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Opening extract from
I am the Blade

Written by
J. P. Buxton

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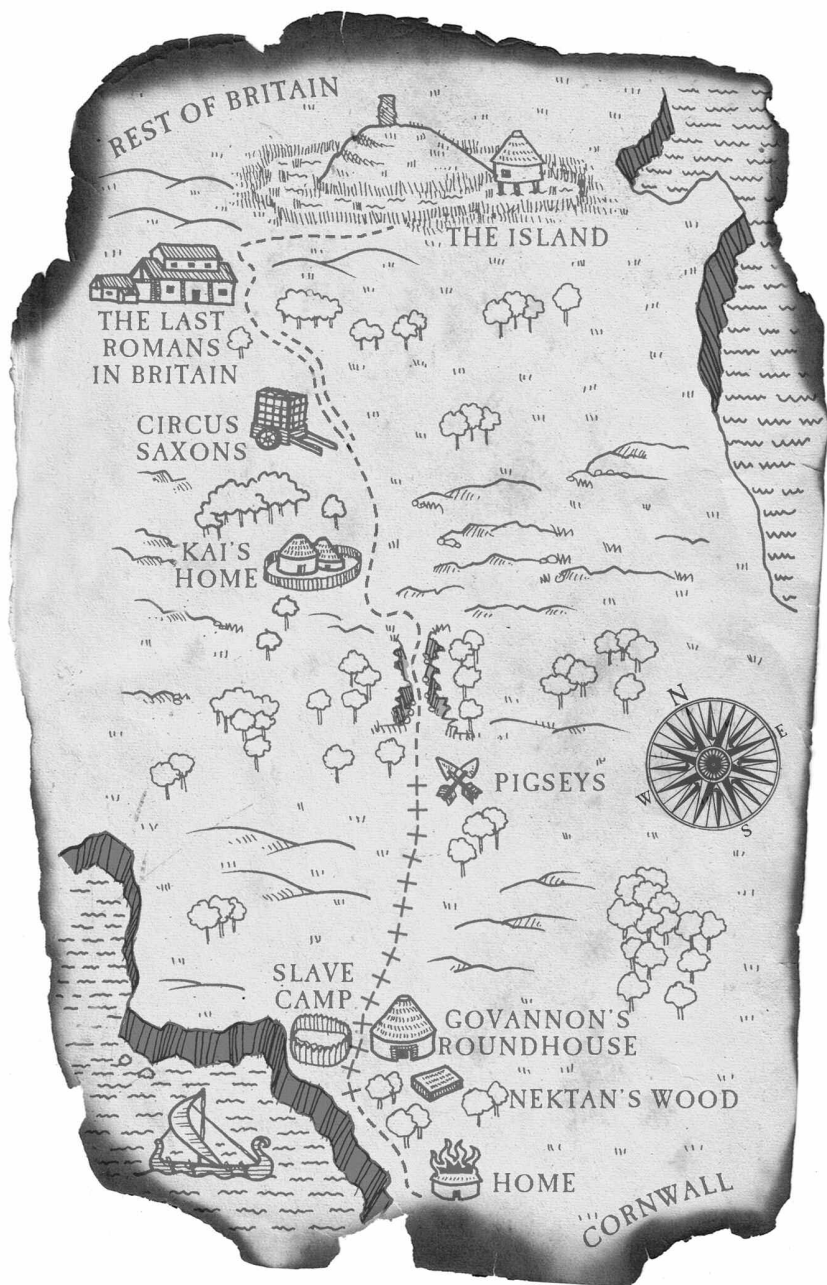
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For Sara Fisher



- TOG'S JOURNEY
+++++++ WITH CROTUS'S PILGRIMS
===== WITH CIRCUS SAXONS

Oh little shining thing
My little tinny thing
Make me a king.

Oh little shining man
As your start was stone
Water is your end.

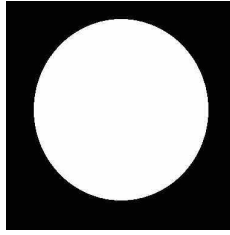
Who's the little blade?
I'm the blade.
Who is the blade?
I am.

(repeat)

Cornish, traditional,
800 BCE approx

I

Full



‘Translate,’ the woodcutter barked.

‘I don’t like this bit.’ Tog blushed invisibly. It was dark outside and almost as dark inside the small, round hut. The only light came from the fire in the middle of the floor and the twitchy flame of a pig fat candle on the table.

‘Do it anyway.’

‘Chapter Four, Verse Five,’ Tog hesitated, swallowed, then hurried on: ‘*Duo ubera tua . . .*’

‘Just get on with it.’

‘*Duo ubera tua . . .* your two . . . chests. But this doesn’t make sense.’

‘Breasts, boy! Breasts. They’re only natural.’

‘Not these ones,’ Tog muttered. ‘*Duo ubera tua sicut duo hinuli . . .*’

‘Yes?’

‘Your two . . . breasts are like two young deer . . . *capreae gemelli* . . . twins of gazelle . . . *qui pascunter in liliis* . . . which are fed on lilies. See?’ Tog protested. ‘If you fed on lilies you’d be sick – I’m sure of it – and how can anyone’s breasts be like deer unless they’re . . .’ he sniggered, ‘hairy.’

The woodcutter’s mattress of dried bracken rustled as he shifted. Tog sensed a raised hand and said hurriedly: ‘All right, all right, I’m on to it. *Donec adspiret dies et inclinentur umbrae* . . . Until the day breaks and the shadows flee away . . . *vadam ad montem murrae at ad collem tur*—’ he paused as the woodcutter belched, ‘—*IS* . . . I’ll go to the . . . What’s “murrae”?’

‘Myrrh.’

‘And “*turis*”?’

‘The other one.’

‘So . . . I’ll go the mountain of myrrh and the hill of the other one.’

Silence.

‘It’s what you told me,’ Tog said. ‘Oh all right: *The hill of frankincense*. Is that better?’

‘I’m afraid I have overestimated you,’ the woodcutter said with an attempt at frosty dignity. ‘I thought you were mature enough for the *Song of Songs*, which describes the

passion King Solomon the Great felt for the Queen of Sheba. But you're obviously just an overtired, snide, sniggering child and not ready for it at all.'

To change the subject Tog said, 'I saw soldiers again.'

'How many?'

'Seven or eight.'

'That's a number?'

'All right, eight. Mounted. Going into the castle.'

'Better.'

The castle stood on a headland, pinched, where it joined the cliffs, into a narrow waist. Surrounded by sea on three sides and with an entrance that was only one man wide, it was easily defensible.

The woodcutter took another long pull from a stoneware pot containing the water of life. He wasn't much of a woodcutter and the poison he brewed certainly wasn't the water of life. A few years ago, he had ended up on the outskirts of the village with a half-baked grasp of distilling spirits, a woman and a baby that wasn't his. He claimed to be a fallen monk but Tog thought it more likely he was ex-army. Disgraced probably. A deserter. The hills and valleys of Cornwall were salted with the bitter remains of various beaten armies: angry men who sat in their huts and muttered about past glories and horrid incomers.

When the woman died, Tog was brought up by the

woodcutter, who sold whisky to the villagers and the castle, drank even more of it himself and, when he was sober, hewed wood for the queen's smelting ovens.

Tog was a slow learner where woodcutting was involved. However, he was well advanced in Latin, and, if he was given a smooth slate, had passable handwriting. He had also learned to fight a bit and had just begun beating the woodcutter. Tog reckoned that this was making the old man withdrawn and moody. In fact, he had been in a filthy mood since midwinter.

'Anyway,' Tog said. 'Someone was looking for you this morning.'

'After my whisky?'

'I don't know. The hogman told me and that's all he said.'

'What did he say exactly?'

'Nothing. Just that.'

The woodcutter cuffed Tog on the back of the head. 'I don't want "nothing" and I don't want "just that". What did the hogman say?'

'I'll tell you if you stop hitting me! The hogman said, quote: "You goes and tells that ole woodcutter loick, that a stranger's bin a pokin' around the ol' village and's a-looking for he." Unquote.'

'And did you see this stranger?' The woodcutter must

have been preoccupied or he would have hit Tog again.

‘Me? No. I was down on the cliffs. There was a foreign merchant ship just beyond the bay and a boat pulling out to it.’

‘Lying little toad. It’s too early for traders and you know it.’

That was true. It was early but that didn’t mean the ship hadn’t been there. The traders that landed on the castle’s sheltered beach came mostly from Brittany, just the other side of the Channel, sometimes from Massilia, which was further away, and occasionally from Constantinople which was very foreign indeed. Tog thought this ship had a Constantinople-ish look, but he knew the woodcutter hated speculation.

‘Queen’s run out of booze,’ he said. It was an uncontroversial statement. Once the queen had been married to the Dux Britanniorum, or high king of Britain, but he’d dropped her when their baby died, people said. She’d moved back to Cornwall and now hardly ever left the castle where she grew richer and richer on the sale of tin and copper, and drunker and drunker on red wine. The high king encouraged this – he didn’t care how drunk she was, or how rich, provided she didn’t make trouble. Anyway, most of her garrison were king’s men. She was practically under arrest.

The woodcutter ignored Tog's comment. 'What else did the hogman tell you?' he pressed.

'Oh for God's sake—' Tog began and was felled by a buffet on the side of the head.

'DON'T BLASPHEME, DON'T GIVE ME CHEEK AND DON'T PULL THAT FACE,' the woodcutter shouted. 'What else did he do?'

Tog jumped up, shouting, 'YOU NEVER DID SAY ANYTHING ABOUT SINGING, YOU FAT OLD IDIOT!'

He braced himself for another buffet but all the woodcutter said was, 'Singing?'

'The hogman said the stranger was singing under his breath when he didn't think anyone was near, though how he could have missed the hogman . . .'

'What?'

'Because the hogman's so RANK!'

'What was he singing?'

'A baby song.'

'Which baby song?'

Tog sang:

Oh little shining thing
My little tinny thing
Make me a king.

Oh little shining man
As your start was stone
Water is your end.

Who's the little blade?
I'm the blade.
Who is the blade?
I am.
Blah blah de blahblah

Now the woodcutter was blinking in shock and suddenly Tog was worried. He had never seen him like this before. If he could provoke the woodcutter into having another go at him, it would mean normal service had resumed, so he whined, 'I still don't see why I can't work at the castle. You never explain anything.'

The woodcutter rose to the bait, perhaps grateful to change the subject. 'Never explain? How many times have I told you how they treat the locals?'

'You'll just lose your source of unpaid labour,' Tog sneered.

'As if you ever did a stroke of work for me. What about your lessons? What about the Latin?'

'I wouldn't have any, *Deus vult*,' Tog snapped back. 'Latin's just an elaborate form of torture worked out to

punish bastards like me for the sins of their parents.'

'Don't you talk about your mother like that!'

'But it's literally true,' Tog yelled. 'I am a bastard, aren't I?'

The woodcutter blinked again and chewed a nail. When Tog was feeling vengeful, he liked to say things like this. It hurt him and for some reason, seemed to hurt the woodcutter. He had no idea who his father was, though the chances were that he was one of the queen's soldiers; the village was full of castle-bastards. Another theory was that the woodcutter was his natural father but too embarrassed to admit it.

Often, when Tog went on and on about it, the woodcutter would drink himself senseless. However, on this occasion he recovered quickly. 'Let's address the original point. You know my views on the castle. If you got in, you'd be the lowest of the low. A slop boy. No – you'd be the slop boy's boy. *If* you were lucky you might be allowed to eat his crumbs and wipe his . . .'

'Shut up!'

' . . . nose.'

Tog breathed out fiercely, enjoying the pointless argument. He had been brought up to loathe anything to do with the castle and found it quite easy to do so. The only thing the queen had going for her was her

Cornishness. That apart, she exploited the people whose taxes paid for:

a castle they couldn't live in,
feasts they couldn't eat,
horses they couldn't ride,
and the very weapons that were used to keep them down.

And although she was rumoured to be so full of magic that she practically leaked the stuff, it did no good at all. The harvest had failed two years running and Irish pirates had started to raid up and down the coast, burning villages and taking slaves at will. Of course, the local warlords could bypass her and appeal to the high king directly but they wouldn't. He was half Roman, people said. Not one of us. Give him an inch and he'd take a mile, like all incomers.

'Well,' the woodcutter said. Making an effort to seem normal, he joined Tog on the log that was drying out next to the fire. 'I don't know why anyone would want to see me.' With no more nails to chew he started on his cuticles. 'Tog, I know what you want. You want to know about your parents. Believe me, I . . .'

'Oh, here it comes,' Tog said, suddenly terrified. 'More of the same old same old.'

The woodcutter rolled his eyes upwards and said, 'Oh Lord, what do I do? Can you give me a sign?'