

Chapter 1

The Arabian stallion galloped furiously across the sands of the Algarve, the southwestern tip of Portugal and of the entire Europe. The year was 1383, the rider was a courier, and he carried an important message critical to the future the country. His saddle bore the insignia of the royal crown, yet his cloak lacked the markings that might have indicated that his business was of an official nature.

The messenger pressed his spurs into the stallion's belly, urging the horse to quicken the pace so that he would reach his destination before sunset. The white Arabian snorted at the crisp Atlantic sea air and responded to his rider's call.

Sagres was a small settlement on the extreme southwestern tip of the Algarve. It was also a place to heal the wounds of bygone battles, to convalesce a battered spirit and soul, and a location for visionaries to map the contours of the future. It had grown into a prosperous hamlet of summer villas, founded and developed by the resort's inhabitants. Through necessity, they had dug and constructed a social system that could supply and meet the demands of progress and sufficiency. These people of Sagres of Vila do Infante would serve their founder and leader through times of celebration and grief, share and be privy to the great plans and power games of famous generals and would-be explorers, participating in their aspirations and dreams.

The bells on the central tower began to toll, a signal of a distant rider. He was a man that pressed the gravel, and carried an important and crucial communication. The residents of that quiet, sleepy hollow cast their eyes to the north as a cloud of white dust tailed the determined rider. It was his signature to a mission that would change the map of the future. The messenger galloped into Sagres, carefully guiding the Arabian towards the royal villa. The stallion sensed that he was at journey's end, wrestling aggressively with his bit, and increasing the speed of his gallop.

"*Saludos Amigos!* I must meet with the Infante, João de Aviz, immediately. I bear important information and news critical to the future of our country," announced the rider.

João de Aviz was a man who had lived his life in hope and battle. Although he was born to royalty, an older half-brother preceded his claim to the throne. Throughout his life, he cradled the welfare and the love for his country close to his bosom, and when the horn was sounded, he had answered to the call of duty. As a teenager, he had traveled in the valley of kings and drunk from the gravy of childhood aspirations, dreaming about a day in which he would lead Portugal into battle. Never for a single moment had he seriously contemplated the realization of those visions, which were always lost and forgotten to the empty pockets of unfulfilled aspirations. During the sunny winter days on the Algarve, João had seized at occasional moments, gazing to the west across the Atlantic, considering the challenges that awaited the nation, at times sipping on the thick port produced from the vines of the Douro valley, in the north.

The bouquet of the Douro grape of 1375 vintage was tender and charming, its taste poignant and biting. People borne, nurtured and cultivated on Portuguese soil, had learned to absorb the nutrients of the land that would make them a great romantic in matters of love, and a fierce warrior in times of battle. Their Castilian neighbors would jibe at aspiring cavaliers who wished to entertain an affair with a westerner. "Mercy for the soldier who kisses and embraces the serpent," they teased.

"Better to know the venom of a lover, than to taste the rivers of pleasure and lust from an enemy," the soldiers roared in retort.

João would wet whisker with guests, offering them generous measures of his cask and corked Douro collection. "Not recommended for the faint hearted," he would warn.

"Too strong for the palate *amigo*, or just enjoying the sea breeze," João would muse, with gentle nudges of comforting relief on the corner of his guest's shoulders.

João de Aviz's reputation preceded him. Known as a person who was passionate in his undertakings, he lived life by his book. He was clear in his thinking, as he was in exacting the high standards of excellence by which he lived. João's mother had tragically perished in childbirth, leaving him an orphan of the monarchy, and an infant who was raised by the king's servants. At the age of fourteen, he had mastered six languages: Castilian, Latin, Czech, German, French, and Italian. João also had participated in several battles. At fifteen, he was commissioned as a field operator in Portugal's famed clandestine and spy unit. On one of his missions, he infiltrated the French Royal Guard, posed as a Castilian knight, and retrieved valuable intelligence that was passed on to the English. This set the tone and created a mood of cooperation, leading to an Anglo-Portuguese alliance that would shine and burn for generations to come.

João's accomplice for the French mission was his childhood friend, Nuno Álvares Pereira, who was borne from Portuguese and Galician nobility, a fate that they both shared. The boys had both been schooled in the art of warfare and horsemanship by royal guardsmen at the behest of João's father Pedro, King Peter I, a leader who adopted a "no prisoners shall be taken" approach towards his enemies.

In the earlier years, João and Nuno were encouraged by the crown to participate in dangerous cross-border missions into Castilian territory. Although these two countries enjoyed brief interludes of peace and relative tranquility, the underlying antagonism that existed between them was at the time of these escapades brittle and corrosive.

João and Nuno would gallop through the Castilian countryside and her villages, challenging their boyhood contemporaries to contests in advanced horsemanship and endurance. The riders would agree on a predefined circuit and traverse through the uneven, treacherous terrain at breakneck speeds. It was a tournament of endurance for horse and rider alike, a race against time, a test of stamina, of grit and determination. During most of these encounters João and Nuno, *Los Invasores*, or the Raiders as they became known, weighed in with a distinct disadvantage. They were of slighter build relative to their muscular Castilian counterparts, of younger age and experience, and always outnumbered in a game that was robust and physically challenging. The Castilians

had home ground advantage, with their knowledge of local conditions. They were familiar with the water table, with the lie of the land, and knew where the wet patches of soft, muddy ground and marshes would be found. They had an understanding of local wind conditions, and knew how changes in wind patterns could affect a horse's gait and sap the creature of its strength. For the Raiders, victory was never certain. On most occasions, they would retreat to friendly territory on the western side the border. Here they would seek the refuge of warm straw, and scurry for the taste of familiar cuisine. It would be a time to lick their injuries, rub salt into the wound, and cleanse the cuts that had been etched across their shoulder blades. These were wounds that were marked into their flesh through the crack of leather hide, held by the hand of rival horsemen. It was the boyhood battles of the Castilian hills, the physical and emotional beatings and the brutal falls and bruises, which transformed the Raiders from boys who slung at mudstones to become men of steel and might.

Chapter 2

When the buds of spring popped their first blossoms, João would spend time with his father, the king, in the great forests of the Serra da Estrela. It was here that they would hunt for deer, and explore the mountain peaks of the region. During these trips, João became particularly close to the king, as the leader shared with him his intimate knowledge of nature and wildlife, his experience in life and the manner and ways that a man could use limited resources, to tackle the obstacles that confront him.

They would saddle their horses and embark on the mountain trails on the show of the first cracks of dawn, when the sun presented and projected its rays of sunlight over the majestic mountain peaks to the east. João and his father departed, equipped with only the barest of essentials that were necessary for their survival. During these precious days in the forests, they lived off the shrubs, drank water from the fresh flowing rivers and rapids of the mountains, and survived from the environment that provided them with their sustenance.

The king would impart his closely held secrets of the forest with his son, as they tracked the mountain trails from foothill to peak, and from river to waterfall. He taught João how to observe birds from the hidden crevices of rock face in the mountains, and from their campsite in the forests. "The birds and the squirrels will provide you with the secret maps and knowledge of the forest, where to locate fruit for survival, free from

poisonous acids or liquids," he advised. "Watch closely, as a careless or thoughtless move could prove to be fatal, and one that will carry much regret." João would survey his father's actions with wonder and admiration, at the infinite wisdom that the king displayed about nature and survival. He often questioned the king, as to how he had acquired such a keen and intimate understanding of nature, and of the wild. His father would laugh and respond with a humility and modesty that can only be achieved by one who has experienced the pain of disappointment, or by a person with a striving and passionate heart, who understands what it is like to suffer the burden of unrealized expectations. "Experience makes wise men from fools," the king would say earnestly. "It is the test that finds man, and not man who finds the test. Do not chase experience or a challenge that might prove your courage and spirit, for if you are destined, such a test will discover and find you."

The king instructed João in the art of tracking, and showed him how to distinguish between one spoor from another. He would school João in how to identify the size and approximate weight of the animal. These measurements were detectable from the tracks and could be used to establish the distance between animal and hunter, and the pace that the creature had set in its quest to escape. A keen eye could detect the animal's age and identify whether the gait was that of male or female. Environmental considerations had to be factored and accounted for as strong rains, winds or storms, greatly inhibited the accuracy and proficiency with which they would be able to scour the terrain.

When they were in pursuit of deer the king followed the spoor of older stag. These were older male that had fulfilled their life in the forest and that had fathered a sizeable herd. The king considered the efforts, which he had extended in contributing towards conservation. "The need to placate one's lust on the more tender meat of fawn, is a fulfillment in short term gratification, but a loss for future generations," the king would lament. "Destroying the vast treasures with which we have been bequeathed, can never be considered a balanced act of sanity, or prudence. A person who does not consider his emotions is heartless, but one who fails to exercise his intellect is foolish."

With arrows loaded in their longbows, advancing from the downwind side in stealthy fashion and on foot, they made their approach to a location that provided them with a clear shot. It would always need to be a position, which was as close as possible to

their target. This would prevent them from inadvertently advertising their position, prompting their target to flee into the heart of the forest. When they reached their firing positions they retracted their arrows, so that the bows' spring was loaded to its full capacity. João carefully shifted the arrow, in order that its line of fire was directly aimed at a point that was a fraction above the deer's heart. This would allow for the slightest margin of error. If he had miscalculated the firing point and his aim was too high, he would still sink the arrow into the stag's belly. If his aim had been slightly too low, his arrow would find its mark to the deer's heart. João had been schooled to achieve a clear strike on the first attempt of fire. Any pain or suffering that the creature might incur would be minimized. The incident would last no longer than a split second. To promote the chance of fatality, a moment after João had released the spring in his bow the king would follow the initial strike with an arrow of his own, carefully and accurately aimed at the deer's jugular.

They would carve the meat into small and practical strips, sprinkle the venison with fine grains of salt, and package it so that they could easily transport it back to the castle. However, on that night, in celebration of the success of their hunt, when the moon had become full and the howl of wolves could be heard echoing in the forest valleys, they sat around their campfire of glowing coals, licking on the succulent roasted spoils of meat that they had captured.

It was during these campfire discourses of enchantment, when the king would share with João his personal aspirations, his disappointments, and the values that he held dear to his heart. They were the guidelines of life and of the future. This was a legacy that João would be expected to grasp, build and develop, so that he would be equipped to serve a country that the world might look upon as a model for peace and prosperity.

"You are not next in line for the throne," the king would advise João, as they sat huddled around the crackling fire. "Your brother Ferdinand will take the throne at the end of my days, and in my absence. The blind alleys of life block our vision to the future, and only fate knows how long his reign will survive. A time may come when you will be called to lead Portugal to great victories, to deliver to her and the nation the riches of the world, and to answer the call of duty. It will be a time when boys scramble and flee for the sanctuary of the woods, while men of the nation will tackle and protect us from foes.

If you should ever merit to experience such a fate, you will need to administer those resources that you may have under your jurisdiction, wisely and justly. Surround yourself with people who you can trust that are loyal, and who will provide you with true and just counsel, advice that is selfless and that will bring the nation to victory.

"When you are prosperous and victorious, everyone will fight to be your friend. When you are faced with challenges, the chips are down, and all looks lost, the mob will desert you. These are not friends. Remember that the test for true friendship is always found in a time of great challenge."

João would listen intently, with keen interest and sincerity to the king's words. Although he was only a boy who was eight years in age, he knew and understood with intuitive comprehension, the gravity and weight of the legacy that was being imparted.

With the stark and magnificent beauty that lay at the base of every tree, and at the crest of each waterfall, so too was there lurking danger, often hidden and camouflaged to the naked eye. The Montpellier snake lay in wait for its prey, hidden under stones, in crevices, or in dense bush and in trees. It would strike with uncanny speed, hissing and sinking its venomous fangs into the flesh of lizards, birds and rabbits. João had heard of several incidents when a Montpellier had fallen from overhead trees, through unplanned accident on the head of forest pedestrians.

"Something to be able to tell the folk back home," the king would muse, when João would remind his father of the dangers of the forest. João would prefer to avoid becoming a victim to a similar fate, or the object of needless table chatter. However, encounters with the wild are not always restricted to self-invitation, and invariably lie beyond the realm of human choice. As they would traverse across the mountain paths, João's mind and eyes were constantly conscious and on the lookout for snakes and other reptiles, which might be responsible for an awkward intrusion.

On one occasion, when João and his father were riding the trail, they encountered a seven-foot Montpellier and mongoose in combat. The mongoose knew well the path that it would need to follow, to win its battle against the snake. The snake-eater instinctively would apply sharp jabs with its paw against its foe. When the moment was right, with cunning, calculated precision and lightening speed, it would seize the neck of

his victim by its teeth and severe its head from the body, leaving the reptile withering in futile protest.

The summer months were the months of the brown bear. Experienced hunters knew that this formidable creature could weigh up to fifteen hundred pounds, stand upright for extended periods, and clock speeds of up to forty miles per hour. A powerful swipe from a bear's forearm would deck a man with a single blow. Hunters and forest scouts would go to great lengths to avoid a confrontation with these creatures, in fear of the ferocious and brutal battle that such an encounter would engender. "Good training for men who wish to test their courage or prepare themselves for battle," drunkards in taverns would facetiously muse. Nevertheless, for men who valued their lives and souls, combat with a brown bear was a confrontation that would be best surrendered to some other muscle-bearing simpleton.

When the king first discovered the spoor of the brown bear with its two cubs, he knew what he must do. He pursed his lips in appreciation of the threatening danger and risk that such an encounter may pose. "We must follow the trail in the opposite direction to the curvature of the mountain. That way we will avoid the bear and her cubs," the king advised. The monarch and João had heeled the trail in a northwesterly direction, and now they would change course to ascend the peak in a northeasterly orientation.

They had stationed their horses in the valley, and they had tracked the deer to a point where they were minutes from gaining sight of the herd. "Better to forego and loose the opportunity of a strike in this hour, and survive to return to fire a bow on another day," the king would caution. "A dead man's arrow is usually not true to its mark."

João sighed in frustration and disappointment. He had hoped to capture a glance of the herd. They had followed the spoor for the best part of the morning, and now they would turn away from the trail, and throw to the wind the valuable gains that they had made, minutes away from sight of their target. Perhaps they could follow the tracks for another few hundred yards, just to catch a glimpse of the herd, which they had so enthusiastically trailed. However, the king was adamant. "Life is not a game that is played on the spin of dice. The difference between a beating pulse and death can be measured by the breadth of a hair." So with heavy hearts, but clear minds, João and the

king terminated their quest to locate the herd of deer that may well have been close to a fleeting glance, but far from the tips of their arrows.

The single mistake that the king and João had made was small, although critical. They had been conservative in calculating the age of the spoor. Rather than the bears' position being closer to their trackers than may have been anticipated, the mother and her cubs had already made their way around the crest of the mountain, and were descending the northeastern slope. Both king and prince were following a trail that would lead them into confrontation with a pack of dangerous brown bears, creatures that were walking with the claws of death marked on their paws.

The tales that garnish the walls of wooden cabins sing their own melody. These are tunes that are tempered by respect for the predator, and that weep with pity for its prey. Men that have encountered a showdown with these animals or enthusiasts who sought to entertain a bout with a bear, understand that even with the advantage of sophisticated weaponry, little hope or chance of a human victory should be anticipated. The king and João pushed ahead with invigoration, determined to make their stand at the peak of the mountain. They wished to admire the spectacular panoramic view that the ridge offered, extending over the breadth of Portugal as far as the eye could see.

The bears clumsily waddled down the mountainside, searching for the possibility of food. They were heading towards the fresh streams of cold and biting water, which could be found on the lower part of the mountain, and where they could locate and capture wild salmon, jumping upstream over waterfalls, on route towards their spawning grounds near the river's source. The mother bear stood on her hind legs, gently sniffing the fresh and crisp air, growling gently as she detected the scent of the foreboding and perilous danger.