

Chapter One

Nerian turned sharp right to avoid a dip in the land, away from the river that flowed swiftly along the valley bottom. He followed a faintly marked trail, one by which he began to ascend the bracken-covered hillside. His pace slowed as the slope became steeper. The path curved as it levelled out and followed the contour of the land. He found himself high above a rushing stream. Soon the way led down towards the streambed. He left the bracken behind and followed the watercourse up into the hills. At times his route took him beside the stream, at others through it when the gap between the gill walls narrowed. In places he struggled to climb sheer slippery rock faces.

It was some time before he reached a stretch of bare rock that would lead him to the moorland high above. Despite the early summer sun, a chill breeze cooled the air which made him shiver in his damp clothing. The valley bottom was a long way below, the distant river snaking away into the haze. Smoke, rising from the fires of a settlement he had left at daybreak, could be seen faintly in the misty atmosphere. His brief stay with the friendly villagers had refreshed and empowered him. They had replenished his pack, which bulged with fresh supplies.

He turned for one last look and froze. The smoke from the cooking fires had turned to thick columns of black. The village had been torched. His pursuers were only hours behind him. Nerian felt a cold shiver of fear, as well as guilt about the danger to which he had exposed the residents. For a month there had been no sign of the pursuing band, so he had assumed they had lost his trail. Several weeks earlier, he had become aware of being tracked, but had been able to keep ahead of the hunters.

It was not until he had witnessed the burning of a second village, early on in the chase, that it occurred to him the destruction might be linked to him. He had stayed overnight in both of the isolated hamlets, grateful for fresh food and company. After that, until yesterday, he had deliberately avoided contact with anyone. Only then, confident he had evaded his trackers, had he visited the village to replenish his supplies.

But why was he being followed? Nerian had no special talents. Neither had he any secrets, nor did he own anything of special significance - nothing that anyone might consider to be of value to someone else. He was merely a traveller making his way home from foreign lands.

So why were they stalking him? Although they had no scruples about destroying anyone who provided him with shelter, he could not know whether they intended to kill him. Perhaps they wanted to take him prisoner? Unlikely - his family was not wealthy, so ransom could not be a reason. Unless he had been mistaken for someone else? What was it about him? What had he seen or done that could have brought all this upon him? Contemplate as much as he might, he could think of nothing.

From the distance the rumble of thunder echoed up the valley. Beyond the fires of destruction, massive cumulus clouds were building. He needed to take cover quickly, but not only from the coming storm. There was still some distance to go beside the streambed before he reached the open moorland. Luckily, Nerian knew of a place of shelter close by. He turned back towards the stream and followed its path for a short distance. His feet splashed through the last part as he slid over the moss covered rocky bed. The gill sides closed in. He approached a waterfall that towered high above him. It spanned the entire width of the channel. Nerian moved confidently through the cascade and stepped into a hidden chamber beyond. Water dripped from his clothes he walked further into the cavern. Sufficient light filtered through to illuminate the inside. Carefully he picked his way over the damp rock. His wet tracks quickly merged into the moist surface, leaving no sign of his passing.

A good thirty paces inside a wall of rock sealed the way. Nerian stopped before reaching it. High in the cave wall, to his left, was a shallow ledge. From below, it appeared to be nothing more than a crack in the surface. On the ground lay a pine log. He lifted it and rested a flattened end over the lip above. The pole leaned steeply against the wall. Cautiously he scrambled up the unstable wooden prop, using stubby remains of branches to support his hands and feet. After he had eased his way onto the ledge, he raised the log and carefully laid it behind him. He stretched out, using his pack as a pillow, prepared to wait for the storm to abate. At the entrance he had left no signs of his movement so was secure in the knowledge that he would be invisible from the floor below. Very few people knew of the chamber. Even fewer were aware of the ledge. Nerian had learnt about it from an elderly traveller. Several times since then, he had used it as a place of shelter. Never had fear for his life compelled him to take refuge there.

He was only days away from his destination, yet to continue his journey would be foolish. After seeing the smoke in the valley, it was apparent to him that to go home would expose his family and village to danger. The villagers were capable of protecting themselves against everyday dangers. But a group of well-armed, highly trained and disciplined fighting men was something beyond their experience. From what he had observed, it was only the places where

he had stayed that had been destroyed. Some knowledge, something he had seen or maybe something he had picked up, no matter how trivial to him, must be vital to his pursuers.

The sky darkened, taking on a green and eerie hue. Rumbles became crashes that made the whole ground vibrate. Brilliant flashes of light lit the inside of the chamber. Heavy spots of rain began to fall, slowly at first then turning into a torrent. The waterfall became a raging sheet. The stream swelled. Soon, in full spate, it hurtled along the narrow watercourse to the valley below. The rising waters obliterated all traces of his journey from the river. So heavy was the driving rain and hail, that any signs of his passing through the bracken were washed away. He had disappeared, quite possibly swept away by the flood.

Darkness came and Nerian ate a little. He dozed as the storm finally passed into the distance. Further rumblings and occasional flashes continued through much of the night. Intermittent periods of heavy rain fell, feeding the waters as they swept over the mouth of the cave. Inside, the water level had risen sufficiently to cover the ground some distance into the chamber.

His mind filled with his concerns. Was there something he knew that his pursuers sought, some knowledge he alone possessed? Perhaps they believed he had seen, or heard something they wanted to remain secret. From what he had been able to see, they had neither tortured nor questioned anyone at length. By contrast their searches had been thorough. They killed without mercy, but without undue cruelty. Whatever it was they thought he knew, it was of great significance to them - something so important they had to silence everyone with whom Nerian had been in contact. He had seen and heard many things, but he could not recall anything that might justify such violence. Whatever it was, it remained hidden deep within his mind.

Dawn broke. Nerian decided to remain within the chamber. He had sufficient supplies to last a week – considerably longer if he was careful. The occasional visit to the entrance for water was a risk he would have to take. The less he moved around outside, the fainter the chance his enemies had of finding him. If he lost them here he would be free to start backtracking. Only if he discovered why he was being hunted might he find a solution to his predicament.

He remained inside the cavern for five long and tedious days. Although he quickly formed the habit of sitting by the entrance during the day, he dared not step outside into the sunshine. Even so, he was careful not to leave any tracks between there and his bolthole. The sheet of falling water had eased considerably since the day of the storm. With his back to the cave wall, he could make himself believe he was looking through windows of glass he had seen in

cities far away. He had light and could make out vague outlines. It made him feel as if he was still a part of the outside world. Mid-day approached. Suddenly he stiffened. Through the curtain of water he could make out two blurred shapes, moving in his direction. He fled to the back and climbed onto the ledge. The log he pulled up behind him.

A flicker of dust, disturbed in his haste, glistened in the air beneath. He prayed it would not be noticed by anyone who entered. Away from the entrance and cut off from all exterior sounds, Nerian remained motionless. Formless shadows danced across the waterfall and then disappeared. He waited. Suddenly, two dark shapes charged through the watery curtain, swords at the ready. Nerian ducked his head. He dared not move. From below came sounds of movement. The intruders worked slowly and methodically, searching for signs of occupation. Eventually the men halted, standing directly beneath him.

“Nothing here,” one of them uttered, breaking the silence.

“What about that ledge above you?” the other asked. “I’ll give you a leg up to see.”

“No need, it’s only a crack; nobody could squeeze in there. Let’s go.”

“Someone’s been here,” the second voice added. “I can smell them. They’ve moved on now, but it can’t have been all that long ago. The scent’s still fresh.”

“Come on, let’s go, they can’t have gone far.”

They hurried outside, leaving Nerian shaking a little. It had been a narrow escape. If only they had realised just how fresh the scent was. They might decide to pay a return visit, so he would have to be careful about going down to the entrance. At the moment it was too dangerous to leave the cavern. Nevertheless, move on he must, and soon. It would be safer to travel by night, although that would create difficulties in negotiating the rocky streambed.

He had learnt something about his visitors. Their accents had revealed the men’s origins, which gave rise to more questions. Why were highly trained soldiers of Lord Sigebert, the ruler of Passiniera, hunting him? What had he done to offend the tyrant? Nerian had passed through the wretched country only once, saving him several months of travel. To escape attention he had used minor routes, which avoided main towns and troop concentrations. Despite being warned to keep clear of the land, he had thought the risk worth taking, but now he was beginning to alter his opinion.

Nothing came to mind. Rarely had he spoken to anyone; only when running low on supplies had he risked a visit to a quiet village or isolated farmhouse. Wherever possible he had lived off the land. Surely they would not have tracked him all this way for poaching a rabbit on royal lands? That woman! The thought suddenly occurred to him! He had helped a young woman to cross a mountain stream. She had been in a hurry, with only a maidservant for

company. At the time it was a situation that had struck him as unusual. In a country as dangerous as Passiniera it was rare for a woman - a wealthy woman from her appearance - to travel without an armed escort. Winter was almost over, but the high ground had been icy and treacherous.

She had been grateful for his help in guiding her, her companion and their horses across the torrent. As a token of her gratitude she had given him a Crook, despite his protestations that no reward was necessary. If he was honest with himself, it had been a pleasure to help. She was young, dark-haired and very attractive, but a worried, almost haunted look was noticeable in her eyes. While they were speaking, frequently she had cast anxious glances back towards the distant mountains. The staff was light, amazingly so, ornamented with a few simple carvings along its length. Of the mysterious young woman Naomi, whose name he had eventually managed to discover, he knew no more. Their paths had diverged shortly afterwards.

* *

A while later, near the summit of a ridge that overlooked the valley along which the women had ridden, Nerian paused to catch his breath. He could make out a large party of riders in the distance, heading up the vale towards the tiny dots the two women had now become. Then he was over the ridge and striding across the moors. The view behind was lost. Perhaps the Crook was some family heirloom? Even so, it hardly seemed worthwhile to track him a thousand miles across several countries to retrieve it. Why would they burn and kill all with whom he had been in contact? Nothing made sense. Once he was in daylight he would take time to study the object more carefully. Although he doubted it would do anything to help him. For the moment it was too dark. Long before the pursuit began, the Crook was the only item that had been added to his baggage, apart from food. It seemed strange he had not thought about the object sooner. The woman had been in his thoughts often, but not the Crook. Nerian had paid it no attention. It seemed as if it had been with him forever, its acquisition wiped from his mind.

The remainder of the day passed without incident. Later, in the early hours of the morning, Nerian decided it was time to leave. He dropped his possessions onto the ground and clambered down the pole. Careful not to make any marks, he lowered the log and manoeuvred it to rest against the base of the cavern's back wall. For several minutes he stood silently beside the entrance, but could hear no sound other than that of running water. He took a deep breath, picked up his pack and stepped outside to stand alongside the rock-face at the side of the waterfall.

Slowly he moved away from the cascade, keeping to the water's edge until the noise faded. Standing motionless, Nerian allowed his ears to become accustomed to the sounds of the night. It was quiet but not unnaturally so. The scurrying of tiny animals echoed up the gill quite distinctly. From nearby the sudden hooting of an owl made him jump. Confident he was alone, he climbed out onto the rocky edge of the stream. Using the Crook as a support and guide, he worked his way down the narrow channel, criss-crossing the stream as the pathway necessitated. A heavy mist swirled around him. On higher ground it would be impossible to see further than an arm's length. It was mid-summer and, with the onset of an early dawn, the sky began to lighten. A few hundred paces downstream, where the rocky sides gave way to steeply rising hillside, he moved away from the watercourse. The moors lay in that direction. He turned and climbed towards them.