and found themselves looking out over a vast landscape of grass, mud and water. There were clusters of wading birds as far as the eye could see, picking at the wet mud or standing in channels of water that flowed between reed covered islands. The birds paid them no attention.

Wigstan pointed east, far away across the flat marsh, to where the land rose higher.

"While the tide is out, this path is safe," he said. "If we walk fast we'll be on high ground before the water rises."

"Let's be quick then," said Kenhelm. "I don't swim."

Sigwyn shivered. She had heard stories about evil spirits that lived in the marshes – waiting to trick unwary travellers and lead them astray into the drowning mud. Even in this bright morning light, her heart warned her that the tales must be true.

After they had gone for an hour, a dark shape loomed up on their left. From further back it had been hidden behind a bank of reeds, but now it came clearly into view.

The remains of a huge ship were resting in the mud. It was now just a line of wooden ribs, jutting up like bones. Rotting planks clung to them, the remains of the hull. Even in its ruin it was impressive.

"Is that a warrior's ship?" called Edwyn.

"It looks like it," replied his sister. "Maybe it's the boat of Hengist himself."

"No," said Beogard. "When he died his ship was buried with him under a great mound with much treasure."

"This boat has been here for years though," said Wigstan. "When I was a boy it had a carved dragon's head."

He pointed to the prow but where the dragon had once been there was now just a jagged beam, jutting up against the sky.

"It was a warrior's ship then," said Sigwyn.

And she raised her spear in salute.

"Let's move," called Beogard. "The tide is turning."

It was almost noon when the path finally began to climb to higher ground. For the last part of the journey the water had been rising steadily around them as the sea flowed in. It began filling the mud flats on either side and lapping against the long embankment where they walked. The

wading birds had gone and the lower islands were submerged.

Kenhelm, walking at the back, felt the wind pick up, and the power of the tide rising behind him.

"Not far now," called Wigstan. "The road lies ahead."

They were coming into fields again and a line of trees was in front of them.

At last they stopped and sat to eat. Beogard rubbed at his knee.

"The damp air here does not suit me," he said. "I'm happier sitting on top of my hill in the forest."

"You'll soon be away from the river," said Wigstan. "Keep following this path south and east. You will reach the road by nightfall. From there, it is a short way to Cantwareburh."

They thanked him.

"But it will be dark before the next low tide," said Edwyn. "Will you wait here alone until morning?"

Wigstan laughed.

"No. I am a local man, remember. I have cousins nearby and I will follow the dry way home through those fields –" he pointed – "I'll be with my folk before sunset."

"And they'll be glad to see you," said Beogard. "When you get home set a watch Wigstan, you and your neighbours. Watch the water, and watch the road. Keep your weapons close."

"We will."

They rested for a while and ate together. Then it was time to bid Wigstan goodbye – each in turn gripping his arm.

Beogard watched as the farmer walked away, then he turned abruptly.

"We must go quickly now. Time is short. No more resting until we reach the king."

Back at the forge Bron was looking at the amulet again – then suddenly he heard his name being called.

"Bron! Where in Tiu's name are you? Clear out this mess or I'll take my stick to you..."

He quickly hung the charm around his neck.
"OK, I'm coming."

It had been a while since Frumold really had attacked him with a stick – probably because the smith was growing older and lazier, thought Bron. Since his wife and son had died he had become ever more gloomy.

And there was no affection between Frumold and Bron.

Bron could remember his real parents, just about. They had died when he was only three summers old, or maybe four. One day they had been there, and the next they'd been gone.

All he had left of them was a memory of kindness – a smiling face, strong arms lifting him, calling his name – and as he grew up, in his worst days, he still dreamed about them.

Last night he'd had the dream again. But it had changed.

This time he'd felt something powerful and new: not just longing for the past but hope for the future.

In the dream he had seen Beogard and the

Saxons again, coming to the farm – and how tall and fine they'd looked with their swords and armour. They had come to find him, to take him with them as a warrior.

It was only a dream but it had made Bron's heart soar. He wanted to remember it so that the feeling wouldn't end.

Take heart lad...

He tucked the amulet beneath his woollen tunic and went to work, cleaning the ashes from the forge.

Chapter Thirteen

The charm's secret

Bron worked all day, just as he always did, keeping the fire in the forge burning and fed with charcoal. Whenever Frumold shouted for him, he would step in to fan the flames until his arms ached and his skin was burning, feeding the fire with air and making the flames hotter.

He checked on the pigs and chickens and made the midday meal.

Bread and salted fish.

Frumold had tools to fix – a rusting scythe blade to patch-up, a harness-link to

replace, an axe-head to sharpen. None of it was skilled work, and he did it with no pleasure.

Farmers did not ask for their tools to look good or to be decorated, and Frumold did not offer it. He hammered metal, nothing more.

And now he was sleeping, sprawled in the shade beside his hut and snoring.

It was mid-afternoon and these days Frumold often slept at this time.

Bron wasn't allowed to rest until sunset. He was kneeling beside the forge, working to finish the scythe-blade, sharpening its edge on a sandstone.

Later today, or tomorrow some time, Olgwyrd, the farmer who owned the scythe, would come to collect it.

He would bring a coin, or some small goods to trade in payment. A length of cloth maybe, or some cheese.

Or he might send his son Lognard.

Bron didn't like the boy – Lognard was younger than Bron, barely ten summers old, but showed no respect.

"You're just a slave," he had laughed once, when nobody else was near to listen. "When I am grown I'll be a farmer. I might decide to buy you and make you work for me."

Bron had almost knocked him down, smashing his teeth with his fist, but he had stopped himself. Just.

Lognard had smirked and walked away.

"Back to work, slave."

Now, as he remembered this, Bron pushed harder and felt the stone grind into the scythe edge.

And then the amulet that he was wearing, the gift from Beogard, got in the way. The leather cord snagged between the stone and the blade edge, and it was torn in two.

Bron cursed, horrified – the precious amulet fell down into the forge ashes.

He dropped the file and scrambled to pick it up.

As he patted it clean, wiping his hand across

the blue cloth with its forked-lightning symbols, he froze.

There, just visible between the weave of the cloth, was a glint of gold.

He looked more closely, turning the amulet over in his hands.

For the first time he noticed that it was folded over at the top, like a purse. And the edges were held together by... by a fine bone needle.

He pulled at the needle and the purse opened.

And then suddenly the gold ornament was glittering in the palm of his hand.

It was the brooch, the precious hound-jewel that Beogard had shown to everyone last night by the fireside.

Bron stared at it, amazed.

It must be a mistake.

The Lord of the Weald could not have meant to give him this!

But Bron's heart was beating fast, racing with excitement – he remembered Beogard's words, and he knew that it was no mistake.

It's a gift from the gods... maybe it will help you get

your freedom one day...

Frumold sat up, coughing and scratching his head. Cursed lice...

"Boy? Bron? Where are you?"

He blinked, groggy, and saw that the sun was already below the tree tops. It was late!

"What are you thinking of? Why in the hag's name didn't you wake me you idiot? I've got work to do!"

Bron appeared then, stepping out from the store-shed.

Frumold blinked at him.

The boy was wearing his heavy cloak. His hair was braided and neatly tied back. He was carrying a bag strapped across his shoulder.

"What's that? What are you up to?"

"I'm leaving."

"The hell you are. Get over here."

Frumold was on his feet, looking around for his stick. When he found it, he lunged towards Bron, swinging it wide and fast. But the young

man stepped aside, grabbed the stick and pulled it from him.

Frumold was stronger by far – his arms were knotted from a lifetime of hammer work. But he was getting slower, clumsier.

Frumold swung his fist but Bron stepped clear again and the blacksmith staggered and tripped over.

"You'll pay for this!"

"I will pay," said Bron, standing his ground. And he held up the gold ornament. "I'll pay with this. I am buying my freedom."

Frumold stared at the hound brooch.

His mouth opened but he was too astonished to speak.