

Part I



*(Eh) "Eh byþ for eorlum æþelinga wyn,
hors hofum wlanc, ðær him hæleþ ymbe,
welege on wicgum, wrixlaþ spræce,
and biþ unstyllum æfre frofur."*

(Horse) "The horse is a joy to princes in the presence of warriors.
A steed in the pride of its hoofs,
when rich men on horseback bandy words about it;
and it is ever a source of comfort to the restless."

Jute-land, 432 A.D.

Horsa

The door to the stable burst open under a heavy kick. Two large men shouldered their way inside, their faces red with rage. The horses in their stalls nickered in alarm at the sudden intrusion.

The boy and the girl who lay upon the straw looked up in sudden fright. They had seen no more than thirteen winters apiece. Keen for each other, they had succumbed to their burning desires in a secret hideaway they had thought was safe.

One of the men held a heavy length of timber that had been fashioned into a crude cudgel and the other held a vicious looking saex; one of the long bladed knives that were common in that part of the world. Its silvery edge glinted in the afternoon light that streamed in from outside.

The girl cowered as they advanced, frozen in fear, one small breast bulging above the top of her dress.

"Cover yourself, slut!" said the nearest of the men and he dealt her a resounding crack with the flat of his hand that snapped her head backwards.

The boy scrambled to his feet and made a futile dash for the door. The two men caught him between them and he was knocked backwards by a powerful fist to his jaw that sent him tumbling into the hay.

"So," said the larger of the two men, "you thought you could treat our sister as if she were a common whore eh, rich boy?"

"No!" cried the girl, looking to her brothers. "Don't hurt him, please! We love each other!"

But her pleas fell upon deaf ears as the two men hauled the young boy roughly to his feet. His head hung loose and swayed from side to side as he was dragged out of the stable and into the yard. He tried to say something. It may have been an insult to the two men who held him in a vice-like grip, but the words came out through his bloodied teeth as incomprehensible mumbling.

He was thrown to the dirt in the yard outside where a crowd had begun to gather, drawn from the simple huts and pens that made up the settlement, distracted from their daily tasks by the promise of entertainment in the form of a public brawl.

The larger of the two brothers raised his cudgel and brought it down hard upon the boy's back, flattening him under the force of the blow. The youth tried to crawl away on his hands and knees. He cried out in pain as another stroke of the club fell upon him, crushing the wind from his chest.

The second of the two brothers stood nearby, testing the sharpness of his saex with his thumb, grinning at the beating that was being inflicted upon the youth. The screams of the girl could be heard from the doorway to the stable as she pleaded with her brothers to stop.

An elderly man called out from the crowd; "Take care, lad. That boy is the ealdorman's son."

"Mind your own business, old man!" replied the brother with the club. "This little runt dishonoured our sister. He must be made to pay!" He raised his club again but was thrown off balance as somebody crashed into him from behind, sending him flailing to the ground.

He looked up into a long face and a pair of blue eyes that crackled with a cruel intelligence. The one who had knocked him down was not much younger than he was - perhaps sixteen - with long, fair hair that hung in tidy braids. He was tall and slender with the beginnings of a beard growing on his chin that was fairly impressive for his age.

"The old man is right," said the youth with the braided hair. "He is the son of Ealdorman Wictgils. As am I."

"Look here, Hengest," said the fallen man, scrambling to his feet and picking up his club. "Son of the ealdorman or no, your brother does not have the right to lay his hands upon whatever girl takes his fancy."

Hengest walked over to his battered and bruised brother, extending a hand to him. Blood streamed from Horsa's nose and between his teeth, but he grinned, glad to see his older brother. It was not the first time Hengest had helped him out of a sticky spot.

"No, he does not," replied Hengest. "But if you feel that your sister has been wronged by my brother, then he at least deserves a fair hearing at the Folcmot before you take your club to him."

There were murmurs of agreement from the crowd. The ealdorman's sons were well liked and Hengest was always one to stick to the formalities of honour. Besides, the simple folk put much faith in the authority of the Folcmot.

"Folcmot?" exclaimed the man with the club in astonishment. "Fair hearing? We just caught the little bastard with his hand up our sister's skirt! There is nothing further to discuss!"

"Nevertheless," replied Hengest. "I will not allow you to beat my brother half to death in vengeance."

The crowd watched, enthralled as the two pairs of brothers faced off. This was going to be good.

"Now, if it is a case of repayment for your sister's virtue, then I am sure that we can come to some sort of agreement. Name the price."

Horsa snorted at his brother's suggestion. "Virtue? There was precious little of that left by the time I got to her."

Ripples of laughter made their way through the crowd and the faces of the two young men glowed red with indignation. Their sister, who had been watching the altercation from the stable door, ducked back inside, her own face red.

"I've heard enough," said the larger brother, his rage erupting. "Gold is not the issue here, but my family's honour is, and by the gods I'm going to reclaim it!"

He launched himself at Horsa, his club raised high. The blow was intercepted by Hengest, who twisted the attacker's arm around, hurling the big man to the mud for the second time that morning.

The younger man with the saex followed up the attack, but was met by Horsa who gripped both of his wrists. The two of them rolled and thrashed in the mud, fighting for possession of the long knife. Horsa soon prized it from his opponent's grasp and tried to move back, but a savage kick in the belly made him drop it. The knife fell to the mud with a wet splat. His opponent scrambled forward to retrieve it, knocking Horsa backwards.

Hengest had subdued the older of the two brothers who now lay in the mud, dazed; his face pounded and bloody. He turned and saw the younger brother advance on Horsa, six inches of cold, glittering steel in his hand. He moved quickly, for the knife was already making its way towards Horsa's chest. Quick as lightening, he flung himself upon the younger man and began to press his face down into the mud.

Still gripping the knife, the man slashed at Hengest with it. It drew blood from his shoulder, but did not cut deep. Hengest grabbed the arm by the wrist and twisted the blade away from him until he heard the bone snap. The man screamed and dropped the knife. Hengest stood up, leaving his opponent writhing in the mud, grasping his broken arm.

The crowd cheered wildly at the victory of the ealdorman's sons. The elder of the defeated brothers, bruised and humiliated, helped his sibling to his feet and together they staggered away through the crowd, ignoring the jeers.

Their sister scurried from the stable and, pausing to shoot a venomous glance at Horsa, fled after her brothers, her face still burning crimson.

The entertainment over, the crowd dissipated and returned to their chores. Horsa did his best to wipe the mud from his clothes. He breathed a sigh of relief and then hooted with laughter. Hengest strode over to him and cuffed him soundly on the ear.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he demanded. “Those men are the sons of Wulfgar, one of father’s thegns. They were ready to kill you, and quite rightly so if you ask me.”

“I’m sorry, brother,” replied Horsa. “I didn’t know the bitch was Wulfgar’s daughter. And I didn’t know she had two brothers the size of oxen either.”

“Even so, you are the son of Ealdorman Wictgils. It does not become you to whore and brawl as if you were a common ceorl.”

“Oh, give the lectures a rest, Hengest!” snapped Horsa in irritation. “We both know that you are the only son our father gives a damn about. I might as well have been sired on a local fishwife for all the care he pays me!”

Several heads turned and stared at the two brothers, wondering if a new fight was about to break out. Conscious of this, Hengest seized his younger brother by the scruff of the neck and marched him away towards their father’s hall.

Hengest

The lands of the north were dark, brooding places ruled by feuding, tribal communities under the disinterested gaze of indifferent gods. Hammered by the broiling waves of the Eastern and Western Seas and blending into the thick, dark forests of the south, this part of the world had been ignored by the more civilised lands that lay beyond the Rhine; the lands that had fallen long ago to the iron legions of Rome.

But the time of the great Caesars was over; their empire had split in two and was now ruled by corrupt officials and half-mad boy emperors. Rome's armies, which contained more barbarians than Romans, struggled to hold its borders in check, while the denizens of its once great cities cowered in their churches and fearfully called on their Christ-messiah for salvation.

But beyond the black forests of Germania the pagan gods of sea and sky still ruled and the altars to their names were splashed red with the blood of sacrifice. The fires in the halls of kings and ealdormen burned bright and within were recited the sagas of great heroes who battled fire-drakes and sea-wyrms. In the countryside beyond, the people still lived in fear of the trolls and the Aelf-folk who were said to dwell in the dark forests and hills.

The domain of Ealdorman Wictgils was nestled between two sweeping curves of a great river that wound its way through the land of the Jutes and out into the Western Sea. His hall was an impressive construction of timbers with a turf roof and a single smoke hole that emitted gentle wisps into grey skies. Down on the banks of the river, clinker-built vessels were moored, bringing trade from the coast in the form of fish, timber, skins and amber. Drying racks stood nearby from which herring gently swayed in the soft breeze.

The various dwellings and workshops that lay strewn between the wharves and the great hall hummed all day long with their activity; the blacksmith clinked away on his anvil and the smell of honey drifted from the huts where bees were kept and mead was brewed. Around to the side of the ealdorman's hall were his stables where Hengest and Horsa had spent many hours of their childhood playing amongst the bales of hay between riding lessons.

The horse was a sacred animal to the Jutes. The wild creatures that galloped freely across the vast flatlands and rolling moors were a brother race to the sons of Woden who, over time, had tamed them and brought them into their fold to be treated not as slaves, but as equals. Ealdorman Wictgils was a passionate rider and owned the finest horses in all of Jute-land. His fondness for the beasts was demonstrated by his naming of his firstborn 'Hengest' which meant 'stallion' in the Jutish tongue. His second son was given the less illustrious name of 'Horsa' which meant simply 'horse'.

The golden glow of the spring afternoon gently receded across the thatched rooftops of the ealdorman's hall and stables. A few theows wandered about the yard attending to the last duties of their day before they could go home to their families. Other than that, the place was deserted. Hengest, who had been dragging his younger brother with him from the village, finally released the struggling boy and shoved him roughly.

"Who do you think you are, pushing me around?" said Horsa angrily. "Just because you're father's favourite!"

"Do you wonder why I am his favourite?" demanded Hengest. "Do you wonder why I lecture you?"

"Because you think you're better than me," replied Horsa sulkily. "Because you're older than me."

"No. It is because of your irresponsible antics like today. Because of your careless disregard for the honour of our family."

Horsa was silent, his eyes cold. Hengest sighed. He hated to lay into his younger brother like this. They had always got along well and had rarely fought, even as children. Horsa had always looked up to his older brother, but as the years of adolescence had gripped him, he had

changed. He had become bitter and argumentative and Hengest began to worry that he would turn against him just as he had turned against their father.

Father did favour Hengest, it was true. He always had warm praise and hearty encouragement for him, but when it came to Horsa, he was only scathing and overly critical. As the ealdorman's heir, Hengest had always been kept by the side of his father who instructed him in the ways of ruling a clan. But Horsa was often left to his own activities and it was no wonder that the younger brother got into as much trouble as he did.

"Look, Horsa," Hengest said as they entered the stables. "I'm on your side. The more you fight and rebel against father, the tougher it will be for you. Do yourself a favour and try and keep on his good side. Try and do what I do..."

"Oh yes, that would suit everyone perfectly, wouldn't it?" snapped Horsa. "If only I could be more like Hengest! I've heard it all my life. Perfect Hengest! Apple of father's eye!"

"It's not like that..." began Hengest.

"Yes it is! It's always been like that! Father would have been happier had I never been born!"

He stormed away, kicking a pail across the yard as he went. Hengest watched him leave with a heavy heart. Perhaps he was wrong to act like the voice of authority. They were after all, brothers.

He thought back to their childhood years. Playing together and getting into trouble together; sharing everything. Life had been so simple, so black and white. But somewhere along the line, somehow, things had changed. *Horsa* had changed.

Ealdorman Wictgils was in a furious mood that night. News had reached him of the fight in the village between his sons and the sons of his thegn, Wulfgar. He sat on his great carven chair at the head of the hall and seethed. Theows brought him mead which he drank in large quantities, fuelling his boiling rage.

He was a big man, grey-haired but strong. His beard was long and fell down to his broad belt. His right leg was missing, taken by an axe-blow in a territorial dispute years ago. The stump still gave him pain on cold mornings and only added to his ferocious temper. He was held in that odd mixture of fear and awe by the people he ruled. His judgements were accepted as just and yet when one of his moods took him and he could be heard roaring and bellowing like a branded ox, theows and thegns alike did their best to avoid him.

His wife, Aedre was a kind and loving woman who put up with a great deal in life. She was of that noble stock of women who had been trained from childhood to know when to secede to their husbands' whims and when to lay down their own brand of quiet authority in the form of honey poured into their ears. Aedre's ever graceful light touch could often mean the difference between life and death for some poor soul who had incurred the ealdorman's wrath.

Her sons held her in the very highest regard for she was the only person they knew who had the courage to stand up to their father. Wictgils also treated her with a grudging respect, listening to her advice on occasion and letting her have her say when it came to the raising of their boys.

She sat next to her husband, speaking softly into his ear in an effort to cool his temper. She held his mighty forearm as if restraining it from striking out at Horsa. Hengest stood nearby, his words of support for his brother largely ignored by the ealdorman.

"Are you aware of the situation between myself and Wulfgar?" Wictgils demanded of his youngest son. "His land dispute with his neighbour, Osfrid has already put me in a difficult situation. By favouring Osfrid I have alienated Wulfgar, a slight that he has not taken easily. My efforts to placate him have come to naught. And then you take advantage of his daughter and brawl with his sons in the street! Would you have me lose Wulfgar's loyalty altogether?"

"Father," began Horsa, his face burning crimson at being chastised before the whole of his father's hall, "I apologise. Had I known that the girl was the daughter of Wulfgar, I would have never have laid a hand on her."

"So you thought she was just some common wench you could use and cast aside, eh? Her fine clothes and good graces clearly held no meaning for you. Now the issue is to be brought before the Folcmot next month. *Eala!* Our family is to be shamed in public because of your actions! Why do you never think, boy? Why must you always cast a shadow over my name?"

Horsa's red face transformed from humiliation to anger. "I might ask why I must have a father that takes the side of his own thegn instead of his son's?" he snapped. He would have liked to have said a good deal more, but the warning look on Hengest's face made him bite down on his rage. Their father was quick to violence.

"Get out of my sight!" Wictgils roared. "Insolent wretch of a boy! Oh, would that the gods had gifted me with two sons of the same quality!"

Horsa spun on his heel and marched out of the hall. Only Hengest saw the tears that had begun to well up in his eyes spill down his cheeks.

Aedre got up and hurried after him, leaving her husband with his head in his hand. Hengest sat down in his mother's chair and summoned a theow to bring them both more mead.

"Please don't be too hard on him, father," he said, handing him his horn. "He tries hard to please you."

"He doesn't try at all!" snapped Wictgils, accepting the horn and drinking deeply from it. "He thinks only of his own pleasures. Why is he so insistent on shaming me? What have I done to deserve it?"

"He does not do it on purpose," said Hengest. "He just... doesn't think at times. Acts without prudence. He means no harm."

"What good is someone who means no harm but causes it anyway? What am I supposed to say at the Folcmot next month? Am I to defend my son, this defiler of nobleman's daughters? Or am I to punish him as Wulfgar will undoubtedly demand?" He grasped Hengest's arm tightly and leaned close so that his son could smell the sickly sweet mead on the old man's breath. "You are my true son," he said. "My heir. Do not let him drag you down with him. I have great faith in you, Hengest. You will be ealdorman after I am gone. Forget your brother. Do not waste your time protecting him from his own weaknesses and folly."

"He is my brother, father," said Hengest. "If I do not protect him, then who will?"

"Oh, this is tiresome," said Wictgils in a resigned tone. "We have more important things to discuss. I want to send you on an errand, Hengest."

"Of course, father," Hengest replied. His father often sent him on missions of diplomacy within his territory, not only because the old, one-legged ealdorman found it difficult to get about, but because he wanted his eldest son and heir to get a feel for the responsibilities of being an ealdorman. An ealdorman, his father had explained, must use his own intuition to settle disputes for the good of everyone. And by the gods, that was a fine art.

"A married couple came to me the other day," Wictgils explained. "The woman was called Ebba and the man, oh I can't remember. Anyway, they were upset by the actions of some relative. He's been mistreating his niece apparently. She's only a girl, about fourteen. Her parents were taken by a fever last winter and she inherited their farm; some broken down old place over West Hastham way. Naturally the girl cannot take care of the place on her own being young as she is and without the wealth to purchase theows, so her uncle has taken it upon himself to be her guardian.

"He's living with her now and this couple claim that he keeps her locked up and treats her like a common theow, forcing her to work and beating her if it's not up to scratch. This Ebba woman is her cousin and she's desperate to get the girl to come and live with her and her husband, but the uncle will have none of it. Says she's his charge and he won't budge."

Wictgils cursed as he spilt mead down his tunic and irritably brushed it off.

"I can't say that I'm much interested in the family affairs of ceorls, and I told this couple as much the other day. But they damn near got on their knees, begging me to help. They are convinced that this fellow is up to no good, trying to get his hands on the farm."

"But the only way he could manage that, legally speaking, would be if he married the girl," said Hengest.

"I daresay that's what they're afraid of."

"And you want me to go over there and see what's to be done?"

Wictgils smiled at him. "For the sake of appearances at least. I can't have the people speaking ill of me, saying that I refuse to intervene just because it's a ceorl who asks.

Personally I don't give a damn how this fellow treats his niece. But as I say, appearances..."

"What's the girl's name?" asked Hengest.

"Oh Gods, I can't remember," said Wictgils, staring into space for a while whilst the drunken parts of his brain tried to shuffle themselves into some sort of order. "Halfritha I think it was. Be a good lad and nip over there in a day or two. See what's up. I can send several thegns with you just in case the uncle dares to give you any nonsense. And you'll take Ebba and her husband with you of course. No point in making a show of things if there's nobody around to see it."

Horsa

At the entrance to the hall Horsa looked up at the star-filled night through frustrated tears. How he hated this place! If only he could get away from it all. There had to be more to life than playing second fiddle to Hengest. But where? Who did he know? He may be the son of an ealdorman, but he felt as trapped as the lowliest theow.

He felt a hand on his arm.

"Don't go," his mother said. "Please. Your father is an ill-tempered man and he says things that he does not mean."

"He means them," replied Horsa, wiping the tears away with the back of his hand.

"He loves you, I know it. But you both have the same hot blood in your veins. You are too similar and that is why you do not see eye to eye. Hengest has more of my blood in him. Cooler, more thoughtful. He fights you because he sees himself in you and that frightens him. But he loves you nonetheless, Horsa, trust me on this."

"I need to go, mother."

"Where?"

"I just need to clear my head. I can't stay in this hall a moment longer. The heat stifles me."

She let go of his arm and Horsa stepped out into the cold night air.

He did not return that night.

Hengest

Hengest's horse snorted and pawed at the earth as he stared down at the small farm. It was in a shambles. A broken fence that had not been maintained in many years surrounded a cluster of dirty huts and a few stray chickens that seemed to have the run of the place clucked about, scratching in the dirt for worms. A pig had died in a nearby pen and its owner had not been bothered to remove the carcass, leaving it to fester with flies buzzing about its jellified eyes.

"A damned disgrace," said Cynebeald behind him. "This used to be a respectable homestead. A good family home."

"Is there anybody else living here with him apart from the girl?" Hengest asked.

"No, just him and my poor cousin, Halfritha," replied Ebba. "Her parents were too poor to afford any theows."

Ebba and Cynebeald had accompanied Hengest along with six thegns. They were not young, although not yet in the winter of their years. Cynebeald was a woodcutter and Ebba was a kind wife with a good heart.

Hengest led the way down to the farm, Ebba, Cynebeald and the six thegns following close behind, harnesses jingling. Nobody was in sight as they entered the yard but the ferocious barking of several dogs could be heard from inside the main house. Hengest dismounted, strode up to the door and rapped smartly on it. The owner of the farm took his time opening it and when he did so he only opened it just wide enough to peep out at Hengest.

"Clear off!" he said. "I set the dogs on the last lot of beggars who came round here and don't think I won't set them on you!"

The door slammed shut.

Hengest turned to the six thegns and nodded. They came forward and with three heavy stamps, broke the door down and dragged the wretched creature out into his own yard. From somewhere inside the dogs were going berserk and Hengest assumed that they must be tied up for none came running out to defend their master.

The man had clearly realised his mistake and grovelled at Hengest's feet. "My apologies, aetheling!" he whimpered, cowering under the drawn swords of the warriors who surrounded him. "I thought that you were no more than common ruffians."

"Never mind that," said Hengest. "We are here about the girl."

"Girl?"

"Your niece. The one these people say you keep locked up."

The man seemed to notice Cynebeald and Ebba for the first time and his face turned to one of loathing. "My lord," he protested. "That girl was entrusted to my care by her parents. It was her father's dying wish. You cannot expect me to hand her over to these two who are little more than strangers to her."

"You're a liar!" shouted Ebba, stepping forward. "Your brother would never have asked you to come and live in his home and care for his daughter for he learned many years ago what a vile creature you are!"

"Show me the girl," said Hengest.

"Ah, she's er, sick," said the man. "She can't possibly be brought before company I'm afraid."

Hengest noticed that the man's eyes kept darting over to a tiny pit-hut on the opposite side of the yard, a sad, dilapidated building of the kind that was used for storing meat. He turned from the man and made his way towards it.

The farmer scrambled to his feet and ran to keep up with Hengest, putting himself between him and the hut, spouting some remarks about the girl being a troublemaker possessed of a violent temper and that she had to be restrained from time to time. Hengest's men seized the farmer and hauled him away from their lord.

The door to the hut was shut fast with a dirty length of rope tied around the handle and nailed into the doorframe. Hengest drew his saex and sliced through the rope, heaving the door open.

The hut stank of rotting meat and flies buzzed around erratically. Within the darkness, something moved. Hengest saw the dirty hem of a dress, half hidden in the shadows.

"Come into the light, you there," he said. "I'll not harm you."

A small figure moved quietly from the shadows into the rectangle of light thrown in from the doorway. Hengest's eyes widened as he saw her.

She was filthy. Her dress was little more than rags and her feet were bare. Hair, the colour of straw fell down to slender shoulders. She was not unattractive despite her filthy appearance. Her pale, frightened face was marked by several purplish bruises. She looked up at Hengest, squinting as if she was unaccustomed to daylight. He held out his hand to her and she took it, cautiously at first, never taking her eyes from him, but then a trust deepened and, gingerly, she let him lead her out into the yard.

Ebba cried out and ran to her, wrapping her arms around the frightened girl and weeping tears of joy.

"She is to go back with you," Hengest told the kindly woman. "Look after her." Then he turned to the uncle who stood in sheepish silence between two thegns.

Rage boiled inside Hengest. He wanted to kill this revolting man, or bolt him up inside the hut as he had done to his niece and leave him to rot. But he was on his father's business and the ealdorman would not be best pleased if he began dispensing self-made justice with too heavy a hand. He tried to calm himself and spoke coolly.

"You are lucky that your niece was still alive when we found her," he told the man. "For if she had not been, then it would have gone very badly for you. As it stands, you are relieved of your guardianship of this girl."

"The girl is simple," protested the uncle. "Touched in the head. She often has violent outbursts and I am forced to lock her up. She lies too. You can't believe a word she says..."

"Silence!" bellowed Hengest. "This home is no longer your own. You are to leave it immediately."

"But..."

"I am returning the ownership of the farm to Halfritha, to be held until she comes of age by Cynebeald and Ebba. And if, in the interim, any destruction or damage should befall it, then I will come looking for you. Mark me on that!"

The man looked at the ground and kept his mouth shut. Hengest was aware of the girl's eyes watching him. She still had not uttered a word, but she stared at her uncle with hatred in her blue eyes. There was also a fierceness there. 'Simple', the man had said. 'Touched in the head'. But there did not seem to be anything wrong with her as far as Hengest could see.

"See that this worm leaves this land," Hengest said to two thegns. He mounted his horse and the remaining four warriors followed suit.

Ebba carried Halfritha upon her saddle and they made their way up the rise and away from the farm. As they crested the hill, Hengest caught the girl looking back down at the nest of ramshackle buildings that was her birthright.

She did not look sad to see the back of it.