

FLIGHT FROM SOMMERFIELD

by Ian S. Johnston

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Heart racing, Flynn Tan'Eldin darted into a small stand of trees just moments before a crackle of arrowheads dug into the hard bark of the oaks around him. Panting, he took a moment to observe the landscape. The meadow and surrounding tree line were illuminated by the silver light of the moon, casting deep shadows across the ground.

A quick glance down at his right hand confirmed to he was still in possession of the item he had come for—a small statuette of the goddess Valdara.

I wonder if this is all worth it, he mused. They nearly got me there!

Flynn's long, tapered ears could clearly hear the huffing whines of the pack dogs and the angry shouts of their masters many yards away. For the moment, he had found shelter, but he knew it would be a fatal mistake to tarry here too long.

His breath was only slightly labored now, his exhalations producing small vapor clouds that slowly ascended into the chilly autumn air. He was used to running long distances at speed and would have ordinarily left his human trackers far behind by now. However, a small stab wound he had sustained to his upper right thigh earlier that night had slowed his usual pace.

Flynn tore off a strip of his soft cotton tunic and tied it around his leg to slow the bleeding.

Some wenches can't bear a good-bye, he thought angrily to himself, wincing slightly as he pulled the knot tight. Why do they all think I want to wed them?

A small spot of blood began to pool on the white cotton fabric as Flynn contemplated his next move. Up the trees? With his quick reflexes and dexterity, he could easily move from tree to tree to elude his pursuers.

Flynn frowned as he pondered this and other possible courses of action. Scampering through the treetops wouldn't work at all. He would eventually come to the edge of the small grove and the dogs would merely bark and howl at the trunk until their masters filled him full of arrows or set the tree ablaze. Double back? Impossible. Wait here? Not an option.

Flynn closed his eyes and concentrated his keen hearing for a moment. The dogs and men following him across the farmland meadows were drawing closer. They were likely sixty or seventy yards away now and closing.

"Dratted dogs barking makes it so hard to think!" Flynn muttered to himself.

However, just below the sounds of the ravaging canines and the inane and angry blather of the men that gave chase, he could hear it. It was just a whisper at first, but as Flynn focused more intently, the sound became obvious: running water.

There was a stream nearby! A wry smile spread across the young man's handsome countenance as his mind feverishly hatched an escape plan.

It must be about a hundred yards away, he reasoned, eyes still shut. That way? To the right? No. Slowly, as if divining a source of water, he pinpointed the source of the sound.

As Flynn opened his eyes to see his path, he realized that he could not make a run for it without exposing himself to another volley of arrows from his pursuers.

Drat and double blast! he thought. *Why must my only escape be a perilous one?*

There was no more time to think, however. The dogs and men were almost to the edge of the grove. He *must* act. Now!

Flynn tucked the small statuette into his belt pouch and pulled the drawstrings tight. Then, gripping his small buckler, he made a mad dash for the far tree line and the body of water that coursed through it.

The first few steps into the open were fine. The eyes of the men and their dogs had not seen him yet. If he could keep running undetected, he could slip away into the forest and down the stream before... Just then, an acute pang from his wound shot up his leg, and a muffled cry escaped his lips before he could stifle the impulse.

"Der 'e is!" shouted one of the men. "Fire!"

Well this isn't going to be pleasant, thought Flynn as he deftly and painfully navigated the rough ground toward the far end of the meadow. Fifty yards. Forty-five. Forty.

The distinctive twang of arrows being loosed punctuated the drone-like barking of the hounds behind him. Flynn's keen ears could hear the unmistakable whistle of a dozen or more sharp-tipped projectiles traveling through the air, growing louder as they neared him.

If he weren't slowed by his wounded leg, Flynn knew he could easily dodge or deflect most of them, but as it was, he would have to focus on keeping his head protected and vital organs intact.

In a single fluid motion and grimacing with pain, Flynn whirled around, swinging his buckler in an arc to deflect three or so of the arrows. Six or seven others hit the ground around him with a soft yet ominous thud, burrowing mid-haft into the dirt. His excellent night vision allowed him to see and side step two others destined for his chest and head.

Unfortunately, three of the bolts found their mark, ripping into his flesh with devastating speed and ferocity. Two arrows found his right arm, which he was using for balance. The third pierced the calf of his uninjured leg. Flynn screamed out in pain.

"We got 'im, lads!" said one of the men. "Nice shootin'! Sic 'em, pups!"

The dogs barked and howled with renewed vigor as they raced toward the injured rogue. Flynn's mind was hurried and chaotic. There was no time to suffer. There was no time to think. Flynn had to keep moving or the hounds would rip him asunder in mere moments.

Wasting no time, Flynn pulled the arrow from his lower leg. The flesh tore badly as the arrowhead came free and he cried out again. As he glanced to see where the dogs were, he was surprised by one snarling assailant, already in range and lunging for his throat.

Flynn swung his buckler at the dog, striking it hard on the side of its head. With a yelp, the animal dropped to the damp ground and rolled over onto its side. As it landed, Flynn jammed the arrow tip through its skull, pinning it to the earth.

The other dogs were almost upon him now—maybe a dozen of them or more. He turned and ran again for the tree line. Thirty five yards. Thirty. Twenty five.

Another volley of arrows was loosed. Flynn braced for the worst, all the while running as hard as he could toward the cover of the shadowy trees before him. He put the buckler above his head. It was instantly greeted by another pair of arrows destined for back of his skull.

Again, several other arrows peppered the soil around him but two found their way to their mark: one in his right shoulder, the other in his right leg.

"Ack!" hissed Flynn, tumbling to the ground. "This evening has certainly taken a turn for the worse!"

"Down 'e goes!" cheered one of the men. "Get 'im before 'e can get up again!"

"Yeah! We'll teach 'im to steal from our lord!" said a another.

As Flynn pulled the second arrow from his leg, the pain was so excruciating he was beginning to feel woozy. If only he hadn't left his focus talisman on that wench's chamber floor, he could heal himself with magicks and be on his way... Or distract his pursuers with a clever glamer that would lead them on a merry chase. Alas, the price of a hasty exit!

The dogs were closer now, yowling and snapping their teeth.

Flynn laborious got to his feet and ran on as best he could. By now, the pain was nearly unbearable, but it was better to suffer now than be ripped apart by dogs later he reasoned. What would his mentor at the guild say about that? Nothing sporting, that was certain. On top of being dead, he'd be a laughing stock. The thought of such a humiliation was almost too much to bear.

Fifteen yards. Ten.

As he dove into the scraggly underbrush, another hail of arrows smote into the tree bark around him. At least he didn't get hit again. He might be able to make it to the water before the dogs found him in the woods. He scrambled to his feet and moved forward, making his way deftly through the thorny underbrush, all the while keeping his ears alert for the sounds of running water. Yes! There it was!

Flynn used small clearings in the brambles to increase his lead over the angry men of Sommerfield and their dutiful canine assassins. With any luck, he wouldn't encounter any of the nasty beasties that lurked about in these woods at night. That would certainly be worse than the dogs!

After what seemed like an endless search, Flynn found it. There, in the middle of the wood was a rapidly-flowing river. He smiled to himself. This water would carry him far from this place in a matter of moments and leave his pursuers behind. He strode confidently toward the water's edge.

As he approached the route to his salvation, however, Flynn began to feel light headed. The images that greeted his eyes began to fluctuate and become distorted.

I'm losing too much blood, he reasoned, suddenly lurching forward. *Got to hurry!*

Just as he reached the bank, the pack of dogs broke free from the scrub nearby, barking and snarling as they rushed toward him.

Summoning every ounce of his remaining energy, Flynn took two quick steps and dived deeply into the river. As the ice-cold waters engulfed him, wispy tendrils of his crimson blood spiraled upward from his wounds to the surface.

The chill of his aqueous surroundings was at once shocking and welcome. The smarting arrow wounds were numbed somewhat by the cold temperature of the water, bringing a measure of relief and also sharpening his senses somewhat—if only for the moment.

As Flynn surfaced, he heard the distinctive splash of dogs entering the water in pursuit.

Stupid animals! he thought. *Don't they ever give up?*

One of the hounds was nearly to him as Flynn's face surfaced. Taking a quick gasp of the cold night air, Flynn reached out and grabbed hold of the dog's scruff. As the animal's teeth snapped shut, narrowly missing his face, Flynn rolled himself into position behind the dog, using the river's current to aid him.

With a deep breath of air, Flynn submerged, taking the hapless canine under the water.

Ahlorn's beard! I hate doing this! he thought.

As Flynn faded toward unconsciousness, he held the struggling dog below the water, using himself as an anchor, until the animal finally stopped moving. As Flynn let go, the dog's body slowly floated up to the surface of the river.

Swimming underwater for a way, Flynn resurfaced once more, this time much further downstream. Some of the village's men had broken through the forest to the river bank, but they were out of arrow range now. Seeing the dead dog in the water, they called to their other hounds, who begrudgingly gave up the chase.

"E's probably drowned by now 'imself," reasoned one of the men. "After all de arrows we's put in 'im."

"Quite right!" agreed another, their voices fading in the distance.

"We'll 'ead downstream at first light an' pick up 'is body," said a third. "Then, we cans 'ang it on the village gates as a warning we don't like no feeves 'round 'ere!"

The men continued talking, but after a while even Flynn's keen hearing couldn't make out what they were saying anymore. The branches of the trees over-arching the river way made a thick natural canopy that nearly blocked out the light of the moon and stars.

Struggling to stay awake, Flynn began to fade in and out of consciousness.

Must... stay... alert, Flynn thought to himself. *Got... to keep... moving....*

Despite his best efforts, however, his loss of blood proved too great an obstacle to overcome. Slowly and surely, his mind faded to black, the burbling, swirling sounds of the waters all around him.

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