

## Chapter Eight

### The king's bridge

“So I left my hall and travelled with Sherwyn. And on the way we were met by Sherwyn's son Kenhelm –” Beogard paused and pointed to the young man sitting beside him. The boy nodded, stern faced.

“This is Kenhelm, son of Sherwyn, a fine young warrior. His only fault is that he doesn't much like Jutes – but I think that is changing. Now that he has finally tasted your ale he starts to love you a bit more.”

Everyone laughed and Kenhelm blushed.

“And the same is true of brave Sigwyn

here and her brother Edwyn. I met them on the journey too. They are of the East Saxons, yes, but I think they are ready to call you Jutes their friends.

“But their uncle, King Bricgnytt – well, *that* is a different matter.

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“I met King Bricgnytt at his stronghold, Robrivis. Have you been there? No? It is a fine town by the river, with a stone wall all around it built by the old Romans.

“When I arrived King Bricgnytt bowed, treating me with honour, for his father and I were blood-brothers, both descended from Hengist.

“‘Come Lord,’ he said. ‘I have something to show you. We are re-building our great bridge.’

“And then he took me to see the ruined bridge which once spanned the river. When I was just a boy this bridge used to stretch from bank to bank – until one night when Woden smashed it with a storm.



"But now I saw that men were climbing all over it, fixing new beams. 'Now my army will come quickly in time of war,' said Bricgnytt. 'If the Jutes attack Robrivis, my warriors will race across this bridge into their land.'

"I nodded and stroked my beard. 'But what will King Eormenric and his Jutes think?' I asked him. 'They'll think that you are planning to invade their land.'

"Bricgnytt shook his head. 'But if you will help us mighty Beogard, Lord of the Weald, if all your folk will join us, if the Sword of Hengist will fight on our side, King Eormenric will never dare to threaten us.'

"So now I understood. King Bricgnytt wanted to get my Saxons on his side. 'I must defend my land from the Jutes,' he protested. 'Will you not help, uncle?'

"This was a difficult situation and I had to think carefully. I did not want to offend Bricgnytt. But nor did I want to make an enemy of Eormenric.

"I wondered what to do – and then I

remembered the sign from the gods. The hound was speaking to me, I thought, warning me to do something.

"So I replied at last, with the only answer I could think to give: 'I *will* help you. And your people. I'll go to see Eormenric myself. I will tell him that you want peace and that your bridge is not a threat. And then the two of you can meet and sort out your arguments by talking. You both have enough enemies raiding along the river without fighting between you.'

"And he agreed – reluctantly."

Beogard stood silent for a moment, and looked at the farming families gathered around the fire.

"You spoke right," nodded Paega solemnly. "We do have enough enemies along this river."

Others around the fire nodded, agreeing with the elder-man.

"So now you know why I am here," replied Beogard. "And you know where I am going with these East-Saxon friends."

"May the gods bring you luck," said Rowena, drawing Willa close to her.

"You will need it," added Paega. "For our King Eormenric is already making plans for war. His messenger may come to us any day. And when his command comes I will have no choice but to answer. I will have to lead these good farmers to fight for him."

He looked at Beogard and his face was grim.

"I do not want to. We have no wish to leave our homes, to kill Saxons or be killed by them."

Beogard nodded.

"There is no good in war, elder-man, only sorrow. But take heart, there is still time to stop it. I will speak to Eormenric and do my best to persuade him."

Beside him, Bron noticed how Sigwyn, Edwyn and Kenhelm exchanged glances. The three of them must have heard tales about the fearsome King of the Jutes. And now they were on their way to meet him.

Then more food was passed around, and the story telling continued until the fire died.

## Chapter Nine

### Standing watch

The wood burned low until only the glowing embers were left.

The talking ended and, one by one, the families left and went back to their farms. At first light they would rise again to work in their fields.

Bron slipped away too.

He followed the path through the trees – the path where he carried wood each day – and reached the clearing where the blacksmith's home stood dark and silent.

But he didn't go to his bed.

The forge was in front of him, the



covered pit where Bron spent his days heating iron and helping to hammer it into shape.

And beside it was the thatched store shed where he had slept every night since he was a child, on a bed of straw matting.

But tonight he couldn't sleep. He was wide awake – so he turned away, and walked back along the path. He was thinking about the great bridge at Robrivis and trying to imagine what it must look like – *a bridge strong enough to carry an army.*

And he was thinking about the Saxon warriors who were not much older than him, but who were so much better.

They wore fine clothes, they had expensive weapons, they were free to leave their homes and travel.

And more than that, they had each other as comrades – sworn friends for life against all enemies. Bron remembered the way they had stood together, shields locked, when the farmers had surrounded them. And he'd seen their determined looks when the name of King

Eormenric was mentioned. If war did begin, those three friends would face it together.

They weren't like him. They didn't sleep alone in an old store hut.

"Standing guard lad?"

The voice came out of nowhere. Bron spun round and saw a bulky figure looming out of the dark. It was Beogard.

"Lucky I didn't mistake you for a raider –" he raised his hand and Bron saw a glint of silver, a knife. "You can't be too careful out here."

"I...I was walking. I couldn't sleep..."

"Same here. Too much pig in your belly I expect, that's what keeps me awake – although you look as if you need a good meal more than I do. You're far too skinny, if you don't mind me saying."

Bron bowed and turned to leave.

"Wait up lad, don't go on my account. You were here first, I'll leave you in peace."

The old warrior turned away, but then stopped.

"Am I right – you were the boy who fought with Sigwyn? I saw you listening at the edge of the

feast.”

Bron hung his head.

“It wasn’t much of a fight. She knocked me down. She could have cut my throat.”

“Well don’t feel too bad, she’s a trained warrior. And from what I hear, you didn’t have weapon.”

“No. I was running to get my master’s sword. Bron began to explain – but then he shook his head bitterly. “Not that they believed it. They thought I was a coward, running to save my own skin.”

Beogard nodded.

“It’s bad to be seen running away lad, I won’t pretend otherwise.”

He scratched the back of his head.

“You know, you could always use a stick if you have to, I mean if you have to fight without a weapon. I was in a battle once and my sword was – well, it was lost – so I just grabbed a bit of wood and clobbered the man who wanted to kill me.” He grinned. “I remember how disappointed he looked...”

Bron managed to smile.

“Take heart lad,” continued Beogard. “*You* know that you’re not a coward – and the gods know too. Don’t worry what men say. Or women. Be true to Woden and be true to yourself. When the day of battle comes that is where you will find courage – not in fine garments or famous weapons...”

Bron was amazed. No great lord had ever spoken to him like this before, as if he mattered, as if he could be worth something.

“Thank you lord...Lord Beogard...”

The old warrior shrugged.

“That’s my bit of wisdom lad. For what it’s worth. One thing is certain. If war does come we’ll all need to ask the gods for courage...”

Then he fell silent for a while, looking out towards the river where the moon was now rising above a fine mist. Suddenly he turned to Bron.

“Here. I want you to have this.”

He reached back and lifted something over his head – a cord with a woven disk tied to it.

“A warrior should always carry a lucky charm.



Take this amulet. Who knows, maybe it will help you get your freedom one day."

Bron took the necklace, astonished.

"I...I thank you lord!"

"Guard it well lad, it comes from the gods and it will bring you luck."

He put a friendly hand on Bron's shoulder.

"And now I'll be gone and leave you to your watch. Stay alert and be ready. I must rise early tomorrow. I have a king to talk some sense into..."

The old warrior turned and ambled away into the shadows.

And he was smiling to himself.

Of course he'd known all along that the lad wasn't a coward. Sigwyn had told him that. When Bron was down, she'd said, she'd seen defiance in his eyes not fear.

## Chapter Ten

### The war party

The next day at dawn, while Bron still lay sleeping, a line of Jute horsemen came riding along the old Roman road. There were more than twenty of them, heavily armed and riding hard. They drew up not far from the village.

Their leader, Jutrad, raised his hand for silence. He looked down at the ground. The grass glistened with summer dew but some of the taller stalks had been broken, pressed down.

*People have walked here...*

Jutrad dropped lightly to the ground to

look more closely.

He was gathering fighters, leading them to King Eormenric's stronghold at Cantwareburh. But something else was on his mind too. Yesterday a farm had been attacked – a farmer and his children killed – and a group of Saxons had been spotted on the road.

*Saxons.* Jutrad was determined to find them.

He was a lean man, sharp-eyed and humourless. There was a deep scar behind his ear. It ran down his neck and beneath his mail coat onto his shoulder. Some young fool had got drunk and argued with him at the king's feast last year. The boy had paid with his life. But Jutrad's own wound had taken many months to heal and it was still painful.

"What do you think Havrad? Were these tracks made by the Saxon dogs?"

He nodded towards a forest path that led away from the road.

"Hard to say, lord. There are many farms down that way, near the marshes."

"Farmers will be busy in their fields, not out on the road," Jutrad replied. "No – I say others



have been here."

He turned to the troop leader behind.

"Romulf, wait here with the men."

"Yes lord."

"Havrad, you come with me. Let's see if the Saxons are hiding down here..."

Jutrad kicked his horse on again, onto the woodland track.

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Beogard woke early and rolled out of the bed that had been made up for him in the weaving shed.

He found that Rowena already had the fire lit again with a stew bubbling over it.

"No lady, we've eaten enough of your food already," he said. "We'll be on our way."

"I don't care how much you eat," she replied. "If you hadn't come to us when you did..."

She shook her head.

Beogard smiled.

"Don't thank me, it was our young Saxon friends who made me come here."

Just then Sigwyn appeared, walking back from the nearby stream with a pot of water. Willa was next to her, carrying a small pot of her own.

"Sigwyn says I can be a warrior like her," the little one called out.

Beogard laughed.

"Good! And you will be a fierce sword-sister!"

But then he turned and spoke quietly to Rowena again.

"If war comes, it could reach you here soon. Maybe in a few days. I am afraid of what might happen. More dangerous men than a few river-raiders may find you..."

He looked over his shoulder, towards the trees, and it was as if he could already hear the beat of horses approaching.

"Be ready Rowena. When the time comes, act quickly. If you don't feel safe here by the water, my country is a good place. It is wild and rough – but you and Wigstan could make a home there. Bring all your folk."

Rowena leaned forward and embraced him.

"Just travel for a week. Six days to the west and another south," he continued. "Ask for me



by name."

"You are a good man," said Rowena. "My mother told me that only farmers are truly good, that warriors just live to rob and kill. But she was wrong."

"Maybe," he replied. "It depends on the warrior."

And then he looked up – Wigstan had appeared. The farmer had a spear in hand.

"Lord Beogard, I have an idea..."

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The woodland path narrowed and Jutrad kicked his horse forwards. He ducked his head beneath a low hanging branch.

He felt certain that he was on the right path. Suddenly Havrad called out to him.

"Look lord! Here."

"What is it?"

Jutrad turned his horse and rode back.

There was a clearing beside the path where more grass had been trampled down, Jutrad had seen that. But Havrad had found something else

too.

The earth had been softened by rain yesterday, and close to a tree where somebody had sat there was a clear dimpled pattern in the mud.

It was unmistakable, to a warrior's eye at least. The mark of a mail shirt!

"I was right...!"

Jutrad drew his sword and kicked his horse on.

A short way further he reached a farm – a cluster of low buildings in a clearing. A child – a girl – was helping a woman to clear cups and bowls from beside a smouldering fire. The little one looked up at the riders. She ran to the woman afraid – but the woman straightened, seeing that the horsemen were Jutish warriors.

Jutrad called to her.

"Is your husband with you?"

"Nearby," she replied, her hand resting on her seax knife.

Jutrad smiled and the scar on the side of his face twisted.

"We mean you no harm. But you should be watchful. Raiders attacked a farm further west."

"We know of it," she answered. "Our men are

keeping their weapons close today.”

“It was a full day to the west. How did this news reach you here?”

The woman hesitated.

“The raiders came here. I think they would have attacked us too... but we defended ourselves.”

“You did well,” replied Jutrad. “How many were there?”

“Six.”

“Saxons?”

Rowena shook her head.

“Raiders, men from up the coast – they left on the tide.”

Jutrad frowned and turned his horse around.

“And you were feasting last night I see. You had guests?”

“Our neighbours. We ate together and thanked Thunor for protecting us.”

“Thunor, eh? He put in an appearance did he?”

Jutrad looked north towards the river. The woman did not like him, he could see it in her eyes. But no matter. She was only a farmer’s wife.

“Your days of feasting are over woman. Tell

your husband that war is coming. The East-Saxons are arming against us.”

And then he kicked his horse on, back towards the trees.

“Get to your work. Get the harvest in. Your men will soon be called to fight for the king.”

Rowena watched him go, holding Willa close to her side.

She breathed a sigh of relief and glanced towards the river herself. Then, she thanked the gods that Beogard and his three young Saxon friends had set off just a while earlier.

They had walked out, following a muddy trail through the marshes. Wigstan had gone as their guide. It would be safer, he’d said, to travel off the road.

“Aye, it may be so,” Beogard had agreed.

And the gods had just proved him right.

None of the Saxons had noticed the lone figure of the slave boy watching from the edge of the woods. And they could not guess the pang of sadness he felt as they left.