

Chapter 1

The thin rays of the rising sun slanted across the frost-beaded spider's web hanging above my head. I moved my eyes and saw more of the crystalline structures strung amid the thorns of the gorse bush I was lying beneath. My breathing pushed out clouds of white vapour which hung motionless in the still air, and I felt the cold.

By God, did I feel the cold!

Although I was wrapped in a thick woollen cloak, which had now become hard and brittle with rime, the freezing air had penetrated my bones and I ached.

I'd ache even more if they caught me.

That thought spurred me out of my lethargy, and I sat up, the ice cracking as my cloak creased. I rubbed my bushy beard, now stiff with ice, and then scratched my hair. I needed a wash, for sure, and it was just as certain I wasn't going to get one today, unless I made it to the river.

Looking through the briar, up the hill, I could see its crest, crowned with the beech trees and thorns I'd forced myself through the night before. I couldn't see any watchers, but then, they wouldn't want to be seen.

I'd staggered down the gradient until I'd reached the small copse of trees and had dropped exhausted under the bushes. The night, although short by reckoning the hours, had been subjectively long, my nerves stretched to alertness while I lay awake listening for any unusual noise.

I studied the slope that led down to the river and decided to linger at least a few hours. If I went now, I'd stand out unmistakably against the white frost. Better to regain a little strength and allow the morning sun to burn off the ice. It might warm my muscles as well.

Time passed slowly.

I saw a few deer wander past my hiding place, some rabbits feeding in the early morning sun, and I felt the pangs of hunger. Wouldn't I love to dig my teeth into a stewed rabbit.

Still, better to wait until I was certain it was safe. I wasn't sure about the woods that topped the hill. By my inner sense, I felt certain they concealed watchers. I had learnt to trust my feelings a long time ago, and, if I was right, once they saw me, they would have me in a few minutes. A man on horseback could easily catch me before I managed to reach the river. I imagined that being impaled by a lance might spoil my whole day.

So, what to do?

I studied the long slope that led down to the river. A river I couldn't see, but knew was there. It was the boundary between the kingdom of Ashtar, where I was, and Perrireign, the kingdom of the High King John, who was merely a boy and had been crowned a few days previously.

Once I got across the river, or rather, if I got across the river, I'd be in relative safety. Relative, because although they couldn't officially pursue me across, they would certainly try.

Again I cursed the foul luck that had caused me so much trouble. Why hadn't I kept out of it instead of interfering? And I hadn't even been rescuing a fair maiden. No, she'd been at least fifty, scrawny, half-starved, and more than a little mad.

I glanced westward once more. Was it my imagination, or had there been a brief flash of light, as if the sun had reflected off bright metal? Unmoving, I kept watch on the trees. One minute. Two. Then it came again. Yes, there were certainly armed men on the ridge.

"Shit and damn," I muttered. "Just what I didn't need."

They couldn't know where I was hiding, or they'd have been to get me. With only a sword and dagger to defend myself, I'd be

dead meat. So that meant they were using the woods as a watching point for a whole length of river, guessing I'd try and get across somewhere.

And they were right. I had to get across or die: they'd make bloody sure of that if I attempted to stay.

While I stared at the woods, there was a stirring within them. I could see brief flashes of polished steel and bright colours that certainly didn't blend into the greens and browns nature provided. After a few minutes a knight, lance at the ready, rode out with half a dozen followers, a few men at arms, and two archers. The archers made my blood run cold; if they were any good they had a two hundred yard range, and I didn't fancy ending my life as a pin cushion.

I watched them as they rode out of sight, then I reconsidered my position. It was nearing noon, and I had hardly slept the night before. The river here was swift flowing with boulders, so I needed to see in order to safely cross it. If I spent another night under the gorse bush, I'd be exhausted, and might not even have enough strength to cope with the current of the water.

Decision time.

I decided to go for it.

Taking off my cloak and leaving it a dark puddle within the shadows of the gorse, I started out in a crouching run, trying to keep the copse and gorse bushes between me and the top of the hill.

I hadn't made more than fifty yards before I heard the bugle note of a hunting horn. I'd lost my bet and been seen. Now it was a matter of reaching the river before they spitted me on the end of a lance.

Racing forward, concentrating on gaining the utmost speed down the slope, but careful not to trip and fall, I threw aside my sword, which was flapping about my legs and getting in the way. It would be useless in a fight in any case. I ran on, my breath rasping

through a suddenly dry throat.

I heard the not so distant thud of horses' hooves, and the cry of another hunting horn sounded loud in my ears. Risking a glance over my shoulder, I saw the knight and his followers, four hundred short yards behind me. The river was nearer, less than two hundred yards. Could I make it?

A couple of arrows fell to my left, a few paces short of the diagonal path I was taking, but still alarming.

Grinning, a reflex action, I pushed myself on. The hoof beats grew stronger.

I began to jog from one side to the other, making myself a more difficult target for the archers. It slowed me, but speed wouldn't help me avoid an arrow.

The banks of the river came into view. Here it ran fast through a long, narrow gorge. Once I was in the water, I'd be safe from the knight, but the archers would still have a target.

I could hear the panting of the horses now, and suddenly, a searing pain slashed across my shoulders. For an instant I was held on the point of a lance, then cloth tore and I fell. The horse thundered past, missing me by inches as I rolled on the tufted grass.

I glanced at the river. Ten paces, no more. I staggered to my feet and on, ignoring the pain in my shoulders and the sounds of the horses as they turned to charge me once again.

The river bank. I flung my arms up and dived, just as an arrow thumped into my left shoulder, the barb exiting under my chin.

I don't remember hitting the water.