
Ranger's Apprentice 5 - The Sorcerer of the North

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The Sorcerer of the North

BOOK FIVE: THE SORCERER OF THE NORTH

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To Lyn Smith,
for your years of support
and encouragement.

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1

In the north, he knew, the early winter gales, driving the rain before them, would send the sea crashing against the shore, causing white clouds of spray to burst high into the air.

Here, in the southeastern corner of the kingdom, the only signs of approaching winter were the gentle puffs of steam that marked the breath of his two horses. The sky was clear blue, almost painfully so, and the sun was warm on his shoulders. He could have dozed off in the saddle, leaving Tug to pick his way along the road, but the years he had spent training and conditioning in a hard and unforgiving discipline would never allow such an indulgence.

Will's eyes moved constantly, searching left to right, right to left, close in and far ahead. A casual observer might never notice this constant movement—his head remained still. Again, that was his training: to see without being seen; to notice without being noticed. He knew this part of the kingdom was relatively untroubled. That was why he had been assigned to the Fief of Seacliff. After all, as a brand-new, just-commissioned Ranger was hardly going to be handed one of the kingdom's trouble spots. He smiled idly at the thought. The prospect of taking up his first solo posting was daunting enough without having to worry about invasion or insurrection. He would be content to find his fief here in this peaceful backwater.

The smile died on Will's lips as his keen eyes saw something in the middle distance, almost concealed by the long grass beside the road.

His outward bearing gave no sign that he had noticed anything out of the ordinary. He didn't stiffen in his seat or rise in the stirrups to look more closely, as the majority of people might have done. On the contrary, he appeared to slouch a little more in the saddle as he rode—seemingly disinterested in the world around him. But his eyes, hidden in the deep shadow under the hood of his cloak, probed the ground urgently. Something had moved, he was sure. And now, in the long grass to one side of the road, he thought he could see a trace of black and white—colors that were totally out of place in the fading greens and new russets of autumn.

Nor was he the only one to sense something out of place. Tug's ears twitched once and he tossed his head, shaking his mane and letting loose a rumbling neigh that Will felt in the barrel-like chest as much as heard.

"I see it," he said quietly, letting the horse know that the warning was registered. Reassured by Will's low voice, Tug quieted, though his ears were still pricked and alert. The packhorse, ambling contentedly beside and behind them, showed no interest. But it was a transport animal pure and simple, not a Ranger-trained horse like Tug.

The long grass shivered once more. It was only a faint movement but there was no wind to cause it—as the hanging clouds of steam from the horses' breath clearly showed. Will shrugged his shoulders slightly, ensuring that his quiver was clear. His massive longbow lay across his knees, ready strung. Rangers didn't travel with their bows slung across their shoulders. They carried them ready for instant use. Always.

His heart was beating slightly faster than normal. The movement in the grass was barely thirty meters away by now. He recalled Halt's teaching: Don't concentrate on the obvious. They may wait

you to miss something else.

He realized that his total attention had become focused on the long grass beside the road. Quickly his eyes scanned left and right again, reaching out to the tree line some forty meters back from the road on either side. Perhaps there were men hiding in the shadows, ready to charge out while his attention was distracted by whatever it was that was lying in the grass at the road's edge. Robbers, outlaws, mercenaries, who knew?

But he could see no sign of men in the trees. He touched Tug with his knee and the horse stopped, the packhorse continuing a few paces before it followed suit. His right hand went unerringly to the quiver, selected an arrow and laid it on the bowstring in less than a second. He shrugged back the hood so that his head was bare. The longbow, the small shaggy horse and the distinctive gray and green mottled cloak would identify him as a Ranger to any observer, he knew.

"Who's there?" he called, raising the bow slightly, the arrow nocked and ready. He didn't draw back yet. If there was anyone skulking in the grass, they'd know that a Ranger could draw, fire and hit his mark before they had gone two paces.

No answer. Tug stood still, trained to be rock steady in case his master had to shoot.

"Show yourself," Will called. "You in the black and white. Show yourself."

The stray thought crossed his mind that only a few moments ago he had been daydreaming about this being a peaceful backwater. Now he was facing a possible ambush by an unknown enemy.

"Last chance," he called. "Show yourself or I'll send an arrow in your direction."

And then he heard it, possibly in response to his voice. A low whimpering sound: the sound of a dog in pain. Tug heard it too. His ears flicked back and forth and he snorted uncertainly.

A dog? Will thought. A wild dog, perhaps, lying in wait to attack? He discarded the idea almost as soon as it formed in his mind. A wild dog wouldn't have made any sound to warn him. Besides, the sound he had heard had been one of pain, not a snarl or a warning growl of anger. It had been a whimper. He came to a decision.

In one fluid movement, he removed his left foot from the stirrup, crossed his right leg over the saddle pommel and dropped lightly to the ground. Dismounting in that fashion, he remained at all times facing the direction of possible danger, with both hands free to shoot. Had the need arisen, he could have loosed his first shot as soon as his feet touched the ground.

Tug snorted again. In moments of uncertainty like this, Tug preferred to have Will safely in the saddle, where the little horse's quick reflexes and nimble feet could take him quickly out of danger.

"It's all right," Will told the horse briefly, and walked quietly forward, bow at the ready.

Ten meters. Eight. Five ... he could see the black and white clearly now through the dry grass. And now, as he was closer, he saw something else in the black and white: the matted brown of dried blood and the rich red of fresh blood. The whimper came again and finally Will saw clearly what it was that had stopped them.

He turned and gave the "safe" hand signal to Tug, and the horse responded by trotting forward to join him. Then, setting the bow aside, Will knelt beside the wounded dog lying in the grass.

"What is it, boy?" he said gently. The dog turned its head at the sound of the voice, then whimpered again as Will touched it gently, his eyes running over the long, bleeding gash in its side stretching from behind the right shoulder back to the rear haunch. As the animal moved, more fresh blood welled out of the wound. Will could see one eye as the dog lay, apparently exhausted, on its side. It was filled with pain.

It was a border shepherd, he realized, one of the sheepdogs bred in the northern border region, and known for their intelligence and loyalty. The body was black, with a pure white ruff at the throat and chest and a white tip to the bushy tail. The legs were white and the black fur repeated again at the dog's head, as if a cowl had been placed over it, so that the ears were black, while a white blaze ran u

the muzzle and between the eyes.

~~The gash in the dog's side didn't appear to be too deep and the chances were that the ribcage had protected the dog's vital organs. But it was fearfully long and the wide-gaping edges were even, as if they had been cut by a blade. And it had bled a lot. That, he realized, would be the biggest problem. The dog was weak. It had lost a lot of blood. Perhaps too much.~~

Will rose and moved to his saddlebags, untying the medical kit that all Rangers carried. Tug eyed him curiously, satisfied now that the dog represented no threat. Will shrugged and gestured to the medical kit.

"It works for people," he said. "It should be all right for a dog."

He returned to the injured animal, touching its head softly. The dog tried to raise its head but he gently held it down, crooning encouraging words to it as he opened the medical pack with his free hand.

"Now let's take a look at what they've done to you, boy," he said.

The fur around the wound was matted with blood and he cleaned it as best he could with water from his canteen. Then he opened a small container and carefully smeared the paste it contained along the edges of the gash. The salve was a painkiller that would numb the wound so that he could clean and bandage it without causing more pain to the dog.

He allowed a few minutes for the salve to take effect, then began applying an herbal preparation that would prevent infection from setting in and help the wound heal. The painkiller was working well and his ministrations seemed to be causing no problem for the dog, so he used it liberally. As he worked, he saw that he had misnamed the dog by calling it "boy." It was a female.

The border shepherd, sensing that Will was helping, lay still. Occasionally, she whimpered again. But not in pain. The sound was more a sound of gratitude. Will sat back on his haunches, head to one side as he surveyed the now cleaned injury. Fresh blood still seeped from the gash and he knew he would have to close it. Bandaging was hardly practical, however, with the thick fur of the dog and the awkward position of the gash. He shrugged, realizing that he would have to stitch it.

"Might as well get on with it while the salve's still working," he told the animal. She lay with her head on the ground, but one eye swiveled around to watch him as he worked.

The shepherd obviously felt the sensation of the needle as he quickly put in a dozen stitches of fine silk thread and drew the lips of the wound together. But there seemed to be no pain and, after an initial flinching reaction, she lay still and allowed him to continue.

Finished, Will rested one hand gently on the black-and-white head, feeling the softness of the thick fur. He had done his job well but it was obvious that the dog would be unable to walk.

"Stay here," he said softly. "Stay."

The dog lay obediently as he moved to the packhorse and began rearranging its load.

There were two long satchels, holding books and personal effects, on either side of the packsaddle. They left a depression between them and he found a spare cloak and several blankets to line the space until he had a soft, comfortable nest in which the dog could lie—with enough space for her to move a little, but snug enough to hold her securely in place.

Crossing back to where she lay, he slid his arms under the warm body and gently lifted her, talking all the time in a low crooning voice. The salve was effective but it didn't last long and he knew she would be hurting again soon. The dog whimpered once, then held her peace as he lifted her into position in the space he had prepared. Again, he fondled her head, scratching the ears gently. She moved her head slightly to lick his hand. The small movement seemed to exhaust her. He noted with interest that her eyes were two different colors. Till this moment, he had seen only the left eye, the brown one, as the dog lay on her side. Now, as he moved her, he could see that the right eye was blue. It gave her a raffish, mischievous look, he thought, even in her current low condition.

“Good girl,” he told her. Then, as he turned back to Tug, he realized that the little horse was eyeing him curiously.

“We've got a dog,” he said. Tug shook his head and snorted, Why?

Ranger's Apprentice 5 - The Sorcerer of the North

2

Early in the afternoon they reached the sea and Will knew he was near the end of his journey. Castle Seacliff was set on a large, leaf-shaped island, separated from the mainland by a hundred meters of deep water. At low tide a narrow causeway allowed access to the island, but at high tide, as it was now, a ferry provided transport across. The difficult access had helped keep Seacliff secure for many years and was one of the reasons why the fief had become something of a backwater. In earlier times, of course, the raiding Skandians in their wolfships had made things quite lively. But it had been some years now since the sea wolves from the north had raided the coast of Araluen.

The island was perhaps twelve kilometers in length and eight across, and Will could not yet see the castle itself. He assumed it would be set somewhere in the high ground toward the middle—that was basic strategic thinking. For the moment, however, it was hidden from sight.

Will had debated stopping for a meal at noon, but now, so close to the end of his journey, he decided to press on. There would be an inn of some kind in the village that would huddle close to the castle walls. Or he might find a meal in the castle kitchens. He tugged the lead rein to bring the packhorse alongside and leaned over to inspect the wounded dog. Her eyes were closed and her nose rested on her front paws. He could see the black sides moving in and out as she breathed. There was a little more blood around the lips of the wound but the main flow had been stanching. Satisfied that she was comfortable, Will touched a heel to Tug's side and they moved on down to the ferry, a large, flat-bottomed punt that was drawn up on the beach.

The operator, a heavily muscled man of about forty, was sprawled on the deck of his craft, sleeping in the warm autumn sunshine. He awoke, however, as some sixth sense registered the slight jingle of harness from the two horses. He sat up, rubbed his eyes, then came quickly to his feet.

"I need to get across to the island," Will told him, and the man saluted clumsily.

"Yes indeed, sir. Of course. At your service, Ranger."

There was a hint of nervousness in his voice. Will sighed inwardly. He was still unused to the thought that people were wary of Rangers—even one as fresh-faced as he was. He was a natural friendly young man and he often longed for easy companionship with other people. But that was not the Rangers' way. It served their purpose to remain aloof from ordinary people. There was an air of mystery about the Ranger Corps. Their legendary skill with their weapons, their ability to move about unseen and the secretive nature of their organization all added to their mystique.

The boatman heaved on the thick cable that ran from the mainland to the island, passing through large pulleys set at either end of the punt. The punt, afloat at one end, moved easily from the beach until it rested wholly in the water. Will guessed that the pulley arrangements gave the operator a mechanical advantage that allowed him to move the large craft so easily.

There was a tariff board nailed to the railing and the operator saw him study it.

"No charge for a Ranger, sir. Free passage for you."

Will shook his head. Halt had impressed on him the need to pay his way. Be beholden to no one, Halt had said. Make sure you owe nobody any favors.

He calculated quickly. Half a royal per person, and the same for each horse. Plus four pennings for

other animals. Close enough to two royals all told. He swung down from the saddle, took a gold three-royal piece from his purse and handed it to the man.

"I'll pay," he said. "Two royals is close enough." The man looked at the coin, then looked at the rider and the two horses, puzzled. Will jerked his head toward the packhorse.

"There's another animal on the packhorse," he explained. The ferry operator nodded, and handed him a silver one-royal piece in change.

"Right enough, sir," he said. He glanced curiously at the packhorse as Will led it onto the punt, taking in the dog in its snug retreat.

"Good-looking dog, that 'un," he said. "He's yours, is he?"

"I found her injured by the road," Will said. "Someone had cut her with a blade of some sort and left her to die."

The boatman rubbed his stubbly chin thoughtfully. "John Buttle has a shepherd like that one. And he'd be the kind to injure a dog and leave it that way. Has a nasty temper, John does, particularly when he's in his drink."

"And what does this John Buttle do?" Will asked.

The boatman shrugged. "He's a herder by trade. But he does most things. Some say he does his reeve work at nights along the roads, looking for travelers who are about after dark. But no one's proved it. He's a might too handy with that spear of his for my liking. He's a good man to stay away from."

Will glanced at the packhorse again, thinking of the cruel gash in the dog's side.

"If Buttle's the one who hurt that dog, he'll do well to stay away from me," he said coldly.

The boatman studied him for a moment. The face was young and well-featured. But there was a hard light in the eyes, he saw. He realized that with Rangers, it never did to assume too much. The pleasant-looking lad wouldn't be wearing the Ranger gray and green if he didn't have steel in him. Rangers were deceptive folk and that was a fact. There were even some who held that they were skilled in the black arts of magic and sorcery and the boatman wasn't altogether sure that those people didn't have the right of it. Surreptitiously making a sign to ward off evil, he moved to the front of the punt, glad for an excuse to break off the conversation.

"Best be getting us across then," he said. Will sensed the change in atmosphere. He glanced at Tug and raised his eyebrows. The horse didn't deign to notice.

As the boatman heaved again on the thick hawser, the punt slid across the water toward the island, small waves burbling under the blunt prow and slapping against the low timber sides. Will noticed that the ferry operator's home, a small planked hut with a thatched roof, was on the island side—presumably as a security measure. The prow of the ferry soon grated into the island's coarse sand, the current slewing it sideways a little as the forward progress stopped. The operator unhitched the single rope rail across the front and gestured for Will to disembark. Will swung up astride Tug and the horses' hooves clapped on the planks as they stepped carefully forward.

"Thank you," he said as Tug stepped off onto the beach. The ferry operator saluted again.

"At your service, Ranger," he said. He watched the slim, erect figure as he rode into the trees and was lost from sight.

It took another half hour to reach the castle. The road wound upward toward the center of the island, through well-spaced, windswept trees. There was plenty of light, unlike in the thick forests around Castle Redmont, or the dark pine forests of Skandia that Will remembered all too well.

The leaves had turned, but so far most of them remained on the branches. All in all, it was pleasant country. As he rode, Will saw plenty of evidence of game—rabbits, of course, and wild turkey. Once he caught a quick flash of white when a deer showed him its hindquarters as it bounded away. Poaching would probably be rife here, he thought. Will had a basic sympathy for the villagers who

sought occasionally to augment their diet with venison or game birds. Fortunately, poaching was a matter of local law and would be policed by the baron's gamekeepers. As a matter of policy, though, Will would need to discover the identities of the local professionals. Poachers could be a prime source of information about goings-on. And information was a Ranger's stock-in-trade.

The trees eventually thinned and he rode out into the sunlight again. The winding uphill road had brought him to a natural plateau, a wide plain perhaps a kilometer across. In the center of the plain stood Castle Seacliff and its dependent village—a huddle of thatched cottages set close to the castle walls.

The castle itself, to one used to the impressive mass of Castle Redmont or the soaring beauty of the King's Castle Araluen, was something of a disappointment. It was little more than a fort, Will realized, with the surrounding walls barely topping five meters in height. As he looked more closely, he could see that at least one section of the wall was constructed from timber—large tree trunks set vertically into the ground and bound together with iron brackets. It was an effective enough barrier, he thought, but it lacked the dramatic impact of Redmont's massive ironstone walls. Yet there were solidly buttressed towers at each corner and a central keep, which would provide a haven of last resort in the event of an attack. Over the keep, he could see the stag's head banner of Baron Ergell as it stirred on the light afternoon sea breeze.

“We're here,” he told Tug, and the horse shook its mane as it heard his voice.

He had reined in at the first sight of the castle. Now he touched Tug's side with his heels and the horse started forward again. As ever, the packhorse moved off a little more slowly, dragging momentarily on the lead rope as they made their way through the open farm fields toward the castle. There was a smell of smoke in the air. The corn stooks had been bundled up and burned after the harvest was brought in and they were still smoldering. In a week or two the farmers would plow the ashes back into the fields and the sequence would begin once more. The smell of smoke, the bare fields and the low-angled autumn afternoon sunlight all evoked memories in Will. Memories of growing up. Of harvests and harvest festivals. Of hazy summers, smoky autumns and snow-covered winters. And, in the last six years, of the deep affection that had grown between him and his mentor, the deceptively grim-faced Ranger called Halt.

There were a few workers in the fields and they stopped to stare at the cloaked figure as he rode toward the castle. He nodded to one or two of those who were closest to him and they nodded back cautiously, raising their hands in salute. Simple farm people didn't understand Rangers and as a result they didn't wholly trust them either. Of course, Will knew, in times of war or danger, they would look to the Rangers for help and protection and leadership. But now, with no threatening danger, they would keep their distance from him.

The occupants of the castle would be a different matter. Baron Ergell and his Battlemaster—Will searched for the name for a few seconds, then recalled it was Norris—understood the role of the Ranger Corps and the value that its members brought to the kingdom's fifty fiefs. They didn't fear the Rangers, but that didn't mean he would enjoy a close relationship with them either. Theirs would be a working partnership.

Remember, Halt had told him, our task is to assist the barons but our first loyalty is to the King. We are the direct representatives of the King's will and sometimes that may not exactly coincide with local interests. We cooperate with the barons and we advise them. But we maintain our independence from them. Don't allow yourself to become indebted to your baron, or to become too close to the people of the castle.

Of course, in a fief like Redmont, where Will had done his training, things were slightly different. Baron Arald, the Lord of Redmont, was a member of the King's inner council. That allowed for a closer relationship between the Baron, his officers and Halt, the Ranger assigned to his fief. But

general, a Ranger's life was a solitary one.

~~There were compensations, of course. Chief among them was the camaraderie that existed between~~ members of the Corps itself. There were fifty Rangers on active service, one for each fief in the kingdom, and they all knew each other by name. Indeed, Will was well acquainted with the man he was replacing at Seacliff. Bartell had been one of his examiners for his annual assessments as an apprentice, and it was his decision to retire that had led to Will's being presented with his Silver Oakleaf, the symbol of a full-fledged Ranger. Bartell, getting on in years and unable to face the rigors of Ranger life—hard riding, sleeping rough and constant vigilance—had traded his own Silver Oakleaf for the gold of retirement. He had been reassigned to the Corps headquarters at Castle Araluen, where he was working in the archives section, compiling the history of the Corps.

Will smiled briefly. He had grown to like Bartell, a well-read and amazingly knowledgeable man in spite of the fact that their first few meetings had been occasions of distinct discomfort for Will. Bartell had been expert at devising tests for the apprentice that were calculated to make the young man's life miserable. Will had since come to value the tough questions and difficult problems that Bartell had posed for him. They had all helped prepare him for the difficult life of a Ranger.

That life itself was the other chief compensation for the solitary nature of the Ranger's day-to-day existence. There was a deep satisfaction and an irresistible allure to being part of an elite band that knew the inner workings and the political secrets of the whole kingdom. Ranger apprentices were recruited for their physical skills—coordination, nimbleness, speed of hand and eye—but even more so for their natural curiosity. A Ranger sought always to know more, to ask more and to find out more about what went on around him. As a youngster, before Halt had recruited him, that restless curiosity and the precociousness that stemmed from it, had caused Will more than his share of troubles.

He was entering the small village now and more people were observing him. Most of them wouldn't make eye contact, and the few who did dropped their gaze when he nodded to them—pleasantly enough, he thought. They saluted, with a clumsy movement of hand to brow, and moved aside to let him pass—quite needlessly, in fact, as there was plenty of room in the broad village street. He made out the symbols for the usual trades that could be found in any village: blacksmith, carpenter, cobbler.

At the end of the single street was a larger building. It was the only two-story structure in the village and it had a wide verandah at the front and the symbol of a tankard hanging above the door. The inn, he realized. It looked clean and well kept, the shutters of the upstairs bedroom window freshly painted and the mud walls whitewashed. As he watched, one of the upstairs windows opened and a girl's head appeared at the opening. She looked to be about nineteen or twenty, with dark, close-cropped hair and wide-set green eyes. She had a clear complexion and was remarkably pretty. When he was more, alone among the people of the village, she continued to meet his gaze as he looked at her. In fact, she went so far as to smile at him and, when she did, the face transformed from pretty to breathtaking.

Will, unsettled by the reluctance of people to meet his gaze, was even more unsettled now by the girl's undisguised interest in him. So you're the new Ranger, he imagined her thinking. You look awfully young for the job, don't you?

As he rode under the window, he realized uncomfortably that as he had raised his head to watch her, his mouth had gaped a little. He snapped it shut and nodded at the girl, stern and unsmiling. His grin grew wider and it was he who broke the eye contact first.

He had planned to stop for a quick meal at the inn but the disconcerting presence of the girl made him change his mind. He recalled the written directions he had been given. His own cabin would be some three hundred meters beyond the village, on the road to the castle and sheltered by a small grove of trees. He could see the grove now and he touched his heels to Tug's side, letting the little horse

break into a trot as they left the village behind. He could sense twenty or thirty pairs of eyes boring curiously into his back as he rode. He wondered if the green eyes from the upper room of the inn were among them, then shrugged the thought aside.

The cabin was a typical Ranger's house, built of logs with large flat river stones for roofing. There was a small verandah at the front of the house and a stable and saddling yard behind it. It nestled under the trees, and he was surprised to see a curl of smoke from the chimney at one end of the building.

He swung down from Tug's saddle, a little stiff after a day's riding. There was no need to tether Tug but he looped the packhorse's reins around one of the verandah posts. He checked the dog, saw that she was asleep and decided she could stay where she was for a few minutes more.

If there had been any doubts that this was to be his house, they were dispelled by the carved outline of an oakleaf in the lintel over the door. He stood for a moment, scratching Tug's ears as the horse nuzzled gently against him.

“Well, boy,” he said, “looks like we're home.”

Ranger's Apprentice 5 - The Sorcerer of the North

3

Will pushed open the door and went inside the cabin. It was virtually identical to the one that had been his home for much of the last few years. The room he entered took up about half the interior space and served as a combined sitting and dining area. There was a pine table with four plain chairs to his left, against a window, and two comfortable-looking wooden armchairs and a two-place settle to the opposite end, grouped around the cheerful fire crackling in the grate. He looked around the room wondering who had laid the fire.

The kitchen was a small room adjoining the dining area. Copper pots and pans, obviously freshly cleaned and polished, hung on the wall beside the small wood-fueled cooking range. There were fresh wildflowers in a small vase under the window—the last of the season, he thought. The homey touch reminded him once more of Halt, and the thought brought a lump of loneliness to Will's throat. The grim-faced Ranger had always contrived to have flowers in his cabin whenever possible.

Will moved to inspect the two small bedrooms—simply furnished and opening off the living area. As he expected, there was nobody in those rooms either. He had exhausted all possibilities in the little cabin—unless the person who had laid the fire and arranged the flowers was hiding in the stables at the back, which he doubted.

The cabin had been cleaned recently, he realized. Bartell had been gone a month or more, yet when he ran his finger along the top of the fireplace mantel there was not a trace of dust. And the stone flagging in front of the grate had been recently swept as well. There was no sign of ash or debris from a fire.

“Obviously we have a friendly spirit living nearby,” he said to himself. Then, remembering the animals waiting patiently outside, he moved to the door again. He glanced at the sun's position and estimated there was still over an hour of daylight left. Time to unpack before he made his presence known at the castle.

The dog was awake when he looked at her, her varicolored eyes showing keen interest in the work around her. That was a good thing, he realized. It was an indication of a strong will to live that would stand her in good stead in her current weakened condition. He gently lifted her from her nest on the packhorse and carried her inside the house. She lay relatively contentedly on the flagstones close to the fire, soaking up the warmth into her black coat. Returning to the packhorse, Will dug out an old horse blanket and took it back in to arrange a softer bed for the dog. When he laid it out for her, she rose painfully and limped the few steps to lie on it, settling herself with a grateful sigh. He fetched a bowl of water from the pump that had been built into the kitchen bench—no need to draw water from an outside well here, he realized—and left it beside her. The thick tail thumped softly on the floor once or twice in recognition of his care.

Satisfied, Will went back to the horses. He loosened the girth on Tug's saddle. There was no point in unsaddling yet as he still needed to make his official call at the castle. Then he began to unload the small pile of personal belongings that he had brought with him.

That done, he unsaddled the packhorse and led it to the stable, where he rubbed it down and put it in one of the two stalls. He noticed that the manger in the stall was filled with fresh hay and the water

bucket was filled too. He inspected the water. No sign of dust on the surface. No trace of green in the bucket. He hefted the bucket from the other stall and took it outside to Tug, letting his horse drink his fill. Tug shook his mane in gratitude.

Will began to organize his belongings in the cabin. There were hanging pegs beside the door for his bow and quiver. He set his bedroll on the bed in the larger of the two bedrooms and hung his spare clothes in the curtained-off closet there as well. His mandola case and a small satchel of books were on a sideboard in the living room.

Will glanced around. In truth, he'd brought little enough with him, but at least now the cabin had a trace of personality to it—as if it belonged to someone. His thoughts were interrupted by a warning neigh from Tug, outside. Simultaneously, the dog by the fire raised her head, turning painfully to look toward the door. Will spoke calmly to her. Tug's call had not been a danger alert, merely a notification that someone was approaching. A second or so later, Will heard a light footstep on the verandah and a woman's figure was framed in the open doorway. She hesitated and tapped on the door frame.

“Come in,” Will said, and she stepped into the room, smiling hesitantly, as if unsure of her welcome. As she moved away from the backlight, he could make her out more clearly. She was around forty years old, obviously one of the women from the village by her dress—a simple woolen garment without the sort of embellishment favored by the more wealthy inhabitants who would live in the castle, and overlaid by a clean white apron. She was tall and quite well built, with a rounded, motherly figure. The dark hair was close cropped and beginning to show streaks of gray. Her smile was warm and genuine. There was something about her that was familiar, thought Will, but he couldn't quite place what it was.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

She made a perfunctory curtsy. “My name is Edwina, sir. I brought you this.”

“This” was a small covered pot, and as she removed the cover Will was conscious of a delicious aroma filling the room—a stew of meat and vegetables. His mouth watered. Yet, mindful of Halt's warnings, he contrived to keep his face stern and uninterested.

“I see,” he said noncommittally. Edwina set the pot down on the table and reached into her apron to produce an envelope, which she held out to him.

“This stew will heat up nicely later for your supper, sir,” she said. “I suppose you'll be needing to see Baron Ergell first, though?”

“Possibly,” Will replied, not sure whether he should discuss his planned movements with the woman. He realized she was holding the envelope out to him and he took it from her. He was surprised to see that the seal was an oakleaf imprint, accompanied by characters from the coded numbering system that were the equivalent to 26—Bartell's number in the Corps, he remembered.

“Ranger Bartell left it for whoever would be sent to replace him,” she told him, gesturing for him to open the letter. “I kept the house and did cooking for him while he was here.”

Realization dawned on Will as he opened the letter. At the time of writing, Bartell had no idea who would be replacing him, so it was headed simply “Ranger.” Briefly, he scanned the message.

Edwina Temple is a thoroughly trustworthy and reliable woman who has worked for me over the past eight years. I can recommend her highly to whoever replaces me. She is discreet, sober and an excellent cook and housekeeper. Edwina and her husband, Clive, run the village inn in Seacliff. You would do me and yourself a favor by retaining her services when you take over. Bartell, Ranger 26.

Will looked up from the letter and smiled at the woman. The prospect of having the cooking and cleaning done for him was a welcome one, he realized. Then he hesitated. There was the question

payment, and he had no idea how much that might be.

“Well, Edwina,” he began, “Bartell speaks very highly of you.”

The woman made a curtsy again. “We got on well, sir. Ranger Bartell was a true gentleman. Served him for eight years, I did.”

“Yes ... well...”

The woman, seeing his obvious youth and guessing that this was his first posting, added carefully, “As to payment, sir, there's no need for you to concern yourself. Payment comes from the castle.”

Will frowned. He wasn't sure that he should allow the castle to pay for his upkeep. He had his own stipend from the Ranger Corps. Edwina sensed the reason for his uncertainty and continued quickly.

“It's all right, sir. Ranger Bartell told me that the castle has the responsibility for providing accommodation and provisions to the Ranger on duty. My services are covered by that arrangement.”

It was true, he realized. The castle in a fief did have the Ranger's services as one of its expenses and the costs were deducted from the tax assessment made by the crown each year. He smiled at her, finally reaching a decision.

“In that case, I'll be glad to avail myself of your services, Edwina,” he said. “I assume you're the one who kept the house clean and lit the fire earlier?”

She nodded. “We've been expecting you this past week, sir,” she said. “I've come by each day to keep things tidy—and the fire stops things from getting damp at this time of year.”

Will nodded his appreciation. “Well, I'm grateful. My name is Will, by the way.”

“Welcome to Seacliff, Ranger Will,” she said, smiling at him. “My daughter Delia saw you riding through the town. Very stern you looked, she said. Very much the Ranger.”

Will made the connection at that point. He'd felt that the woman was somehow familiar. Now he saw those eyes, green like her daughter's, and the smile, so wide and welcoming. “I think I saw her,” he said.

Edwina, the question of her continuing employment settled, was looking with interest at his few belongings. Her eye settled on the mandola on the sideboard.

“You play the lute, then, do you?” she asked. Will shook his head.

“A lute has ten strings,” he explained. “This is a mandola—sort of a large mandolin with eight strings, tuned in pairs.” He saw the blank look that overcame most people when he tried to explain the difference between a lute and the mandola and gave up. “I play a little,” he finished.

The dog, still asleep, chose that moment to let out a long sigh.

Edwina noticed her for the first time and moved over for a closer look. “And you've a dog, I see, well.”

“She's hurt,” Will told her. “I found her on the road.”

Edwina stooped and laid a gentle hand on the dog's head. The dog's eyes opened and looked at her. The tail stirred slightly.

“Good dogs, these border shepherds,” she said, and Will nodded.

“Some say they're the most intelligent of dogs,” he said.

“You'll need a good name for a fine dog like her,” the woman said, and Will frowned thoughtfully.

“The ferry master told me she might have belonged to a man named Buttle. Do you know him?”

The woman's face darkened instantly at the name. “I know of him,” she said. “Most folks know him around here—and most would rather not. He's a bad man to have around is John Buttle. Were this his dog I'd be in no hurry to hand her back.”

Will smiled at her. “I'm not,” he said. “But I'm beginning to think I should make this man an acquaintance.”

Before she could help herself, Edwina replied, “You'd be best to stay away from that one, sir. Then she covered her mouth in consternation. It was the lad's youth that had led her to say

awakening her maternal instincts. But she realized she was talking to a Ranger and they were a breed who needed no advice from housekeepers on the subject of who to stay away from. With understanding the reasoning, smiled at her.

“I’ll be careful,” he told her. “But it seems that it’s time someone spoke seriously to this person. Now,” he said, closing the subject of Buttle, “there are other people I should be talking to first—Baron Ergell chief among them.”

He ushered Edwina out, glancing once at the dog to make sure she would be all right in his absence. After taking his bow and quiver from their pegs, he closed the door softly. Edwina watched him as he tightened the saddle girth before remounting Tug. More used to being around Rangers than most people, she liked what she saw in this one. Then, as he swung the gray and green cloak around his shoulders and pulled the cowl over his head, she saw him change from a cheerful, outgoing young man into a grim and anonymous figure. She noted the massive longbow held easily in his left hand. As he swung into the saddle, saw the feathered ends of his arrows protruding from the quiver. A Ranger carries the lives of two dozen men with him, the old saying went. Edwina thought then that Job Buttle might need to watch his step around this one.

Ranger's Apprentice 5 - The Sorcerer of the North

4

Baron Ergell's chamberlain ushered Will into the Baron's study with a gesture that was halfway between a bow and a flourish. "The new Ranger, my lord," he announced, as if he had personally produced him for the Baron's pleasure, "Will Treaty."

Ergell rose from behind the massive desk that was the dominant piece of furniture in the room. He was an exceptionally tall and thin man and for a moment, seeing the long, pale hair and the black clothes, Will had the shocking sensation that he was looking at a reincarnation of the evil Lord Morgarath, who had threatened the peace of the kingdom during Will's youth. Then he realized that the hair was gray, not dead white as Morgarath's had been, and Ergell, although tall, stood nowhere near Morgarath's height. The moment passed and Will realized he was staring at the Baron, who stood waiting with his hand outstretched to greet him. Hastily, Will moved forward.

"Good afternoon, my lord," he said. Ergell pumped his hand eagerly. He was aged around sixty but still moved easily. Will handed him the parchment containing his official orders of appointment. Ergell's rights, the guard at the drawbridge should have taken it and had it delivered to Ergell for inspection before allowing Will access to the keep. But the sergeant in charge had simply looked at the Ranger's cloak and longbow and waved him inside. Slack, Will thought. Decidedly slack.

"Welcome to Seacliff, Ranger Treaty," the Baron said. "It's a privilege to have one so distinguished in our service."

Will frowned slightly. Rangers didn't serve the Barons they were attached to and Ergell should know that. Perhaps, he thought, the Baron was trying to assume authority by the simple expedient of implying that it existed.

"We all serve the King, sir," he replied evenly, and the slight shadow that flickered across Ergell's face told him his suspicion was correct. Ergell, seeing a Ranger so young, may well have been trying to put him on, as Halt would have put it.

"Of course, of course," the Baron replied quickly, then indicated the heavysset man standing to one side of his desk.

"Ranger Treaty, this is Seacliff's Battlemaster, Sir Norris of Rook."

Will put Norris's age at about forty, which was pretty much the average for Battlemasters. Much younger and a man didn't have the necessary experience to lead a fief's troop of knights and men-at-arms into battle. Too many years older and he was beginning to lose the physical strength necessary for the task.

"Sir Norris," he said briefly in greeting. The knight's handshake was firm, which hardly came as a surprise. Men who had spent the greater part of their lives wielding sword or battleaxe usually ended up with powerful muscles in the hand and arms. He sensed the Battlemaster studying him as they shook hands, saw the quick scrutiny that took in his youth and slight build.

There was something else, Will fancied—a hint of satisfaction at what the knight saw. Perhaps after years of dealing with the knowledgeable and experienced Bartell, Norris could foresee a slightly easier time with this new, freshly commissioned Ranger. Will felt a slight pang of disappointment at the thought. Halt and Crowley, the Corps Commandant, had warned him that some fiefs saw the

relationship with Rangers as antagonistic.

Too many of them see it as an “us and them” situation, Crowley had said when he briefed Will for the posting. After all, it is part of our task to keep tabs on them, to assess their battle readiness and their level of skill and training. Some Barons and Battlemasters don't like that. They like to believe they're running their own race and they don't care to have Rangers watching over their shoulders.

That had never been the way at Castle Redmont, Will knew. But then Halt and Arald had an excellent relationship and a deep level of mutual respect. He filed the thought away as he made polite small talk in reply to Norris's and Ergell's questions as to his trip.

Ergell, he realized, was inviting him to dine with them in the castle. Will smiled politely as he offered his apologies. “Perhaps later in the week, my lord. It's not fair for me to disrupt your household. After all, you had no way of knowing that I would arrive today and I'm sure you have already finalized plans for the evening.”

“Of course, of course. Later in the week, when you're settled in,” the Baron agreed. He was a likeable enough person, Will felt, in spite of his attempt to subtly undercut Will's authority. His smile was warm and welcoming. “Perhaps we can send something from our kitchens for you later on?”

“No need for that, my lord. The woman Edwina has already left me a very creditable beef stew. From the aroma of it, I'll be more than satisfied for the evening.”

Ergell smiled in reply. “She's a fine cook, that's the truth,” he said. “I've tried to tempt her to work for us here in the castle but to no avail, I'm afraid.”

Norris took a seat on one of the long benches that flanked the desk. “You've moved into Bartell's cottage then?”

Will nodded. “Yes, Battlemaster. It seems comfortable enough.”

Ergell gave a short bark of laughter. “With Edwina's cooking laid on, I should think so,” he agreed. But Norris was shaking his head.

“Far more efficient for you to move in here at the castle,” he said. “The Baron can let you have your own suite of rooms—a lot more comfortable than a rickety cabin in the woods. And you'd be closer at hand if we needed you.”

Will smiled, recognizing the ploy behind the innocent suggestion. By moving into the castle, he would be taking the first step toward a subtle shift in control. It mightn't happen immediately, but relinquishing his independence would be the thin end of the wedge. Also, the statement that he would be closer to hand if they needed him held an unspoken implication that he was at the castle's beck and call. He was aware that Ergell was watching him closely, waiting for his response.

“The cabin is fine, thank you, Battlemaster,” he said. “And it is traditional for Rangers to have their quarters apart from the castle.”

“Well, yes, traditional,” said Norris dismissively. “Sometimes I think we give too much importance to things that are 'traditional.' ”

Ergell laughed again, breaking the slightly awkward silence that followed Norris's words. “Come now, Norris, we all know how the Rangers value tradition. Just remember,” he added to Will, “the offer stands. If that cabin grows too cold and drafty in the dead of winter, you'll always have a suite of rooms available here in the keep.”

His quick glance told the Battlemaster that the subject was not to be pursued further. To his credit, Norris shrugged and complied. Will couldn't really blame them for trying to influence him. He could imagine how galling it might be to have someone quietly standing by, day in, day out, watching over your shoulder as you went about your work, submitting reports to the King on your abilities and activities. Particularly when that someone was as inexperienced as he was. At least, it seemed, he had managed to refuse their advances without causing offense.

“Well then, Ranger Treaty ...” Ergell began, and Will held up a hand.

“Please, my lord,” he said, “I'd be happy if you would simply call me Will.”

~~It was a gracious gesture, particularly as in saying it, Will made it clear that he would continue to use the Baron's title as his method of address. Ergell smiled, with more warmth than Will had seen so far. The gesture had not gone unnoticed.~~

“Will it is then. As I was about to say, perhaps we could plan for an official welcome dinner two nights from tonight? It will give my Kitchenmaster time to plan something appropriate.”

“And we all know how difficult Kitchenmasters can make life if we don't give them that time,” said Norris, smiling ruefully. Will grinned in return. It seemed Kitchenmasters were the same the world over, he thought. The atmosphere in the room lightened considerably.

“If there's nothing else then, my lord, I'll take my leave,” Will said. Ergell nodded, and Norris rose from the bench again.

“Of course, Will,” said the Baron. “If there's anything you need at the cabin, let Gordon know. Gordon was the chamberlain who had shown Will into the office.”

Will hesitated, then said quietly, “You have my commission, sir” He indicated the parchment rolled on the desktop. Ergell nodded several times.

“Yes, yes. Rest assured I'll look through it shortly.” He smiled. “Although I'm sure you're not an impostor.” Strictly speaking, Ergell should have broken the seal and read the commission when Will first handed it to him. Things seemed a little bit easygoing in Seacliff Fief, he thought. But perhaps he was just being a stickler for detail.

“Very well, my lord.” He glanced at Norris. “Battlemaster,” he said, and the knight shook hands with him once more.

“Good to have you with us, Ranger,” he said.

“Will,” Will reminded him, and the Battlemaster nodded.

“Good to have you with us, Will,” he corrected himself. Will gave a slight stiff bow to the Baron and turned and left the room.

Back in the cabin, he found the dog lying where he had left her. She was awake now and her tail thumped the floor two or three times as he entered. There was another bowl on the table and he saw that it contained a meat broth. Underneath the bowl was a small piece of parchment bearing a crude drawing of a dog. Edwina, he thought. The broth was still warm so he placed the bowl on the floor for the dog. She stood carefully and limped a few paces to reach it. Her tongue began a steady lap-lap-lap as she ate. He fondled her ears, checking the wound in her side. The stitches were still holding.

“Lucky she left the drawing, girl,” he said. “Or I might have eaten your dinner.”

The dog continued to lap at the savory broth. The smell was delicious, he realized, and his empty stomach groaned. Edwina had also left a small loaf of bread with his stew. He carved himself a slice and chewed it eagerly as he waited for the stew to heat on his stove.

Ranger's Apprentice 5 - The Sorcerer of the North

5

The following days seemed to go by in a blur as Will became familiar with his new surroundings. The welcome dinner that Ergell held for him in the castle dining room was a pleasant enough occasion. As it was an official function, Craftmasters such as the Armorer, Horsemaster and Scribemaster were all in attendance, as well as the knights attached to the castle and their ladies. Their faces and names were a blur, but Will knew that over the coming weeks he would begin to remember them, and assign individual traits and characters to each person. For their part, they all seemed curious to meet the new Ranger, and Will was sufficiently pragmatic to realize that a certain reputation preceded him.

As the former apprentice of Halt, one of the greatest and most famous members of the Ranger Corps, Will would always have enjoyed a degree of celebrity. But he was also the one who had discovered and thwarted the secret plans of Morgarath, the evil Lord of Rain and Night, when he had attacked the kingdom little more than five years ago. Then he had served as protector to the Princess Cassandra during her captivity by the Skandian sea wolves. That particular interlude had been rounded off by a major battle with the Temujai, the fierce cavalry from the Eastern Steppes, and finally, the signing of a non-aggression treaty with the Skandians—a treaty which still held to this day.

In fact, it was his part in securing the Hallasholm Treaty that had given Will the name by which he was known these days—Will Treaty. Raised as an orphan at Castle Redmont, he had known no family name in his childhood.

So perhaps it was natural for people to be surprised at his apparent youth and even, in some cases, to assume that they had mistaken him for some other Ranger—someone who must be older and far bigger in stature. In the years he had spent with Halt, Will had often witnessed the disbelief evident on people's faces when they first met the small, gray-bearded man whose untidy hair looked as if it had been cut with his own saxe knife. People expected their heroes to live up to a romantic ideal. The fact that most Rangers were on the small side, albeit wiry, agile and fast moving, seemed to go against general belief.

So Will faced an air of puzzlement and even mild disappointment as he met his new neighbors—particularly among the ladies of the court. Seacliff was a backwater, as he had surmised, and the arrival of a celebrity—one who had been thanked personally by King Duncan for protecting his daughter—was cause for great anticipation. If the reality was not quite up to people's expectations, that was simply too bad, he thought.

For his part, the more he saw of Seacliff, the more his own sense of disappointment grew. It was a pleasant enough fief, set in a beautiful part of the kingdom. But the years of peace and safety had brought with them a sense of carelessness and neglect in the castle's garrison. And the blame for that neglect could only be sheeted home to the Baron and his Battlemaster. It created an awkward situation for Will, as he felt a genuine liking and respect for both men. But it was undeniable that the readiness and training among the knights and men-at-arms maintained by Ergell was way below the acceptable level.

For days he had considered how he might bring the matter to the Baron's attention without causing

offense. He had hinted as broadly as he could that things seemed a little too ... comfortable. But Erge and Norris had laughed off the comments, seeming to take them as compliments on the relaxed and enjoyable way of life in Seacliff.

Every baron in the kingdom was required to maintain a force of mounted knights and men-at-arms to ensure the King's peace in the fief. And, in the event of war, each castle would send its men to join the King's army, under the leadership of King Duncan and his inner council. A large fief such as Redmont would maintain a force totaling several hundred mounted warriors and infantry. Seacliff, one of the smaller fiefs, was required to field half a dozen knights, ten Battleschool warrior apprentices, and an infantry force of twenty-five men-at-arms. An irregular force of fifteen archers was also available if needed, its members drawn from among the villagers and farmers living nearby.

In several weeks at Seacliff, Will was yet to see any formal drilling of the knights and the men-at-arms. There were some weapons drills, held on what seemed to be a haphazard basis, but no real program of training and practice—the sort of constant work that warriors needed to maintain the edge. In addition, the Battleschool apprentices, under the overall guidance of Sir Norris and his two senior knights, were sloppy in their drill and even to Will's young eyes their skill levels seemed to be behind their contemporaries in other Battleschools.

The one area in which Seacliff excelled was in the kitchen. Kitchenmaster Rollo was a true master indeed and his skill rivaled that of Master Chubb at Redmont, long recognized as one of the kingdom's finest. Perhaps that was part of the problem, Will thought. Life at Seacliff was too comfortable, too settled.

Altogether too uneventful.

At the same time, he had traveled to the mainland several times and visited some of the other villages and hamlets within a day's ride of the castle. On several of these occasions, he discarded the symbols of his authority as a Ranger—the gray and green mottled cloak, the longbow and the distinctive double knife scabbard—and took the guise of a traveling peasant. He found that people spoke more freely in front of an anonymous traveler than they would if one of the mysterious Ranger Corps was in their midst. Will sensed that all was not totally well in Seacliff Fief. Life at the castle might be comfortable enough. Life among the outlying hamlets and farms was somewhat less so.

There were rumors of highwaymen and bandits preying on lone travelers. Of strangers being waylaid and even, on some occasions, disappearing altogether. They were rumors only, and Will knew that country folk, with their relatively uneventful day-to-day existence, tended to exaggerate anything out of the ordinary to the point where it assumed massive proportions. But he heard the rumors sufficiently often to sense that they had at least a basis in truth. Several times, as well, he heard the name *Buttle* spoken—most times with a sense of uncertainty that bordered on fear.

On the positive side, the dog had grown in strength with each day and was virtually recovered from the wound in her side. Now that she could move about more freely, he could see that she was young, probably only half grown. But the reputation that border shepherds held for loyalty and intelligence was no exaggeration. The dog became a constant companion for him and Tug, able to run all day beside the small horse in an effortless lope.

Not so effortless were his attempts to think of a suitable name for the dog. Edwina's comment "a fine dog like that deserves a good name" stuck in his mind. He wanted something special for her, but so far, all his ideas seemed rather pedestrian. For the moment, he referred to her as "the dog" or "girl."

At first Tug seemed merely amused by the presence of the black-and-white newcomer, but as the weeks went on, Tug seemed to welcome her company, as well as the added watchfulness she brought to their night camps as Will explored his new domain. Tug was accustomed to acting as sentinel for Will—all Ranger horses were trained that way. The dog assumed a complementary role in the task and her sense of smell was even keener than Tug's. The two animals, linked by their loyalty to their young

master, rapidly developed a mutual liking and a working understanding of each other's skills.

It was three weeks after Will arrived at Seacliff that events contrived to bring matters to a head—at least as far as the unsatisfactory training of the Baron's forces was concerned. Will was leaning on his longbow, watching the Battleschool apprentices practicing sword drills one afternoon. Wrapped in his cloak and cowl, he stood in the shadows of a small grove of trees beside the drill ground, virtually invisible so long as he didn't move. The dog, who had already grown to understand the need for stillness and concealment, lay in the long grass beside him, her nose on her front paws. Her only movements were an occasional twitch of the ears or a flick of the eyes to check that Will didn't have some visual signal for her.

He frowned as he watched the apprentices and their swordmaster. Their moves were technically correct. But there was a lack of urgency, a lack of interest to their work that concerned him. The drill was a drill and nothing more. They didn't seem to see beyond it to the reality that it represented. His old friend Horace, now a knight at the King's court at Araluen, had made all these moves during countless drill sessions as an apprentice. But he had done them with passion, and with the understanding that the ability to produce these moves smoothly, without thought or conscious volition could be the difference between life and death in battle. Horace's instinctive, seamless precision had saved Will's life on at least one occasion during the battle at Hallasholm.

Will frowned. In just over a week he would have to submit his first monthly report on the state of affairs at Seacliff to Ranger headquarters. He could see that it was going to have to be a negative one.

He heard the voice before the man came into view. Then, a few seconds later, he saw a burly figure break from the trees below the castle, running and shouting, waving his hand to attract attention. The words were indistinguishable as yet, but the note of alarm was obvious in the voice and in the man's body language.

The dog sensed it too. A low growl sounded in her throat and she rose to a half crouch, instantly alert.

“Still,” Will warned her, and she froze obediently. The clash of practice weapons on the drill field died away as more people became aware of the shouting, running figure.

And now Will could hear the words he was calling out.

“Sea wolves! Sea wolves!”

It was a word that had chilled the blood of Araluens for centuries past. Sea wolves were the Skandian raiders, who sailed from their snow-covered, pine-forested northern land to raid the pleasant, peaceful coastal centers of Araluen, Gallica and half a dozen other countries. Fearful in their huge horned helmets and wreaking terrible destruction with their massive battleaxes, the Skandians and their wolfships were the stuff of nightmares.

Yet not here. Not for the past four years, since Erak Starfollower, newly elected as Oberjarl of the Skandians, had put his name to a treaty with Araluen. The strict letter of the treaty had forbidden an organized, massed attack on the Kingdom of Araluen by the Skandians. Yet, effectively, it had put an end to individual raiding as well. While Erak couldn't actually forbid his captains to raid, it was known that he definitely disapproved of it, feeling a debt of honor to the small group of Araluens who had saved his country from the Temujai invasion. And when Erak didn't approve of something, that was usually enough to ensure that it didn't happen.

The shouting man was close to the practice field now, staggering and breathless. By his dress he was a farmer.

“Skandians,” he panted. “Sea . . . wolves . . . at Bitterroot Creek... Skandians ...”

Exhausted, he sagged against the drill field fence, his chest and shoulders heaving with exertion. Sir Norris was crossing the field quickly to intercept him.

“What's that?” he asked. “Skandians? Here?”

There was a note of concerned disbelief in his tone. For all the tack of urgency in the training his men, Will knew Norris was a Professional. He may have grown careless and lax in the years of peace that Seacliff had enjoyed, but now, faced with a real threat, he was experienced enough to realize that he was in trouble. His men were not up to the threat posed by a real enemy.

The farmer was pointing back the way he had come, nodding his head to confirm the truth of what he had said.

“Skandians,” he repeated. “I saw them where Bitterroot Creek flows into the sea. Hundreds of them!” he added, and this time there was a buzz of concern from the apprentices and knights who had gathered around him.

“Silence!” Norris snapped. Will, approaching unseen, spoke directly to the farmer.

“How many wolfships? Did you see them?”

The farmer turned to face him, a wary look crossing his face as he realized he was talking to a Ranger.

“One,” he said. “Huge it was, with a huge wolf's head on the prow! I saw it plain as day.”

Again there was a mutter of fear and speculation from those around him. Norris turned angrily and the sound died away. Will met the Battlemaster's eye.

“One ship,” he said. “That'll be forty men at most.”

Norris nodded agreement. “Closer to thirty if they leave a guard on board,” he said.

Not that this made the situation too much better. Thirty Skandians on the loose on Seacliff Island would be a virtually unstoppable force. The ill-trained, unfit men-at-arms and out-of-practice knights who constituted the defense force at Norris's disposal would offer little opposition to the wild pirates, and Norris knew it. The Battlemaster cursed his own laziness, realizing that he was to blame for the situation. It was his responsibility to do something—yet he had another responsibility as well, and that was for the lives of the men he led. Taking them into battle against a hardened, battle-ready band of Skandians would be tantamount to taking them to their deaths.

Yet it was his duty. Will sensed the knight's twin predicaments—practical and moral.

“You're badly outnumbered,” he said. The nominal force of men-at-arms was twenty-five. But on short notice, Norris would be lucky to raise twenty—along with three or four of his knights at best. As for the apprentices, Will shuddered at the thought of opposing a force of determined Skandian axmen with the sloppy group he had been watching.

Norris hesitated. He lived a privileged life, as did all noblemen. But the privilege was earned and paid for at times like these. Now, when he was needed, he was unready, unable to protect the people who depended on him.

“There's no point in leading your men to their deaths,” Will said quietly, so that only the Battlemaster heard him. Norris's hand clenched and unclenched on the hilt of the sword at his side.

“We must do something ...” he said uncertainly.

Will interrupted him calmly. “And we shall,” he told the older man. “Get the villagers inside the walls, with as much as they can carry. Drive the animals out into the fields. Scatter them so that the Skandians have to hunt them down if they want them. Get your men armed and ready. And ask Master Rollo if he could rustle up something quick in the way of a banquet.”

Norris wasn't sure if he was hearing correctly. “A banquet?” he asked, totally confused.

Will nodded. “A banquet. Nothing too special. I'm sure he can put something together for us. In the meantime, I'll go and have a word with these Skandians.”

The Battlemaster's eyes widened as he looked at the calm young face before him.

“Have a word with them?” he repeated, a little louder than he had intended. “How do you think you can stop them from attacking us by talking to them?”

Will shrugged. “I thought I'd ask them not to,” he said. “And then, I'll invite them to dinner.”

Ranger's Apprentice 5 - The Sorcerer of the North

6

Bitterroot Creek ran into the ocean on the eastern coast of the island. It was a sheltered spot, with plenty of overhanging trees growing right down to the water's edge to provide concealment—even for a craft as large as a wolfship. The water was deep right up to the bank and it made an ideal landing place for raiders. Will was cantering Tug down the winding path through the forest toward the creek when he heard the sound of galloping hooves behind him.

He turned in his saddle and checked the horse with a touch of his heel as he recognized Sir Norris galloping after him on his battlehorse. The Battlemaster was fully armed and armored now and the steel-shod hooves of his massive gray left a cloud of dust hanging behind them. The dog, who had been loping silently to one side of the track, keeping pace with Tug, dropped on her stomach as the Ranger horse came to a halt, and watched the approaching horse and rider with her head cocked curiously to one side.

Norris reined in beside Will. The battlehorse was at least four bands taller than Tug and horse and rider towered above them. Will inclined his head in greeting.

“Sir Norris,” he said. “What brings you here?”

Norris hesitated. Will had a good idea what he was about to say. After a few seconds' hesitation, Norris answered him.

“I can't let you do this on your own, Ranger,” he said, the note of bitter self-reproach evident in his voice. “It's my fault that we're unprepared. I've let things go soft and I know it. Now I can't leave it to you to pull my chestnuts out of the fire for me. I'll stand with you.”

Will nodded thoughtfully. It had taken courage to say that, and just as much courage to make the decision to accompany him to face the Skandians. He felt a new surge of respect for the Battlemaster. Perhaps if this turned out all right, it might prove to be a blessing he thought. The arrival of a raiding wolfship had certainly rammed home the lesson that Seacliff Fief was underprepared. And it did so far better than any criticism that Will might have voiced.

“I appreciate your offer,” he told the knight. “But it might be better if I did this alone.”

He saw the color rising in the other man's face and he quickly held up a hand to calm his anger. “It's not that I doubt your courage or your ability,” he added. “Quite the opposite, in fact. But I think you have a better chance of settling this on my own.”

“You surely can't plan to fight them alone?” Norris asked.

Will shook his head, a little smile touching his lips. “I don't plan to fight them at all,” he said. “But your presence, in full armor and mounted on that huge horse of yours, mightn't give me a choice. Think about it,” he went on before Norris could interrupt. “At the first sight of you, obviously ready for battle, the Skandians are likely to attack without further thought.”

Norris chewed his bottom lip. What Will was saying made sense. Then the young Ranger continued.

“On the other hand, if they see me alone, they might be willing to talk. We Rangers tend to have a unsettling effect on people. They're never quite sure what we might be up to,” he added, the smile widening. Norris had to admit that was true. Yet he was reluctant to leave the young man to face odds

of thirty to one, armed only with a bow. Will saw the hesitation and continued, his voice crisper now as he realized that time was running short.

“Besides, if things go wrong, I can always outrun them on Tug here—and pick a few of them off as I go. Please, Sir Norris, it's best my way.” He glanced down the track, looking for the first sign of the Skandians, knowing they would be coming this way as there was no other path up from the beach. Abruptly, Norris made his decision. On his light, agile horse, the Ranger could take to the shelter of the forest if need be, or simply outrun the Skandians back to the castle. The sea wolves rarely used bows or other missiles.

“Very well,” he said, wheeling his mount. Will nodded his gratitude as the knight set spurs to his horse and began to canter clumsily back the way he had come.

As the hoofbeats faded, Will took stock of the ground around him. At this point, the path ran relatively straight for fifty meters in either direction, the trees were set back and the ground was level, leaving an open space. This would do as well as any other spot to meet the Skandians, he thought. He could keep them at a distance if he needed to and had room to maneuver.

He backed the horse up a dozen paces or so, then stopped in the middle of the path. The dog, belatedly low to the grass, loped back beside him and dropped flat. Will glanced up at the sun. It was a little behind him, so it would be in the Skandians' eyes. That was all to the good, he thought. He shrugged the deep cowl of the cloak up over his head and settled the longbow comfortably across the saddle. His position was ready without being overtly threatening.

Tug's ears twitched and a fraction of a second later the dog let out a low warning growl. Will could see movement in the shadows under the trees at the bend in the path.

“All right,” he told his two animals. Settle down. He eased his seat in the saddle and slouched comfortably, waiting for the Skandians.

Gundar Hardstriker, skipper of the Wolfcloud, stepped out into the afternoon sunlight from the shade under the trees. At his back, twenty-seven Skandian warriors marched in double file. His eyes, a little dazzled after the dim light of the forest, Gundar stopped in surprise at the sight of a solitary figure on the road ahead of them.

Not a knight or a warrior of any kind, he saw. It was a slightly built figure on a small shaggy horse. There was a longbow held almost casually across his thighs, but no sign of other weapons. No ax, no sword, no mace or club. His men straggled to a halt behind him, fanning out to either side of the path as they moved to see what was causing the delay.

“A Ranger,” said Ulf Oakbender, who pulled the bow oar on board Wolfcloud, and Gundar realized he was right. The sun's dazzle, almost directly behind the waiting figure, had stopped him from making out the mottled cloak that was the sign of a Ranger. Now, as his eyes adjusted, he could see the strange, irregular patterns that seemed to shimmer and move with a life of their own.

“Good pastnoon,” called a clear voice. “What can we do for you?”

It was the surprisingly young voice of the speaker, as well as the fact that he used the traditional Skandian greeting, that caused Gundar to hesitate. Behind him, he heard his men muttering, as puzzled as he was at this sudden appearance. They had expected either resistance or flight from the people they encountered, not a polite inquiry.

Realizing that he had somehow lost the initiative, Gundar called angrily, “Step aside! Step aside! Run or fight. We don't care which way. You choose.”

He started forward and the figure straightened slightly in the saddle. “No further.” The voice had a ring of authority now and no sign of any indecision. Gundar hesitated again. Behind him, he heard Ulf's low voice.

“Be careful, Gundar. These Rangers can shoot like the devil himself.”

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