

CHAPTER 1

Flight, 620 A.D.

The horses' hooves thundered past their heads as they lay rigid in the bracken. Leofric's arm was over the little girl in an attempt to keep her quiet and unseen. He felt his infant son squirm under his belly. His pregnant wife Kera was a few feet away and motionless.

They heard the hooves moving into the distance and then came the sound of shouting. Leofric wondered if now was the time to run and get further into the woods but he hesitated. Perhaps he hesitated too long? The shouting stopped and the hooves came back, searching, searching. He knew they would have orders to make sure there were no survivors. Leofric pressed harder on Matild's head, more as a warning than to physically stifle any incipient cry. He need not have worried. She was a good little girl and seemed to know what was expected of her. Even Adulph stopped his wriggling and Leofric kept his own face down in the bracken lest any stray beams from the setting sun should filter through the trees and signal his presence.

Again they passed close and Leofric tensed as he prayed repeatedly to Mithras that they would not be seen. The wound on his right arm throbbed and he wondered if the blood was dripping onto Matild's young body. There was nothing he could do now but lie still and hope and

pray that soon they would give up and go away. Like wild dogs they seemed to sense however that their quarry was close and as a nobleman's son Leofric's head would be a fine prize.

He wondered how many of them there were. From the noise, there could be as many as four. He heard them rein their horses to a standstill just a few yards away. Hooves stamped impatiently at first, as one of the riders barked out curse-ridden orders, but then there was a change of rhythm as one of the searchers set off down a path. It sounded to Leofric as if only one horse remained. It whinnied and Leofric visualised the horseman peering into the forest; smelling the air. Had the horse seen them? Was the whinny a communication between horse and rider?

The coppice edge creaked as the mount was urged gently off the path and twigs cracked as the horse picked its way across the forest scrub towards the prostrate bodies. The rider was a skilful tracker and he was using all his animal senses and intuition as he was drawn infallibly towards his prey.

Leofric heard the grate of steel as the searcher unsheathed his sword and the creak of leather and slight thump from his boots when they hit the ground as he slid from his horse.

The undergrowth rustled and then came the eeriness of the enemy's voice as he cooed, "I know you're there, Out you come my fine fellow, I shall get you, you don't have a chance so come out now; out you come!"

Leofric's heart was pounding so hard he felt sure his opponent would hear it. The noises came nearer and nearer and Leofric waited for the blow of the sword penetrating his back. The searcher's senses were accurate

even in the darkening forest but not quite accurate enough as, unbelievably, he crept right past Leofric's tense body. From the corner of his eye, Leofric glimpsed a passing leg and gambled his only chance. He grabbed the ankle with one hand whilst hauling himself up and punching the back of the knee with the other fist. Swift as an arrow from a bow, he cannoned into the falling body and grasped the now-roaring head wrenching it sideways and backwards. There was a satisfying crunch and the head's roars abruptly ceased.

A new sound came from behind. A second horse was crashing through the undergrowth towards his two-year-old son Adulph who was now standing confused and unsure what he should do next. The horseman's clear intention was, in one fluid movement, to ride Adulph down and kill Leofric with a single sword stroke.

Leofric only had time to shout a futile "Adulph ... look out!" before the horse's foreleg hit the child with a sickening thud and spun him round into the undergrowth. In a trice horse, sword and rider were then on top of Leofric who had no defence but to crouch to meet the inevitable blow. As his hands touched the ground, one landed on the sword dropped by his former adversary and he instinctively raised the weapon and clumsily parried the blow that was meant to remove his head.

The momentum of the horse's charge took it further into the woodland and the rider slid to the ground, sword in hand and came running back to finish the job he had started. Leofric was ready for him now though and, unfamiliar as the enemy sword felt in his hand, and painful as was his wounded arm, he felt nothing but a burning need to annihilate the man who had just killed his son.

The fight was fierce with the enemy swordsman initially confident of victory. He thought he had secured it too when Leofric seemed to trip and his opponent gave a triumphant shout as he lunged for the kill. Leofric's balance was still intact however and he deftly tilted sideways to avoid the blow while thrusting upwards with the sword onto which his opponent fell.

Leofric sank onto one knee, still alert and wondering if the noise might have attracted further unwelcome attention but all was quiet except for the tears of Kera and Matild who were sobbing over the inert bundle that they had retrieved from the bracken.

His fury unabated, Leofric rose and savagely stabbed the enemy sword into the ground as he returned to his family. He knelt and turned his head to place his left ear on Adulph's chest. He thought he could detect a sound; the body still felt warm. It was now too dark to investigate the extent of the injuries. With more confidence than he felt, he said "He lives! With Mithras' help he will recover. Come, we must get away from here. Wait while I get some material for a sling. Our enemies now have no need of their clothes."

A few minutes later Adulph was wrapped securely around Leofric's body and they made their way back to the pathway and headed westwards.

Leofric's first thought was to capture one or both of the horses so that they could quickly put in some leagues to the south. A Mercian horse would be remembered in every hamlet they passed through however and this would defeat his main aim of losing himself and his family to the forest. He decided to keep things simple.

Leofric took the lead with his left arm supporting the bundle that had once been Adulph, and in his right

hand he held a snatched sapling before him, as he moved as quickly as he could into the blackness. A still-sobbing Kera followed, leading Matild by the hand. It was two hours before Matild started to falter. Kera swept her up and hurried on, straddling her little legs around her left hip but now there was a danger that if Kera fell she would land on top of Matild. Leofric knew that at most they could keep going for another couple of hours and then they would simply *have* to stop. That would put them ten or eleven miles from their hunters however and they might, with caution, be able to open the gap by a further twenty or so miles the next day.

He had originally chosen the path because it was one he had used before and knew it led south towards safety but he could recognise nothing about it now. Every so often they passed a clearing and then the path narrowed again. Occasionally sounds from the bordering trees made Leofric's heart leap into his mouth but he could do nothing but hope that the noises came from animals rather than men. He was tired from battle and from loss of blood as well as from walking. As fatigue and hunger overtook him, so did sadness.

Sadness for the loss of those who had been killed; despair at the slaughter of his dynasty; hate of battle and violence and a desire for a different life. He had nothing left to fight for now, except his immediate family. What was he going to do? How was he going to support them? There was nobody left to whom he could turn for help. He was on his own. He needed to find somewhere safe; somewhere where he could start again. Take on a new mantle. Now the virtue in being a noble lord had been lost. His fiefdom had gone. He yearned for the life of a simple working man and hoped he would never see battle

again. He was the last one left. His spirit hit the bottom of its pit and bounced upwards a little as he managed to push despair to one side, knowing that it was a luxury he could ill afford.

They were approaching the top of a small rise and he slowed, making low warning sounds to Kera so that she did not bump into him. He held her close with his free arm and, directly into her ear, whispered that they would leave the path at this point and go deep enough into the woods to be secure for the night.

Slowly they felt their way between the tree trunks, Leofric leading and probing with his sapling to try to find the kindest route. Cruel branchlets slashed at their faces and surface roots conspired to trip them up. They made a fearsome noise as they guessed and pushed and hazarded their way through the vegetation. Leofric had just decided that they were far enough from danger when the density of the trees suddenly reduced. Matild was still awake and Kera put her down and unwrapped the bundle of Adulph from Leofric so that his hands were free to push and pull and flatten the ground and prepare a rude shelter. The place had but two virtues: it was dry and it seemed safe.

Again Leofric laid his ear on Adulph's chest and in spite of his tiredness a great feeling of joy surged through him as he heard the unmistakable sounds of life.

"He lives!" he told Kera to renewed sobs of relief.

"Come, lie down here with Adulph between us. Keep him wrapped warmly and let us see what the Sun God will bring tomorrow."

They lay on the forest floor and clasped their arms around each other with the children between them and, in spite of their discomfort, were soon into the blessed sleep of the exhausted.

Leofric was first to wake. Dawn was just beginning to break. He lay still listening and wondering what had awoken him. He could hear the susurrations of the trees topped by the morning birdsong, but he guessed it must have been something else.

The noise came again. It was not from the trees but a rhythmic pulse from his side. Adulph was trying to vomit!

He quickly stripped the shrouding clothes from the little bundle and carried him away from the two remaining sleepers. He sat him on his knee and held his forehead while the little body contorted and retched. Suddenly a fountain of mush was forcibly ejected from the little mouth which in turn took in a great lungful of air.

This was balanced by an explosive yell of fear, pain, confusion and anguish!

Kera and Matild woke instantly and came rushing over to their two menfolk. Kera wiped Adulph's mouth clean with some grass and then took him to her swollen breast where he suckled hungrily.

Leofric sat on his haunches grinning stupidly and marvelling at the incongruous sight of his beautiful, grimy, tear-stained wife suckling the naked toddler with blood-encrusted, matted hair.

"We must find some food for Matild," said Kera. "I don't even have an apple for her."

The grin left Leofric's face as he greeted his next responsibility of the new day. They were lucky that it was mid-summer. There would be fruit, once it became light enough for them to see it, but five-year-old girls were ever impatient. Conflicting alternatives flashed through his mind. He could leave them here whilst he went and

foraged but a hungry Matild might start to cry and make a fuss. He took Matild's hand.

"C'mon," he said. "Let's go and look for some berries while mother feeds Adulph," and, turning to Kera "We'll not be far away. We'll stay in sight."

She nodded and, mentally acknowledging their desperate situation, lovingly squeezed a cuddle into her cradled son. "What did it matter? They were alive weren't they? She had a good husband; they would survive!"