

Chapter Seventeen

The tall Jute

Fefresham was the most important Jutish settlement west of Cantwareburh. With over a dozen large buildings lining the muddy creekside, and more dwellings beyond, it was more than just a village. Fefresham was a trading post, well sited between the river and the road.

Under King Eormenric's rule it had grown prosperous as a place for landing goods and for trading in metal.

Bron had been here before and he knew the smiths – there were three forges and all

of them were better than Frumold's.

Last year, while Frumold had haggled irritably over the price of iron, Bron had slipped away to watch the smiths at work and admire their fine craftsmanship in gold, silver and steel.

These were the forges where King Eormenric had his weapons and armour made.

The tall warrior, the man carrying Beogard's sword, was heading there now.

Bron followed him, keeping well back on the road but matching his pace.

His mind was racing and the feeling of dread deepened.

Why did this man have the precious sword? What had happened to Lord Beogard and the three young Saxons?

When they reached the town Bron lost sight of the man. A boat was being loaded beside the creek and people had gathered to help lift baskets and to watch. The warrior pushed his way through the crowd and slipped from sight.

After a moment of panic Bron spotted him again and hurried behind.

A dog sniffed at his leg and then he bumped into someone – “watch where you’re going...” “sorry...” Then he stopped.

The warrior was talking to someone – a small woman with a bent back – outside a low wooden building.

Bron knelt, resting his spear, and pretended to check his shoes.

Now the woman had turned and disappeared through a low doorway into the building. The tall warrior ducked in behind her.

The sun climbed higher in the sky and Bron sat waiting, watching the doorway.

It felt strange to be sitting here alone, with no master to wait on or worry about. He was free, but now he felt burdened in a different way.

As he ate more of the bread he thought about the three Saxons again.

Where were they? What had happened to

them? Lord Beogard would never give up his sword, not unless...

A seagull landed nearby, eyeing his bread. Bron ignored it and tried to think.

The boat at the jetty was being pushed off – its sail filling, catching the breeze.

Then suddenly the warrior appeared again, ducking out through the doorway.

But the sword was not in his hand.

The man looked around for a moment, shielding his eyes from the sun, and headed back towards the road.

Bron stood.

Should he follow the warrior or speak to the woman?

He made up his mind to speak to the woman. He would do it quickly, find out what he could, then hurry after the tall Jute.

Approaching the low building Bron remembered that he’d been here once before – this house belonged to Cloda, the Frankish

smith. And the small woman was his sister, though Bron didn't remember her name – Cleava? Cleda? She had spoken to him once, when he'd stood entranced, watching Cloda at work. She had a strange way of speaking, being from Francia over the sea, like her brother.

But she had been kind to the young slave boy whom everybody else had been ignoring.

"You like the gold child, yes?" she had smiled.

Bron had nodded.

"It's beautiful."

"Yes my brother has great skill. This will be drinking horn. A gift for the king..."

Now, as he approached, he saw that the sister looked older than he remembered, and more stooped.

She looked up at him. And to his astonishment she smiled.

"You have grown tall I see. A young man with a spear of his own now. Ah, but you still like gold I expect?"

Chapter Eighteen

The Frankish smith

Cloda sat in silence, his sister beside him, listening as Bron told his story about Beogard and the Saxons and their mission to see King Eormenric.

They were in a small, inner room at the back of the hall. Cleava had ushered everyone else out – servants and other members of the household – and pulled a deep red woven cloth across the doorway.

The Frankish smith now sat, with his chin on his hand, listening. The arms of his chair were shaped like wolf heads and they were more richly carved than anything Bron

had ever seen. The wolves snouts were decorated with blue-green jewels and their teeth glistened silver.

The smith himself moved no more than they did. In the semi-darkness it was hard to tell if his eyes were even open.

At last Bron finished his tale.

"I was going straight to Cantwareburh – but at dawn I saw that tall warrior with Lord Beogard's sword and I followed him here. I am... I am fearful about what it means."

Bron waited but still the smith said nothing. Then at last he turned to his sister.

"This is an interesting day," he said, his voice soft. "What do you think Cleava? We've had two visitors with strange stories to tell. Who will come next, I wonder?"

He leaned forward and lifted the corner of a cloth that was lying on the floor in front of him.

"Is this it – the sword that you speak of?"

Bron's heart skipped a beat. Dragon-Flame!

"Yes."

The smith nodded slowly.

"So. Now I will tell you what I know of it. And after that, we will decide what to do."

Cleava left then, slipping out past the hanging cloth. In a moment she returned with a bowl which she pressed into Bron's hands.

"Stew," she said. "Eat it and listen."

Bron accepted gratefully.

"The warrior you followed is named Havrad," began Cloda. "And he was sent here by his lord, Jutrad. Jutrad is a hard man with many battle-scars, one of King Eormenric's chief warriors."

Cloda's dark eyes fixed Bron's now, warning him to heed the words. "He is not a man to cross."

Bron nodded, feeling his pulse beat faster.

"First we will talk about this sword. Dragon-Flame you called it? Yes, well you are right I believe. This *was* the sword of Hengist. This ring here, on the hilt – see it? – this was a symbol of Hengist's house, a sign of favour from the god Thunor. And this blade –" he ran his finger along

the cold steel face “– this was made with great skill. The metal was folded and beaten many times in a flame that was exactly right, not too hot, nor too cold. It was created by a swordsmith with knowledge. Few of us can make this pattern so well – it is beautiful is it not?”

Bron nodded.

“It is also strong and hard wearing. Which is why Jutrad sent it to me. I have the knowledge to work on this weapon. The handle is worn and scarred – here, see? It carries the mark of many battles. Jutrad wishes for it to look new again, and to become his own sword.”

“He cannot take it!” exclaimed Bron.

“Dragon-Flame does not belong to him!”

Cloda looked at him gravely.

“A sword such as this belongs to whoever is strong or clever enough to take it. I am afraid, Bron, that your Lord Beogard was neither...”

“What? You cannot say that!”

Bron put down the bowl and glared at Cloda.

Cleava rested her hand gently on his arm.

“Peace Bron. It is not my brother’s fault...”

“I...I am sorry... but Lord Beogard is a brave warrior and he gave me my freedom.”

“Then I am sorry too,” continued Cloda. “For Beogard and for you. He was attacked on the road yesterday. His Saxon companions, the three you spoke of, they have been taken to King Eormenric to face judgement. They are accused of being raiders, of attacking a Jute farm.”

Bron jumped up.

“They are not! They didn’t do it! They *saved* us from the raiders!”

“Then I hope they can prove it,” said Cloda gently. “For the punishment will be harsh.”

“But what about Lord Beogard? Why did they not take him?”

Cloda leaned forward and lifted the corner of cloth, covering the old sword again.

“Lord Beogard was mortally wounded. He lies dying at the road side, or he may be dead already. If he was a great warrior, as you say, then Woden will welcome him into his hall.”

Bron gripped his spear.

“No! I must find him. I *must* return Dragon-

Flame to him.”

“Find him, yes,” replied Cloda. “Look on the road to Cantwareburh and I hope you are in time.”

The smith placed his hands on the wolf-carved arms of his chair and stood too.

“But I cannot let you take the sword. If this weapon is not here when Jutrad sends for it, then I will be killed – and my sister too, maybe. Would you have that?”

“No of course not,” snapped Bron. He clenched his fists, fighting his frustration. “But a warrior should always die with his sword in his hand. You must understand this – even slaves know it...”

Cloda sighed.

“I am sorry. I am a skilled smith but a poor fighter, and I wish to live. I cannot help you in this.”

Cleava stood and looked up at Bron and her eyes were filled with sadness.

“Go quickly. Find your lord. If he is dead, see that he is buried with honour. Bring him peace.”

Chapter Nineteen



Blood on the road

Bron ran hard, leaving Fefresham in the distance and sprinting back towards the road. There was no sign of Havrad, the tall Jute, nor of Jutrad his lord.

But Bron didn't care whether anyone saw him or not.

He simply ran, determined to find Beogard.

And as he sprinted he touched the amulet at his neck, praying to Thunor.

"... remember him, help him and I will follow you all my life..."

But the god was silent and tears pricked at Bron's eyes.

A pair of crows flew up from the road ahead and he stopped.

The ground had been trampled. There were deep hoof prints cut into the earth beside the road. And something was lying there, broken.

A shield. Its leather face had been ripped from the ash planking behind and the prized metal boss was missing.

A battle... men on foot... men on horseback...

Then Bron saw something else too. A cluster of flies danced around the cobbles in front of him. Blood, thick and dried.

Warrior's blood...

And at that same moment he felt something cold press against his neck.

"Do not move."
The voice spoke quietly, calmly.

"Tell me, did you know these people?"

Bron tried to turn and look, but the blade pressed harder, pricking his skin.

"Answer me – did you know the Saxons?"

Bron tried to ignore the pain.

"Yes. I knew them."

"Stand and face me then."

Bron stood and turned slowly. The man in front of him was not the tall warrior Havrad, as he'd expected, but a stranger.

He was dressed simply and his sword was plain, undecorated.

He looked at Bron and there was anger in his pale blue eyes.

"My name is Harnost. My brother Fornost died here yesterday, cut down by his own people. He died because of the Saxons."

"I am sorry but...but how did it happen?"

Harnost ignored the question.

"You are a Saxon?"

"No, I am a Jute. But I wanted to help them."

"Help Saxons? Why?"

"They needed to get to Cantwareburh."

"For what purpose?"

"To see our King Eormenic."

Harnost frowned.

Bron continued.

"They did not come to harm us. They came to offer peace."

The man studied Bron, unblinking.

"Peace..."

And then he lowered his sword.

"So, it was true what they told us," he said grimly. "And my brother was right to believe them..."

He turned away.

"Follow me. Your friend is dying."

Elder-man Fornost had been buried beneath a beech tree.

A simple pile of stones covered his grave and two men knelt beside it, their heads bowed. Four others, lads from his village, sat nearby, talking quietly.

As his brother Harnost approached, leading

Bron, they stood.

"How fares the Saxon?" asked Harnost. "A friend has come to see him."

The young men looked at Bron.

"He bleeds no more," said one. "But he will not wake. His spirit is gone."

There, slumped against the side of a tree, was a great figure wrapped in a brown cloak. A spear lay beside him on the ground.

Bron hurried forward.

"Lord Beogard... it's me, it's Bron, the slave..."

But there was no answer.

"I found the gold brooch, and I bought my freedom... I came to repay my debt to you... I know I can never do that but at least I wanted to try..."

Silence.

Harnost now laid a hand on Bron's shoulder.

"He will soon be with the gods. He does not hear."

But even as he said it, Beogard stirred.

"...Bron?... I remember you... of course... you found it then?..."

"Yes! Yes lord! I found your golden hound!"

"...good...I am glad..."

His eyes flickered closed again.

"...no debt to pay, lad..."

And he said nothing more.

The day grew hot and airless.
The Jutes sat together beside their leader's grave and Bron stayed with Beogard, watching his breathing grow fainter.

Some time after noon, Bron grew tired too and his head began to nod.

And then suddenly his name was being called.

"Bron?"

It was Harnost.

"Bron, look..."

A small pony was approaching.

He blinked. The rider was dark haired and wearing a cloak that was almost black – and at first Bron did not recognise who it was.

"Where is he? Where is the fallen warrior?" demanded the rider.

It was a woman's voice – gentle, and strangely accented – Cleava.

The blacksmith's sister climbed down and pushed through the men.

She handed something to Harnost – a clay bottle.

"Boil this in water. One cup please. Quickly."

And she looked up at Bron.

"Bring it here –"

She was pointing to the long bundle of cloth tied to the pony.

Bron ran to the horse and untied the cords holding the cloth – and he gasped. Dragon-Flame, the sword of Hengist, dropped heavily into his hands.

"But your brother! What will happen when Lord Jutrad comes for the sword?"

"My brother is skilled," she interrupted. "He can make a copy. In fact, he is already doing it. Now peace, and let me speak to this dying warrior..."

Cleava pulled Beogard's hands together onto his chest, and covered them with her own.

"Enter Woden's hall now. Go as a warrior and go with honour. You have fought hard. The gods will welcome you..."

Her voice grew softer and she leaned forwards, speaking very quietly, close to him.

"But Beogard, son of Beorgwulf, I think that Thunor would have you rise again."

"Rise again?...must I?"

"Yes. If the gods wish it."

She pressed the hot cup to his lips.

"Drink this and we'll see."

He drank.

"But I am old. Tired."

"Yes. I am old too. But I have to stay up all night cooking and cleaning... and this boy Bron, he is tired. He ran all the way here to bring you something."

And she nodded to Bron.

Bron's heart was racing.

He leaned forwards, lifting Dragon-Flame.

Gently, he pressed it into Beogard's hands.

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He leaned forwards, lifting Dragon-Flame.

Gently, he pressed it into Beogard's hands.

The warrior's grip tightened at once around
weapon and his eyes flickered.

"Bless you lad..."

His breathing grew stronger.

"Good," said Cleava after a while. "Life returns
Thunor is not done with you yet."

"... not done yet... an oath to keep..."

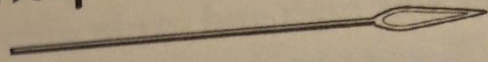
"Then keep it, warrior. Up you come, up! And
do what you must."

And, to Bron's amazement, the small woman
with her thin arms heaved Beogard's great bulk
forwards.

He sat, wincing, and looked around.

"Beer." he gasped. "By Woden's backside your
potion tastes foul. At least get me some beer..."

Chapter Twenty



Prisoners in the stronghold

At that moment, in the centre of Cantwareburh, three prisoners were being led towards the king's hall.

Edwyn stumbled and fell. His hands were tied with leather and he landed heavily, hitting his face on the ground.

"Brother!..."

"I'm alright..."

He struggled to his knees, then stood.

The Jute warrior beside him shoved him forwards, following after Sigwyn and Kenhelm.

They halted. In front of the king's hall

the three Saxons were forced to kneel and crawl into a cage made of rough wooden pales, built against the side of a stone wall.

The wall was high and made with brick – the ruins of a Roman tower – but it offered them no shelter from the weather or from the hostile stares of the townsfolk.

"There you will stay, as Lord Jutrad commands it," said their captor. "When our mighty King Eormenic arrives he will hear of your crimes and you will die."

The three Saxons sat grimly, huddled together against the wall. Hours had passed and now the townsfolk were ignoring them. Earlier on, a small crowd had gathered, keen to see the prisoners, and to goad them with insults. But now nobody was paying them any attention.

Suddenly Kenhelm sat up.

"Look," he hissed.

Two lads were walking past with a bundle of weapons in their arms.

"Those are ours! That's my sword!"

"Don't worry," said Edwyn. "We'll get them back soon enough, when the King Eormenric hears our story."

"You think so?" replied Kenhelm. "I say King Eormenric will believe his man Jutrad. I think we will die here today."

"So then we'll die," said Sigwyn. "But before they can kill us we'll speak the truth and the gods will hear it."

She held out her hand and her companions clasped it. They held to each other tightly. As they did, each felt their fear grow less – for a while at least.