

RANGER'S APPRENTICE



THE
SIEGE ⊕ OF
MACINDAW
JOHN FLANAGAN

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Sneak Preview

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Have You Read Them All?

Also by John Flanagan

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HOSTAGE!

A traitorous knight has captured Castle Macindaw and is conspiring to overthrow the kingdom.

The fate of Araluen rests in the hands of two young adventurers: the Ranger Will and his warrior friend, Horace. Yet for Will, the stakes are even higher: someone he loves is being held hostage inside the castle.

Now is the time to become the hero he was trained to be . .
.

RANGER'S Apprentice

BOOK 6

THE SIEGE OF MACINDAW

JOHN FLANAGAN

RHCP DIGITAL

*For my sister, Joan:
Publicist, columnist, author:
Pathfinder for the rest of us.*

HAVE YOU GOT WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A RANGER?



The Rangers are an elite Special Forces Corps in the medieval Kingdom of Araluen. They are the eyes and ears of the Kingdom, the intelligence gatherers, the scouts and the troubleshooters.

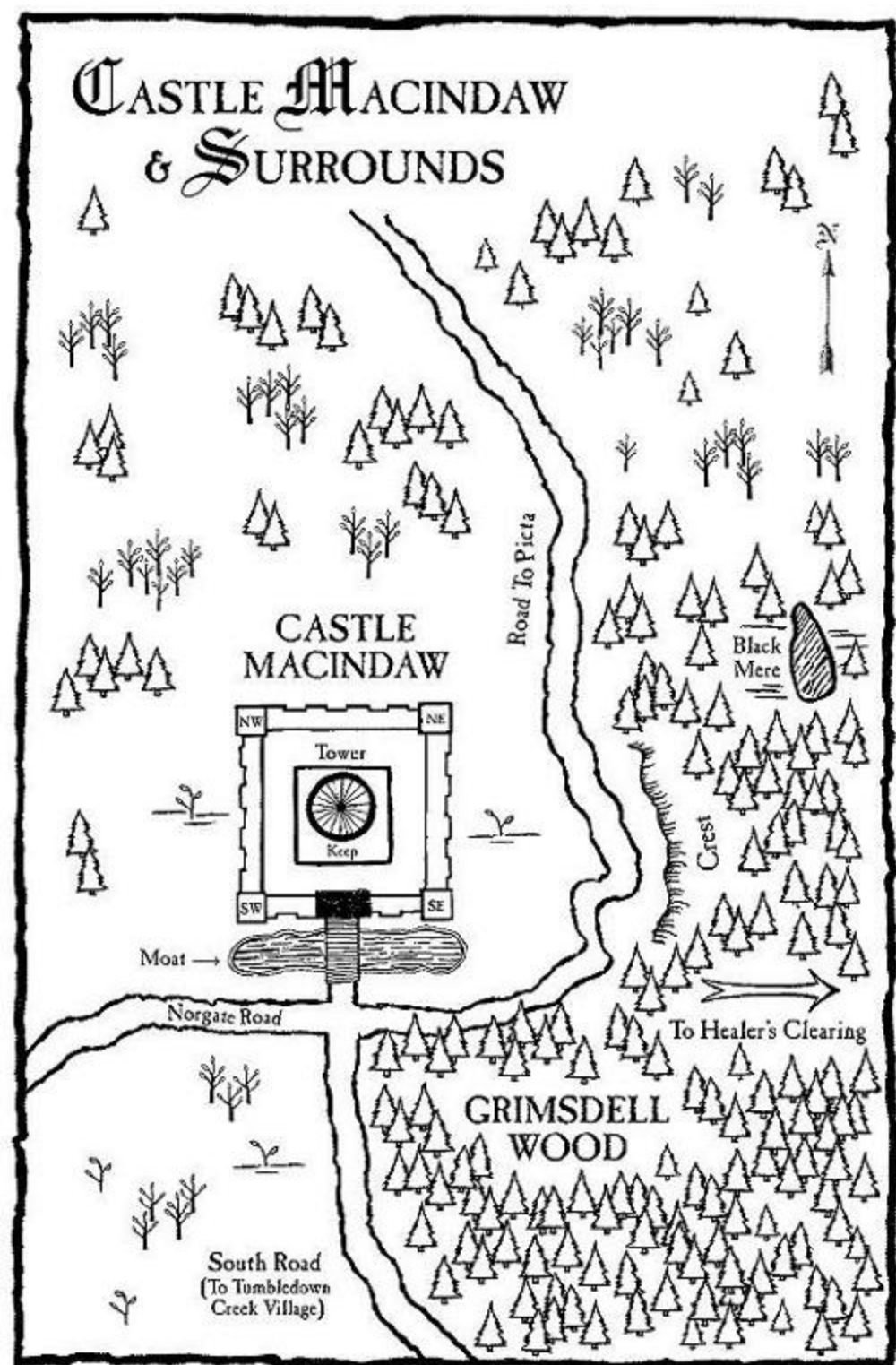
Rangers are expert archers and carry two knives – one for throwing, and one for hunting. They are also highly skilled at tracking, concealment and unseen movement. Their ability to become virtually invisible has led common folk to view them with fear, thinking the Rangers must use black magic.

Occasionally, a young man who is judged to have the qualities of honesty, courage, agility and intelligence will be invited to undertake a five-year apprenticeship – to develop his natural abilities and instruct him in the almost supernatural skills of a Ranger.

If he passes his first year, he is given a bronze medallion in the shape of an oakleaf.

If he graduates, the bronze will be exchanged for the silver oakleaf of an Oakleaf Bearer – a Ranger of the Kingdom of Araluen.

CASTLE MACINDAW & SURROUNDS





GUNDAR HARDSTRIKER, CAPTAIN and helmsman of the Skandian ship *Wolfcloud*, chewed disconsolately on a stringy piece of tough smoked beef.

His crew were huddled under rough shelters among the trees, talking quietly, eating and trying to stay warm around the small smoky fires that were all they could manage in this weather. This close to the coast, the snow usually turned to cold sleet in the middle of the day, refreezing again as the afternoon wore on. He knew the crew were looking to him for a way out of this. And he knew that soon he would have to tell them he had no answers for them. They were stranded in Araluen, with no hope of escape.

Fifty metres away, *Wolfcloud* lay beached on the river bank, canted to one side. Even from this distance, his seaman's eye could make out the slight twist a third of the way along her hull, and the sight of it came close to breaking his heart. To a Skandian, his ship was almost a living thing, an extension of himself, an expression of his own being.

Now his ship was ruined, her keel irreparably broken, her hull twisted. She was good for nothing but turning into lumber and firewood as the winter weather wrapped its cold hands further around them. So far he had been able to avoid stripping the ship, but he knew he couldn't wait much

longer. They would need the wood to build more substantial huts and to burn as firewood. But as long as she still looked like a ship, even with that damnable twist to her hull, he could retain some sense of his pride at being a skirl, as Skandians termed a ship's captain.

The voyage had been a disaster from start to finish, he reflected gloomily. They had set out to raid Gallic and Iberian coastal villages, staying well away from Araluen as they did so. Raids on the Araluen coast were few and far between these days, since the Skandian Oberjarl had signed a treaty with the Araluan King. They weren't actually forbidden to raid. But they were discouraged by Oberjarl Erak and only a very stupid or foolhardy skirl would be keen to face Erak's style of discouragement.

But Gundar and his men had been the last of the raiding fleet to reach the Narrow Sea and they found the villages either empty - ransacked by earlier ships - or pre-warned and ready to take revenge on a single late raider. There had been hard fighting and he had lost several men - and was left with nothing to show for it. Finally, as a last resort, he had landed on an island off the south-east coast of Araluen, desperate for provisions to see him and his men through the winter on the long journey back north.

He smiled sadly as he thought of it. If there had been a bright spot in the trip, that had been it. Prepared to fight and lose more lives, desperate to feed themselves, the Skandian crew had been greeted by a young Ranger - the very one who had fought beside Erak in the battle against the Temujai some years back.

Surprisingly, the Ranger offered to feed them. He even invited them to a banquet that night in the castle, along with the local dignitaries and their wives. Gundar's smile broadened at the memory of that evening, recalling how his rough and tumble sailors had stayed on their best manners, humbly asking their table companions to pass the meat please or requesting just a little more ale in their drinking

mugs. These were men who were accustomed to cursing heartily, tearing legs off roast boar with their bare hands and occasionally swilling their ale straight from the keg. Their attempts at mingling with polite society would have been the basis of some great stories back in Skandia.

His smile faded. Back in Skandia. He had no idea now how they would get back to Skandia. Or even if they would ever return home. They had left Seacliff Island well fed and provisioned for the long trip. The Ranger had even provided them with the means for a small profit from the trip, in the form of a slave.

The man's name was Buttle. John Buttle. He was a criminal – a thief and a murderer – and his presence in Araluen was a source of potential trouble for the Ranger. As a favour, the young man had asked Gundar to take him as a slave to Skandia. The skirl naturally agreed. The man was strong and fit and he'd fetch a good price when they got home.

When they got home. But would they ever see Hallasholm again? They'd sailed slap into a massive storm just short of Point Sentinel and were driven south and west before it.

As they came closer to the Araluen coast, Gundar had ordered Buttle's chains struck off. They were heading for a lee shore, a situation all sailors dread, and there was a good chance that the ship would not survive. The man should have a chance, Gundar thought.

He could still feel the sickening crunch as *Wolfcloud* had smashed down on a hidden rock. At the time, he felt it as if his own spine were breaking, and he could swear he had heard the ship cry out in agony. He knew instantly, from her sluggish response to the rudder and the way she sagged in the peaks and troughs of the waves, that her backbone was fractured. With each successive wave, the wound deepened and it was only a matter of time before she split in two and went under. But *Wolfcloud* was a tough ship and she wasn't ready to lie down and die – not just yet.

Then, as if it were some divine reward for the stricken ship's courage and the efforts of her storm-battered crew, Gundar had seen the gap in the rocky coast where a river mouth widened before them. He ran for it, the ship sagging badly downwind, and made it into the sheltered waters of the river. Exhausted, the men fell back on their rowing benches as the wind and wild waves died away.

That was when Buttle seized his chance. He grabbed a knife from one man's belt and slashed it across his throat. Another rower tried to stop him but he was off balance and Buttle struck him down as well. Then he was over the rail and swimming for the far bank. There was no way to go after him. Strangely, few Skandians could swim and the ship itself was on the point of foundering. Cursing, Gundar was forced to let him go, and concentrate on finding a point where they could beach the ship.

Around the next bend, they found a narrow strip of shingle that would suit their purpose and he ran *Wolfcloud* onto it at a shallow angle. That was when he felt the keel finally give way, as if the ship had kept her crew safe until that final moment, and then quietly died beneath their feet.

They staggered ashore and set up a camp among the trees. Gundar felt it would be best to retain a low profile in the area. After all, without a ship, they had no means of escape and he had no idea how the locals might react to their presence, nor how many armed men they might be able to muster. Skandians never shrank from a fight but it would be foolish to provoke one when they were stranded in this country.

They had food enough, thanks to the Ranger, and he needed time to think of some way out of this mess. Maybe, when the weather improved, they could build a small boat from *Wolfcloud's* timbers. He sighed. He just didn't know. He was a helmsman, not a shipwright. He looked around the little camp. On a hillock beyond the clearing where he sat, they had buried the two men Buttle had killed. They

couldn't even give them a proper funeral pyre, as was traditional among Skandians. Gundar blamed himself for their deaths. After all, he was the one who ordered the prisoner set free.

He shook his head and said softly to himself, 'Curse John Buttle to hell. I should have dropped him overboard. Chains and all.'

'You know, I rather think I agree,' said a voice from behind him.

Gundar leapt to his feet and spun round, his hand dropping to the sword at his belt.

'Thurak's horns!' he cried. 'Where the devil did you spring from?'

There was a strange figure, wrapped in an odd black and white mottled cloak, sitting on a log a few metres behind him. As Gundar said the word *devil*, his hand hesitated, sword half drawn, and he peered more closely at the apparition. This was an ancient forest, dark and forbidding. Maybe this was a spirit or a wraith that protected the area. The patterns on the cloak seemed to shimmer and change form as he watched and he blinked his eyes to stabilise them. A vague memory stirred. He had seen that happen before, he realised.

His men, hearing the commotion, had begun to gather around. But there was something about the cloaked, hooded figure that worried them too. Gundar noticed that they took care to stay well behind him, looking to him for a lead.

The figure stood and Gundar involuntarily took a half pace back. Then, angry with himself, he stepped forward a full pace. His voice was firm when he spoke.

'If you're a ghost,' he said, 'we mean you no disrespect. And if you're not a ghost, tell me who you are - or you soon will be one.'

The creature laughed gently. 'Well said, Gundar Hardstriker, well said indeed.'

Gundar felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. The tone was friendly enough but somehow this ... thing ... knew his name. That could only mean some kind of supernatural power was at work here.

The figure reached up and shoved back the cowl of his cloak.

'Oh, come on, Gundar, don't you recognise me?' he said cheerfully.

Memory stirred. This was no raddled, haggard ghost, certainly. It was a young face, with a shock of tousled brown hair above deep brown eyes and a wide grin. A familiar face. And in a rush, Gundar remembered where he had seen that strange, shifting pattern in a cloak before.

'Will Treaty!' he cried in surprise. 'Is that really you?'

'None other,' Will replied and stepped forward, holding out his hand in the universal gesture of peace and welcome. Gundar seized it and shook it hard - not the least because he was relieved to find that he wasn't facing some supernatural denizen of the forest. Behind him, he heard his crew exclaiming loudly at this new development. He guessed they were feeling the same sense of relief. Will looked around them and smiled.

'I see some familiar faces here,' he said. One or two of the Skandians called out greetings to him. He studied them and then frowned slightly.

'I don't see Ulf Oakbender?' he said to Gundar. Ulf had fought in the battle against the Eastern Riders and he had been the first to recognise Will at Seacliff Island. They had sat together at that famous banquet, talking about the battle. Will saw a moment of pain cross Gundar's face.

'He was murdered by that snake Buttle,' he said.

Will's smile faded. 'I'm sorry to hear that. He was a good man.'

There was a moment of silence between them as they remembered a fallen comrade. Then Gundar gestured to the camp site behind them.

‘Won’t you join us?’ he said. ‘We have stringy salt beef and some indifferent ale, courtesy of a very generous island to the south.’

Will grinned at the jibe and followed as Gundar led his way to the small encampment. As they passed through the members of the crew, a few reached out and shook Will’s hand.

The sight of a familiar face, and that face belonging to a Ranger, let them begin to hope that there might be a way out of their present situation after all.

Will sat on a log by one of the fires, underneath a shelter formed by the wolfship’s big square mainsail. He accepted a tankard of ale and drank appreciatively, toasting the men around him.

‘So, Will Treaty,’ said Gundar, ‘what brings you here?’

Will looked around the circle of bearded, craggy faces that surrounded him. He smiled at them.

‘I’m looking for fighting men,’ he said. ‘I plan to sack a castle and I hear you people are rather good at that.’



Two

THE BATTLEHORSE WAS a well-formed bay. Its hoofbeats were muffled by the thick carpet of snow on the ground as its rider guided it carefully along the narrow track beside a stream. There was no telling when that thick soft snow might conceal a patch of slippery ice, which could send them sliding helplessly down the steep bank into the water. The stream itself moved sluggishly, nearly choked with soft, slushy ice, fighting a losing battle against the cold that tried to freeze it over completely. The rider looked at the water and shivered a little. If he went into that, wearing a heavy chain mail shirt and burdened by his weapons, he would have little chance of survival. Even if he didn't drown, the searing cold would be sure to kill him.

It was obvious from his horse and his equipment that he was a warrior. He carried a three-metre ash lance, its butt couched in a socket on his right stirrup. A long sword hung at his left-hand side and a conical helmet was slung over the saddle bow. The cowl of his chain mail shirt was pushed back. He had discovered some days previously that in this snow-covered land, there was nothing more uncomfortable than freezing cold chain mail against the skin. Consequently, he now had a woollen scarf wrapped round his neck inside the armour and a fur cap pulled well down on his head. Interestingly, for it was not a normal part of a

knight's weaponry, there was a longbow in a leather case slung beside his horse's withers.

But perhaps the most significant part of his equipment was his shield. It was a simple round buckler, slung behind him. Placed that way, it would provide protection against arrows or other missiles fired from behind, yet he could shrug it round into position on his left arm in a matter of seconds. The shield was painted white and in its centre was a blue outline of a clenched fist, the universal symbol in Araluen of a free lance – a knight with no current master, looking for employment.

As the track veered away from the stream and widened out, the rider relaxed a little. He leaned forward and patted his horse gently on the side of the neck.

'Well done, Kicker,' Horace said quietly. The horse tossed its head in acknowledgement. He and the rider were old companions. They had depended on one another through several hard campaigns. It was that fact that now led the horse to prick its ears up in warning. Battlehorses were trained to regard any stranger as a potential enemy.

And now there were five strangers visible, riding slowly towards them.

'Company,' Horace said. On this lonely ride, he had fallen into the habit of talking to the horse. Naturally, the horse made no reply. Horace glanced around, looking to see if there were any favourable defensive position close by. He too was trained to regard strangers as potential enemies. But at this point, the treeline was well back from the road on either side, with only low gorse bushes growing between the road and forest. He shrugged. He would have preferred somewhere he could put a solid tree to his back. But there was nothing available and he had learned years ago not to waste time complaining about things that couldn't be changed.

He checked the horse with slight pressure from his knees, and shrugged the shield round onto his left arm. The

small movement was an indication that despite his youth, he was more than familiar with the tools of his trade.

For he was young. His face was open and guileless, strong-jawed, clean-shaven and handsome. The eyes were a brilliant blue. There was a thin scar, high on the right cheek – where a Tualaghi tribesman's belt dagger had opened it more than a year previously. The scar, being relatively new, was still livid. As years passed, it would whiten and become less prominent. His nose was also slightly crooked, the result of an accident when an overeager warrior apprentice had refused to accept that a training bout was over. The student had struck one more time with his wooden sword. He had several weeks of punishment details to think over his mistake.

Far from detracting from his looks, the crooked nose gave the young man a certain swashbuckling air. There were quite a few young ladies of the Kingdom who felt it enhanced his looks, rather than detracting from them.

Horace nudged Kicker once more and the horse moved so that he was turned forty-five degrees to the oncoming riders, leaving the warrior's shield presented to them – both for protection and identification. He kept the lance upright. To level it would be an unnecessarily provocative gesture, he knew.

He studied the five men approaching him. Four of them were obviously men at arms. They carried swords and shields but no lances, the sign of a knight. And they all wore surcoats emblazoned with the same symbol, an ornate gold key on a quartered blue and white field. That meant they were all employed by the same lord, and Horace recognised the livery as belonging to Macindaw.

The fifth man, who rode a metre in front of the others, was something of a puzzle. He carried a shield and wore a leather breastplate, studded with iron. He had greaves of the same material protecting his legs but apart from that he wore woollen clothing and leggings. He had no helmet

and there was no symbol on his shield to give any clue to his identity. A sword hung from his pommel – a heavy weapon, a little shorter and thicker than Horace's cavalry sword. But strangest of all was the fact that in place of a lance, he carried a heavy war spear, some two metres long.

He had long black hair and a beard and he looked to be in a perpetual state of ill temper, with heavy brows set in a permanent frown. Altogether, Horace thought, he was not a man to be trusted.

The riders were some ten metres away when Horace called out.

'I think that's close enough for the moment.'

The leader made a brief signal and the four men at arms drew rein. The leader, however, continued to ride towards Horace. When he was five metres away, Horace freed the butt of the lance from the socket beside his right stirrup and brought the point down so that it was levelled at the approaching rider.

The stranger had chosen to be provocative, he thought. He could hardly take offence if Horace reacted in kind.

The unwavering iron point of the lance, gleaming dully where it had been carefully sharpened the night before, was aimed at the rider's throat. He brought his horse to a stop.

'There's no need for that,' he said. His voice was rough and angry.

Horace shrugged slightly. 'And there's no need for you to come any closer,' he replied calmly, 'until we know each other a little better.'

Two of the men at arms began to edge their horses out to the left and right. Horace glanced at them briefly, then returned his gaze to the other man's face.

'Tell your men to stay where they are, please.'

The bearded man swivelled in his saddle and glanced at them.

‘That’s enough,’ he ordered and they stopped moving. Horace glanced quickly at them again. There was something not quite right about them, he thought. Then he realised what it was. They were scruffy, their surcoats stained and crumpled, their arms and armour unburnished and dull. They looked as if they’d be more at home hiding in the forest and waylaying innocent travellers than wearing the arms of a castle lord. In most castles, the men at arms were under the orders and discipline of experienced sergeants. It was rare that they would be allowed to become so dishevelled.

‘You’re getting off to a bad start with me, you know,’ the bearded man said. In another man, the remark might have had overtones of humour or amusement to take the implicit threat out of the words. Here, the threat was overt. Even more so when he added, after a pause, ‘You might come to regret that.’

‘And why might that be?’ Horace asked. The other man had obviously got the point – Horace smiled inwardly at the play on words – of the lowered lance. Now he raised it again and replaced it in its stirrup socket as the man replied.

‘Well, if you’re looking for work, you don’t want to get on my wrong side, is why.’

Horace considered the statement thoughtfully.

‘Am I looking for work?’ he asked.

The other man said nothing but gestured towards the device on Horace’s shield. There was a long silence between them and finally the man was forced to speak.

‘You’re a free lance,’ he said.

Horace nodded. He didn’t like the man’s manner. It was arrogant and threatening, the sign of a man who had been given authority when he wasn’t used to wielding it.

‘True,’ he admitted. ‘But that simply means I’m unemployed. It doesn’t mean I’m actually looking for a job

at the moment.' He smiled. 'I could have private means, after all.'

He said it pleasantly, without any sarcasm, but the bearded man was unwilling to show any signs of good humour.

'Don't bandy words, boy. You may own a battlehorse and a lance but that doesn't make you the cock of the walk. You're a raggletail beggar who's out of work and I'm the man who might have given you a job - if you showed a little respect.'

The smile on Horace's face died. He sighed inwardly. Not at the implication that he was a ragged beggar but at the insult inherent in the word 'boy'. Since he was sixteen, Horace had become used to potential opponents underestimating his abilities because of his youth. Most of them had realised their mistake too late.

'Where are you heading?' the bearded man demanded. Horace saw no reason why he shouldn't answer the question.

'I thought I'd swing by Castle Macindaw,' he said. 'I need a place to spend the rest of the winter.'

The man gave a derisive snort as Horace spoke. 'Then you've started out on the wrong foot,' he said. 'Since I'm the man who does the hiring for Lord Keren.'

Horace frowned slightly. The name was new to him.

'Lord Keren?' he repeated. 'I thought the Lord of Macindaw was Syron?'

His remark was greeted with a dismissive gesture.

'Syron is finished,' the bearded man said. 'Last I heard, he hasn't got long to live. Might be already dead for all I care. And his son, Orman, has run off as well - skulking somewhere in the forest. Lord Keren's in charge now and I'm his garrison commander.'

'And you are?' Horace asked, his tone totally neutral.

'I'm Sir John Buttle,' the man replied shortly.

Horace frowned slightly. The name had a vaguely familiar ring to it. On top of that, he would swear that this rough-mannered, roughly clothed bully was no knight. But he said nothing. There was little to be gained by antagonising the man further, and he seemed to antagonise very easily.

‘So, what’s your name, boy?’ Buttle demanded. Again, Horace sighed inwardly. But he kept his tone light and good-natured as he replied.

‘Hawken,’ he said. ‘Hawken Watt, originally from Caraway but now a citizen of this wide realm.’

Once again, his easy tone struck no response from Buttle, whose reply was short-tempered and ill-mannered.

‘Not this part of it, you’re not,’ he said. ‘There’s nothing for you in Macindaw and nothing for you in Norgate Fief. Move on. Be out of the area by nightfall, if you know what’s good for you.’

‘I’ll certainly consider your advice,’ Horace said. Buttle’s frown deepened and he leaned forward towards the young warrior.

‘Do more than that, boy. Take the advice. I’m not a man you want to cross. Now get moving.’

He jerked his thumb towards the south-east, where the border with the next fief lay. But by now, Horace had decided that he’d heard enough from Sir John Buttle. He smiled and made no attempt to move. Outwardly, he seemed unperturbed. But Kicker sensed the little thrill of readiness that went through his master and the battle-horse’s ears pricked up. He could feel a fight in the offing and his breed lived for fighting.

Buttle hesitated, not sure what to do next. He had made his threat and he was used to people being cowed by the force of his personality – and the sight of men at arms ready to back his threats up. Now this well-armed young man simply sat facing him, with an air of confidence about him that said he wasn’t fazed by the odds of five to one. Buttle realised he would either have to make good on his

threat, and try to forcibly send the warrior on his way, or back down. As he was thinking this, Horace smiled lazily at him and backing down suddenly seemed like a good option.

Angrily, he wheeled his horse away, gesturing to his men to follow.

‘Remember what I said!’ he flung back over his shoulder as he spurred his horse away. ‘You have till nightfall.’

As the small party rode away, Horace scratched Kicker’s ear thoughtfully. He had the feeling that, had he allowed himself to be cowed by Buttle, he would have been offered employment instantly. But the fact that he had shown some spirit and independence had weighed against him. It seemed a strange way to recruit fighting men, he thought. But then, there was a lot that seemed strange in Norgate Fief at the moment.



Three

MALCOLM THE HEALER, more widely known as Malkallam the Black Sorcerer, looked up briefly from his work as Will rode into the little clearing in Grimsdell Wood.

Each morning at eleven o'clock, Malcolm provided his people with medical treatment. Those with injuries or illnesses would line up patiently outside the healer's comfortable house so that he could diagnose and treat their ailments, sprains, cuts, sores and fevers. Since many of the people who lived in the little forest settlement had been driven out of their previous homes because of physical disabilities or disfigurement, there was usually a long line of patients. Many had ongoing health problems that required constant care.

His last patient was a relatively straightforward case. An eleven-year-old boy had decided to use his mother's doormat as a magic carpet while he attempted to fly from a four-metre-high tree. Malcolm finished binding the resultant sprained ankle, put some salve on the scraped elbows and wrists and ruffled the would-be adventurer's hair.

'Off you go,' he told him, 'and from now on, leave the magic to me.'

'Yes, Malcolm,' the boy said, hanging his head in embarrassment. Then, as he scuttled away, the healer turned to where Will was unsaddling his horse. The older

man watched approvingly, noting the bond between the two as the Ranger spoke gently to the animal while he rubbed it down. The horse almost seemed to understand his words, responding with a good-natured snort and a toss of its short mane.

‘I hear you found the Skandians then?’ Malcolm said eventually. Will nodded.

‘Twenty-five prime fighting men,’ he said. ‘They were right where your messenger told us they’d be, on the banks of the River Oosel.’

Malcolm’s people ranged far and wide through the vast forest. There was little that happened within its boundaries that they didn’t see. And when they saw something out of the ordinary, they brought word to the healer. When reports had come in of a party of Skandian shipwreck survivors, Will had set out to find them.

‘And they were happy to offer their help?’ Malcolm asked. Will shrugged as he sat down on the sunny verandah beside the old healer.

‘They’ll be happy to receive the money I’ve offered them. Besides, their captain felt he owed me something because he let Buttle escape.’

Xander, the secretary and assistant to Orman of Macindaw, came out of the house.

‘How’s Orman?’ Malcolm asked. The castle lord had been poisoned by Keren in his attempt to gain control of Macindaw. Will and Xander had only just reached the healer’s secret clearing in time to save his life.

‘He’s much better. But he’s still very weak. He’s sleeping again,’ Xander said.

Malcolm nodded thoughtfully. ‘That’s the best medicine for him now. The poison’s out of his system. His body can heal itself from here on. Let him rest.’

Xander looked doubtful. In spite of the fact that Malcolm had saved his master’s life, he still viewed the healer with a certain amount of suspicion. He felt Malcolm should be

providing more tangible treatment than the simple injunction *let him rest*. But there was something else nagging at him at the moment.

‘Did I hear you say that you’ve offered to pay these Skandians?’ he asked Will.

Will grinned at him and shook his head. ‘No. I’ve offered to let *you* pay them,’ he replied. ‘Seventy gold royals for their services.’

Xander bristled at him indignantly. ‘That’s outrageous!’ he said. ‘You had no right to do such a thing! Orman is lord of Macindaw. Any such negotiations were up to him – or me, in his absence!’

The secretary had proven to be a brave little man and very loyal to his lord. But that could make him act like a bit of a prig at times. Will eyed him meaningfully. He heard Malcolm’s snort of derision.

‘At the moment,’ Will said, with a warning note in his voice, ‘Orman is lord of nothing very much at all – not even the borrowed bed he’s lying in. So actually, I outrank him. You seem to forget that I act with the King’s authority.’

Which Xander realised was true. Will was a Ranger, after all, in spite of the fact that he had come to Macindaw disguised as a jongleur. It was difficult for Xander to accept that such vast authority could be vested in someone as young as Will. He backed off now, but still felt he had to bluster a little.

‘Even so,’ he said, ‘seventy royals? Surely you could have done better than that!’

Will shook his head at the secretary’s attitude.

‘You can renegotiate if you like. I’m sure the Skandians will be delighted to bargain with someone who’ll sit watching while they risk their lives.’

Xander saw that he was on shaky ground. But he was too stubborn to simply admit it and let the matter drop.

‘Well, perhaps. But after all, it’s their trade, isn’t it? They fight for money, don’t they?’

‘That’s right,’ Will agreed, thinking that Xander could be a very annoying man. ‘And that gives them a pretty good idea what their lives are worth. Besides, look on the bright side. Maybe we’ll lose and then you won’t owe them a penny.’

There was a hard edge to his voice that finally penetrated Xander’s bumptious attitude. The secretary realised that it might be best not to pursue this matter any further. He sniffed and walked away, making sure that Will and Malcolm could just hear his parting remark of, ‘Seventy royals indeed! I’ve never heard such extravagance!’

Malcolm looked at Will and shrugged sympathetically. ‘I do hope you can get that man back in his castle before too long,’ he said. ‘One can tire of him very quickly.’

Will smiled. ‘Still, he’s very loyal. And he can be a courageous little bantam, as you’ve noted.’

Malcolm considered the fact for a few seconds. ‘It’s strange, isn’t it?’ he remarked at length. ‘You’d expect qualities like that to make a person quite likeable. Yet somehow he manages to irritate the devil out of me.’ He made a brief gesture dismissing Xander as a subject of conversation. ‘So, come inside and tell me more about these Skandians of yours.’

He led the way inside the house, where he had a pot of coffee brewing. In the short time that he had known the young Ranger, he had become aware of his near-dependence on the drink. He poured him a cup now and smiled as Will tasted it, smacked his lips and let out an appreciative sigh. The two settled into comfortable chairs at Malcolm’s kitchen table.

‘They’ll be along in a day or two,’ Will continued. ‘I left them to pack up their camp and follow on. One of your people will guide them here. I must say we were lucky to find them. I’m going to need fighting men and they’re in pretty scarce supply.’

Malcolm sighed. 'True,' he said. 'My people aren't fighters. They're not trained or equipped for the job.'

'And the people from the villages around here would hardly join us. They're all terrified of Malkallam the Black Sorcerer,' Will said. He smiled to show there was no insult intended. Malcolm nodded, recognising the truth.

'That's a fact. So what do you plan to do when the Skandians get here?'

The Ranger hesitated before answering. 'Then ... we'll see. I'll have to figure out a way to take the castle and get Alyss out of there.'

'Have you ever done that sort of thing before?' Malcolm asked.

Will grinned ruefully. 'Not really,' he admitted. 'It never came up in my Ranger training.'

He didn't want to dwell on it. He hoped that the Skandians might have some ideas on the subject but he'd cross that drawbridge when he came to it.

Malcolm stroked his chin thoughtfully. 'Have you considered sending to Castle Norgate for help?'

Will shifted uncomfortably in his chair. 'I have,' he replied. 'But Keren has the road sealed off. No riders are getting through.'

Malcolm's observers had reported that riders heading west were being stopped and turned back.

'Except his own,' Malcolm replied. 'A rider left Macindaw while you were away.'

Will nodded gloomily. 'Keren's no fool. I'll wager he's reported that Orman is a traitor and has run off, leaving Keren to keep Macindaw safe. That's what I'd do in his place. The trouble is, he's well liked and respected. They'll be inclined to believe him. Whereas I'm a stranger. What's more, I'm in league with an accused traitor and a known sorcerer.'

'But you're a King's Ranger,' Malcolm said.

‘They don’t know that. My presence here was a secret.’ Will laughed at the thought. ‘Let’s assume I could get a message through and let’s assume they don’t dismiss it out of hand. What do you think they might do?’

Malcolm considered for a moment. ‘Send soldiers to help us?’ he suggested, but Will shook his head.

‘It’s winter. Their army is dispersed to their homes. It would take a couple of weeks to assemble them. It’s a big undertaking and they’re not going to do that on a stranger’s say-so. The best we could hope for is they might send someone to investigate – to find out who’s telling the truth. And even that will take at least two weeks – it’s a week there and another week back, after all.’

Malcolm pulled a wry face. ‘There’s not much we can do, is there?’

‘We’re not exactly helpless,’ Will told him. ‘With twenty-five Skandians, we can cause Keren quite a bit of trouble. Then, once I have some concrete evidence, we’ll send word to Norgate.’

He paused, frowning heavily. He wished he was a little more experienced in matters like this. He was the most junior Ranger in the Corps and, truth be told, he was uncertain that he was taking the right path. But Halt had always taught him to gather as much information as possible before taking action.

For the twentieth time in the past few days, he wished he could contact Halt. But Alyss’s pigeon handler seemed to have disappeared from the district. Run off by Buttle and his men, most likely, he thought gloomily, then shook off the negative thoughts with an effort.

‘So, what else has been going on while I’ve been away?’ he asked.

He drained his coffee and looked hopefully at the pot. Malcolm, who was aware that his supply of coffee beans was running low, studiously ignored the hint, and the quiet

sigh that followed it. He shuffled through a few sheets of notes that he had taken when his spies had reported in.

‘There were a couple of things,’ he said. ‘Your friend Alyss has been showing a light at her window for the past two nights.’

That news took Will’s mind off the coffee, he noticed. The young man sat straight up in his chair.

‘A light?’ he said eagerly. ‘What kind of light?’

Malcolm shrugged. ‘Looks like just a simple lantern. But it moves around the window.’

‘From corner to corner?’ Will asked. Malcolm looked up from his notes, surprised.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘How did you know that?’

Will was smiling broadly now. ‘She’s using the Courier’s signal code,’ he said. ‘I guess she knows that sooner or later, I’ll be watching. When does she do this?’

Malcolm didn’t need to consult the notes this time. ‘Usually after the midnight watch has changed – around three in the morning. The moon’s well down by then so the light is easier to make out.’

‘Good!’ said Will. ‘That gives me time to get a message prepared. I’m a little rusty on the code,’ he added, apologetically. ‘Haven’t had to use it since my fourth-year assessment. You said there were a couple of items?’ he prompted.

Malcolm shuffled the pages again. ‘Oh yes. One of my people saw Buttle and his men talking to a warrior by Tumbledown Creek the other morning. He thought they might be recruiting him but the warrior seemed to send them packing. Then he rode off himself. I believe he’s taken a room at the Cracked Flagon.’

This news was less riveting, Malcolm saw.

Will, his thoughts already composing a message to Alyss, asked absently, ‘Could your man make out the warrior’s blazon?’