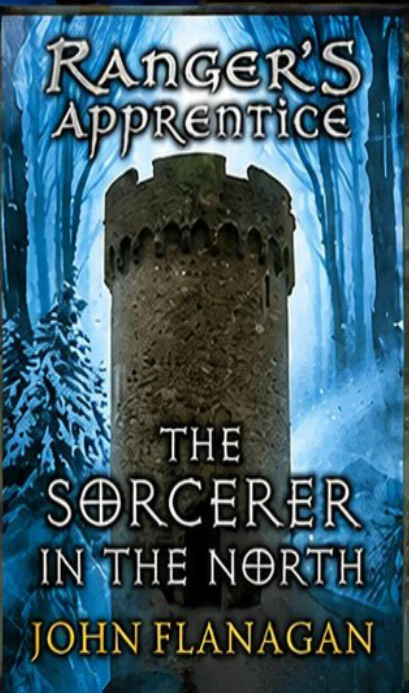
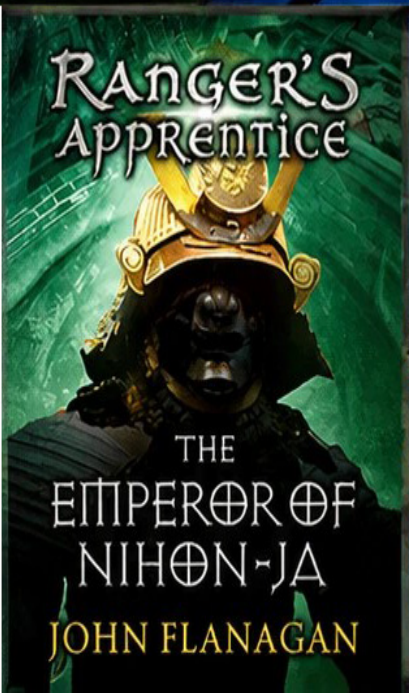
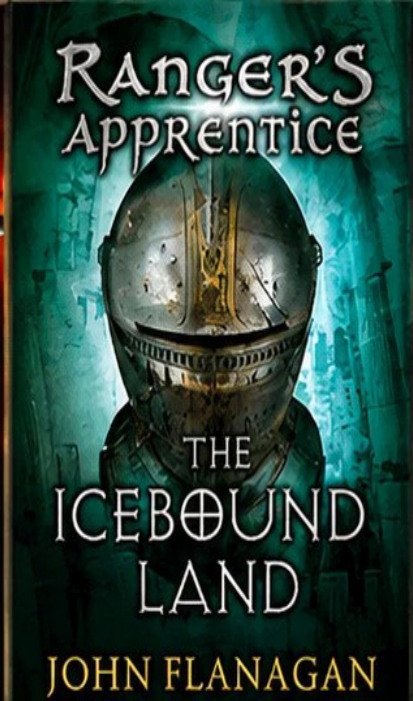
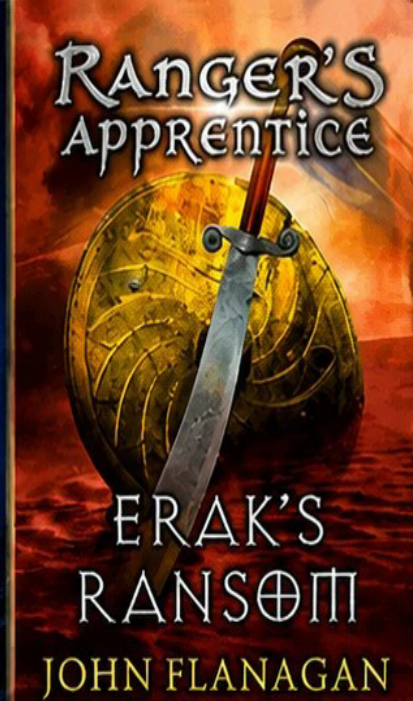
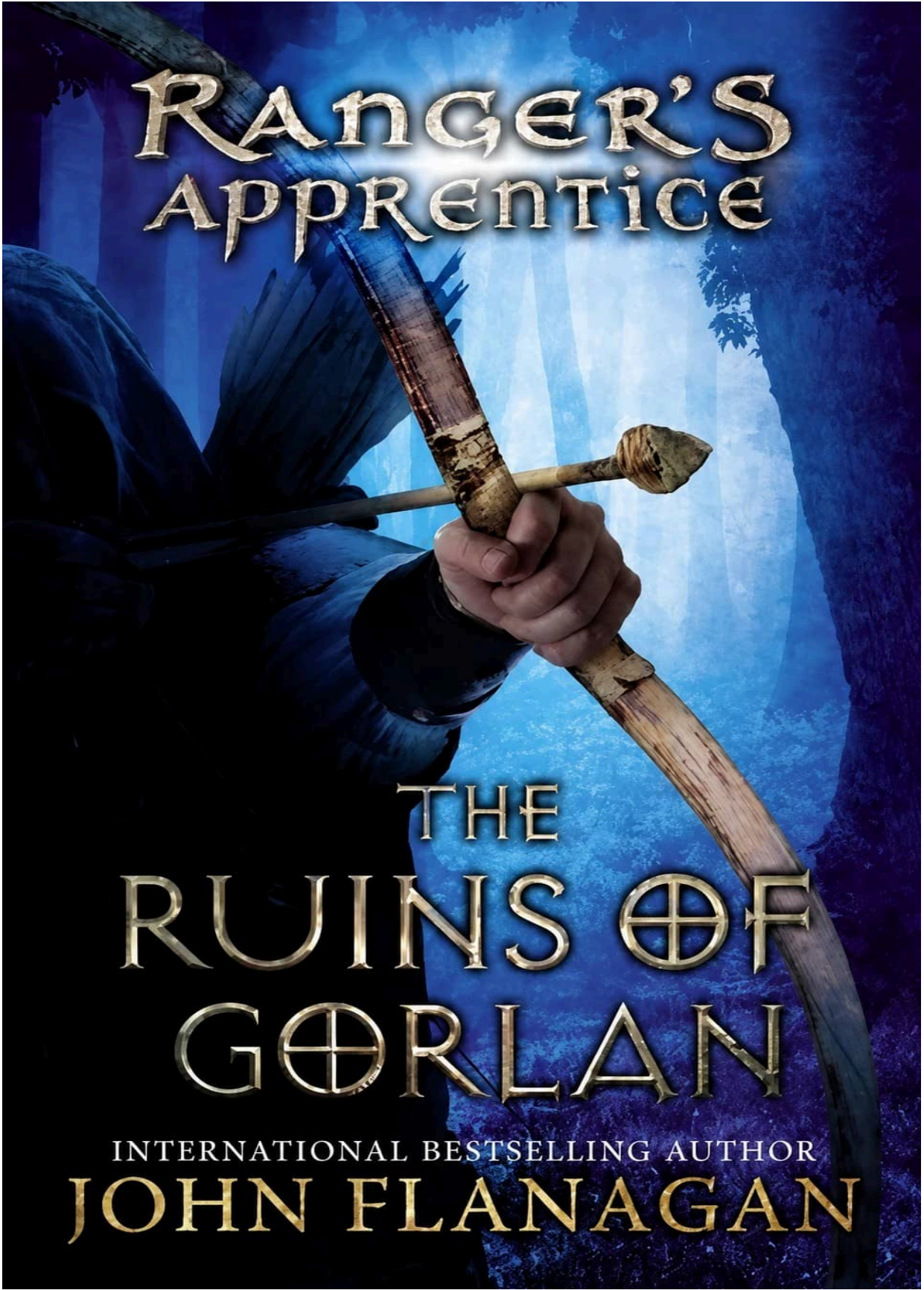






Ranger's Apprentice

THE RUINS $\oplus$ OF G $\oplus$ RLAN

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
JOHN FLANAGAN

Ranger's Apprentice

Book One: The Ruins of Gorlan

John Flanagan

They have always scared him in the past—the Rangers with their dark cloaks and mysterious ways. Folks in the village claim that Rangers have the power to become invisible at will. A skill Will would now dearly love to have.

Will's heart had been set on Battle-school, on becoming a hero to the kingdom. But Will is small for his fifteen years, too small to be a warrior. He possesses other skills, though—a Ranger's skills. He can move silent as a shadow. He can climb. And he is brave.

He will need all these skills and more. For Morgarath, Lord of the Mountains of Rain and Night, is gathering his forces. A battle for the kingdom is destined to begin. A battle the likes of which Will cannot even imagine. Combining the intensity of a young King Arthur with the epic fantasy of The Lord of the Rings, Flanagan brings to America the adventure of the year.

Prologue

Morgarath, the Lord of the Mountains of Rain and Night, former Baron of Gorlan in the Kingdom of Araluen, looked out over his bleak, rainswept domain and, for perhaps the thousandth time, cursed.

This was all that was left to him now - a jumble of rugged granite cliffs, tumbled boulders and icy mountains. Of sheer gorges and steep narrow passes. Of gravel and rock, with never a tree or a sign of green to break the monotony.

Even though it had been fifteen years since he had been driven back into this forbidding realm that had become his prison, he could still remember the pleasant green glades and thickly forested hills of his former fief. The streams filled with fish and the fields rich with crops and game. Gorlan had been a beautiful, living place. The Mountains of Rain and Night were dead and desolate.

A platoon of Wargals was drilling in the castle yard below him. Morgarath watched them for a few seconds, listening to the guttural, rhythmic chant that accompanied all their movements. They were stocky, misshapen beings, with features that were halfway human, but with a long, brutish muzzle and fangs like a bear or a large dog.

Avoiding all contact with humans, the Wargals had lived and bred in these remote mountains since ancient times. No one in living memory had ever set eyes upon one, but rumors and legends had persisted of a savage tribe of semi-intelligent beasts in the mountains. Morgarath, planning a revolt against the Kingdom of Araluen, had left Gorlan Fief to seek them

out. If such creatures existed, they would give him an edge in the war that was to come.

It took him months, but he eventually found them. Aside from their wordless chant, Wargals had no spoken language, relying on a primitive form of thought awareness for communication. But their minds were simple and their intellects basic. As a result, they had been totally susceptible to domination by a superior intelligence and willpower. Morgarath bent them to his will and they became the perfect army for him—ugly beyond nightmares, utterly pitiless and bound totally to his mental orders.

Now, looking at them, he remembered the brightly dressed knights in glittering armor who used to compete in tourneys at Castle Gorlan, their silk-gowned ladies cheering them on and applauding their skills. Mentally comparing them to these black-furred, misshapen creatures, he cursed again.

The Wargals, attuned to his thoughts, sensed his disturbance and stirred uncomfortably, pausing in what they were doing. Angrily, he directed them back to their drill and the chanting resumed.

Morgarath moved away from the unglazed window, closer to the fire that seemed utterly incapable of dispelling the damp and chill from this gloomy castle. Fifteen years, he thought to himself again. Fifteen years since he had rebelled against the newly crowned King Duncan, a youth in his twenties. He had planned it all carefully as the old king's sickness progressed, banking on the indecision and confusion that would follow his death to split the other barons and give Morgarath his opportunity to seize the throne.

Secretly, he had trained his army of Wargals, massing them up here in the mountains, ready for the moment to strike. Then, in the days of confusion and grief following the king's death, when the barons traveled to

Castle Araluen for the funeral rites, leaving their armies leaderless, he had attacked, overrunning the southeastern quarter of the kingdom in a matter of days, routing the confused, leaderless forces that tried to oppose him.

Duncan, young and inexperienced, could never have stood against him. The kingdom was his for the taking. The throne was his for the asking.

Then Lord Northolt, the old king's supreme army commander, had rallied some of the younger barons into a loyal confederation, giving strength to Duncan's resolve and stiffening the wavering courage of the others. The armies had met at Hackham Heath, close by the Slipsunder River, and the battle swayed in the balance for five hours, with attack and counterattack and massive loss of life. The Slipsunder was a shallow river, but its treacherous reaches of quicksand and soft mud had formed an impassable barrier, protecting Morgarath's right flank.

But then one of those gray-cloaked meddlers known as Rangers led a force of heavy cavalry across a secret ford ten kilometers upstream. The armored horsemen appeared at the crucial moment of the battle and fell upon the rear of Morgarath's army.

The Wargals, trained in the tumbled rocks of the mountains, had one weakness. They feared horses and could never stand against such a surprise cavalry attack. They broke, retreating to the narrow confines of Three Step Pass, and back to the Mountains of Rain and Night. Morgarath, his rebellion defeated, went with them.

And here he had been exiled these fifteen years. Waiting, plotting, hating the men who had done this to him.

Now, he thought, it was time for his revenge. His spies told him the kingdom had grown slack and complacent and his presence here was all but

forgotten. The name Morgarath was a name of legend nowadays, a name mothers used to hush fractious children, threatening that if they did not behave, the black lord Morgarath would come for them.

The time was ripe. Once again, he would lead his Wargals into an attack. But this time he would have allies. And this time he would sow the ground with uncertainty and confusion beforehand. This time none of those who conspired against him previously would be left alive to aid King Duncan.

For the Wargals were not the only ancient, terrifying creatures he had found in these somber mountains. He had two other allies, even more fearsome-the dreadful beasts known as the Kalkara.

The time was ripe to unleash them.

Chapter 1

"Try to eat something, Will. Tomorrow is a big day, after all." Jenny, blond, pretty and cheerful, gestured toward Will's barely touched plate and smiled encouragingly at him. Will made an attempt to return the smile, but it was a dismal failure. He picked at the plate before him, piled high with his favorite foods. Tonight, his stomach knotted tight with tension and anticipation, he could hardly bring himself to swallow a bite.

Tomorrow would be a big day, he knew. He knew it all too well, in fact. Tomorrow would be the biggest day in his life, because tomorrow was the Choosing Day and it would determine how he spent the rest of his life.

"Nerves, I imagine," said George, setting down his loaded fork and seizing the lapels of his jacket in a judicious manner. He was a thin, gangly and studious boy, fascinated by rules and regulations and with a penchant for examining and debating both sides of any question-sometimes at great length. "Dreadful thing, nervousness. It can just freeze you up so you can't think, can't eat, can't speak."

"I'm not nervous," Will said quickly, noticing that Horace had looked up, ready to form a sarcastic comment.

George nodded several times, considering Will's statement. "On the other hand," he added, "a little nervousness can actually improve performance. It can heighten your perceptions and sharpen your reactions. So, the fact that you are worried, if, in fact, you are, is not necessarily something to be worried about, of itself-so to speak."

In spite of himself, a wry smile touched Will's mouth. George would be a natural in the legal profession, he thought. He would almost certainly be the Scribemaster's choice on the following morning. Perhaps, Will thought, that was at the heart of his own problem. He was the only one of the wardmates who had any fears about the Choosing that would take place within twelve hours.

"He ought to be nervous!" Horace scoffed. "After all, which Craftmaster is going to want him as an apprentice?"

"I'm sure we're all nervous," Alyss said. She directed one of her rare smiles at Will. "We'd be stupid not to be."

"Well, I'm not!" Horace said, then reddened as Alyss raised one eyebrow and Jenny giggled.

It was typical of Alyss, Will thought. He knew that the tall, graceful girl had already been promised a place as an apprentice by Lady Pauline, head of Castle Redmont's Diplomatic Service. Her pretense that she was nervous about the following day, and her tact in refraining from pointing out Horace's gaffe, showed that she was already a diplomat of some skill.

Jenny, of course, would gravitate immediately to the castle kitchens, domain of Master Chubb, Redmont's head chef. He was a man renowned throughout the kingdom for the banquets served in the castle's massive dining hall. Jenny loved food and cooking, and her easygoing nature and unfailing good humor would make her an invaluable staff member in the turmoil of the castle kitchens.

Battleschool would be Horace's choice. Will glanced at his wardmate now, hungrily tucking into the roast turkey, ham and potatoes that he had heaped onto his plate. Horace was big for his age and a natural athlete. The

chances that he would be refused were virtually nonexistent. Horace was exactly the type of recruit that Sir Rodney looked for in his warrior apprentices. Strong, athletic, fit. And, thought Will a trifle sourly, not too bright. Battleschool was the path to knighthood for boys like Horace-born commoners but with the physical abilities to serve as knights of the kingdom.

Which left Will. What would his choice be? More importantly, as Horace had pointed out, what Craftmaster would accept him as an apprentice?

For Choosing Day was the pivotal point in the life of the castle wards. They were orphan children raised by the generosity of Baron Arald, the Lord of Redmont Fief. For the most part, their parents had died in the service of the fief, and the Baron saw it as his responsibility to care for and raise the children of his former subjects-and to give them an opportunity to improve their station in life wherever possible.

Choosing Day provided that opportunity.

Each year, castle wards turning fifteen could apply to be apprenticed to the masters of the various crafts that served the castle and its people. Ordinarily, craft apprentices were selected by dint of their parents' occupations or influence with the Craftmasters. The castle wards usually had no such influence and this was their chance to win a future for themselves.

Those wards who weren't chosen, or for whom no openings could be found, would be assigned to farming families in the nearby village, providing farm labor to raise the crops and animals that fed the castle inhabitants. It was rare for this to happen, Will knew. The Baron and his Craftmasters usually went out of their way to fit the wards into one craft or another. But it could happen and it was a fate he feared more than anything.

Horace caught his eye now and gave him a smug smile. " Still planning on applying for Battleschool, Will?" he asked through a mouthful of turkey and potatoes. "Better eat something then. You'll need to build yourself up a little"

He snorted with laughter and Will glowered at him. A few weeks previously, Horace had overheard Will confiding to Alyss that he desperately wanted to be selected for Battleschool, and he had made Will's life a misery ever since, pointing out on every possible occasion that Will's slight build was totally unsuited for the rigors of Battleschool training.

The fact that Horace was probably right only made matters worse. Where Horace was tall and muscular, Will was small and wiry. He was agile and fast and surprisingly strong, but he simply didn't have the size that he knew was required of Battleschool apprentices. He'd hoped against hope for the past few years that he would have what people called his "growing spurt" before the Choosing Day came around. But it had never happened and now the day was nearly here.

As Will said nothing, Horace sensed that he had scored a verbal hit. This was a rarity in their turbulent relationship. Over the past few years, he and Will had clashed repeatedly. Being the stronger of the two, Horace usually got the better of Will, although very occasionally Will's speed and agility allowed him to get in a surprise kick or a punch and then escape before Horace could catch him.

But while Horace generally had the best of their physical clashes, it was unusual for him to win any of their verbal encounters. Will's wit was as agile as the rest of him and he almost always managed to have the last word. In fact, it was this tendency that often led to trouble between them: Will was yet to learn that having the last word was not always a good idea. Horace decided now to press his advantage.

"You need muscles to get into Battleschool, Will. Real muscles," he said, glancing at the others around the table to see if anyone disagreed. The other wards, uncomfortable at the growing tension between the two boys, concentrated on their plates." Particularly between the ears," Will replied and, unfortunately, Jenny couldn't refrain from giggling. Horace's face flushed and he started to rise from his seat. But Will was quicker and he was already at the door before Horace could disentangle himself from his chair. He contented himself with hurling a final insult after his retreating wardmate." That's right! Run away, Will No-Name! You're a no-name and nobody will want you as an apprentice!" In the anteroom outside, Will heard the parting sally and felt blood flush to his cheeks. It was the taunt he hated most, although he had tried never to let Horace know that, sensing that he would provide the bigger boy with a weapon if he did.

The truth was, nobody knew Will's second name. Nobody knew who his parents had been. Unlike his yearmates, who had lived in the fief before their parents had died and whose family histories were known, Will had appeared, virtually out of nowhere, as a newborn baby. He had been found, wrapped in a small blanket and placed in a basket, on the steps of the ward building fifteen years ago. A note had been attached to the blanket, reading simply:

*His mother died in childbirth. His father died a hero. Please care for
him.*

His name is Will.

That year, there had been only one other ward. Alyss's father was a cavalry lieutenant who had died in the battle at Hackham Heath, when Morgarath's Wargal army had been defeated and driven back to the mountains. Alyss's mother, devastated by her loss, succumbed to a fever some weeks after giving birth. So there was plenty of room in the Ward for the unknown child, and Baron Arald was, at heart, a kindly man. Even though the circumstances were unusual, he had given permission for Will to be accepted as a ward of Castle Redmont. It seemed logical to assume that, if the note were true, Will's father had died in the war against Morgarath, and since Baron Arald had taken a leading part in that war, he felt duty bound to honor the unknown father's sacrifice.

So Will had become a Redmont ward, raised and educated by the Baron's generosity. As time passed, the others had gradually joined him and Alyss until there were five in their year group. But while the others had memories of their parents or, in Alyss's case, people who had known them and who could tell her about them, Will knew nothing of his past.

That was why he had invented the story that had sustained him throughout his childhood in the Ward. And, as the years passed and he added detail and color to the story, he eventually came to believe it himself.

His father, he knew, had died a hero's death. So it made sense to create a picture of him as a hero—a knight warrior in full armor, fighting against the Wargal hordes, cutting them down left and right until eventually he was overcome by sheer weight of numbers. Will had pictured the tall figure so often in his mind, seeing every detail of his armor and his equipment but never being able to visualize his face.

As a warrior, his father would expect him to follow in his footsteps. That was why selection for Battleschool was so important to Will. And that was

why the more unlikely it became that he would be selected, the more desperately he clung to the hope that he might.

He exited from the Ward building into the darkened castle yard. The sun was long down and the torches placed every twenty meters or so on the castle walls shed a flickering, uneven light. He hesitated a moment. He would not return to the Ward and face Horace's continued taunts. To do so would only lead to another fight between them-a fight that Will knew that he would probably lose. George would probably try to analyze the situation for him, looking at both sides of the question and thoroughly confusing the issue. Alyss and Jenny might try to comfort him, he knew-Alyss particularly since they had grown up together. But at the moment he didn't want their sympathy and he couldn't face Horace's taunts, so he headed for the one place where he knew he could find solitude.

The huge fig tree growing close by the castle's central tower had often afforded him a haven. Heights held no fear for Will and he climbed smoothly into the tree, continuing long after another might have stopped, until he was in the lighter branches at the very top-branches that swayed and dipped under his weight. In the past, he had often escaped from Horace up here. The bigger boy couldn't match Will's speed in the tree and he was unwilling to follow as high as this. Will found a convenient fork and wedged himself in it, his body giving slightly to the movement of the tree as the branches swayed in the evening breeze. Below, the foreshortened figures of the watch made their rounds of the castle yard.

He heard the door of the Ward building open and, glancing down, saw Alyss emerge, looking around the yard for him in vain. The tall girl hesitated a few moments, then, seeming to shrug, turned back inside. The elongated rectangle of light that the open door threw across the yard was cut off as she closed the door softly behind her. Strange, he thought, how seldom people tend to look up.

There was a rustle of soft feathers and a barn owl landed on the next branch, its head swiveling, its huge eyes catching every last ray of the faint light. It studied him without concern, seeming to know it had nothing to fear from him. It was a hunter. A silent flyer. A ruler of the night.

"Atleast you know who you are," he said softly to the bird. It swiveled its head again, then launched itself off into the darkness, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

Gradually, as he sat there, the lights in the castle windows went out, one by one. The torches burnt down to smoldering husks and were replaced at midnight by the change of watch. Eventually, there was only one light left burning and that, he knew, was in the Baron's study, where the Lord of Redmont was still presumably at work, poring over reports and papers. The study was virtually level with Will's position in the tree and he could see the burly figure of the Baron seated at his desk. Finally Baron Arald rose, stretched and leaned forward to extinguish the lamp as he left the room, heading for his sleeping quarters on the floor above. Now the castle was asleep, except for the guards on the walls, who kept constant watch.

In less than nine hours, Will realized, he would face the Choosing. Silently, miserably, fearing the worst, he climbed down from the tree and made his way to his bed in the darkened boys' dormitory in the Ward.

Chapter 2

"All right, candidates! This way! And look lively!" The speaker, or more correctly the shouter, was Martin, secretary to Baron Arald. As his voice echoed around the anteroom, the five wards rose uncertainly from the long wooden benches where they had been seated. Suddenly nervous now that the day had finally arrived, they began to shuffle forward, each one reluctant to be the first through the great ironbound door that Martin now held open for them. "Come on, come on!" Martin bellowed impatiently. Alyss finally elected to lead the way, as Will had guessed she would. The others followed the willowy blonde girl. Now that someone had decided to lead, the rest of them were content to follow.

Will looked around curiously as he entered the Baron's study. He'd never been in this part of the castle before. This tower, containing the administrative section and the Baron's private apartments, was seldom visited by those of low rank-such as castle wards. The room was huge. The ceiling seemed to tower above him and the walls were constructed of massive stone blocks, fitted together with only the barest lines of mortar between them. On the eastern wall was a huge window space-open to the elements but with massive wooden shutters that could be closed in the event of bad weather. It was the same window he had seen through last night, he realized. Today, sunlight streamed in and fell on the huge oak table that Baron Arald used as a desk.

"Come on now! Stand in line, stand in line!" Martin seemed to be enjoying his moment of authority. The group shuffled slowly into line and he studied them, his mouth twisted in disapproval. "In size place! Tallest this end!" He indicated the end where he wanted the tallest of the five to stand. Gradually, the group rearranged itself. Horace, of course, was the tallest.

After him, Alyss took her position. Then George, half a head shorter than she and painfully thin. He stood in his usual stoop-shouldered posture. Will and Jenny hesitated. Jenny smiled at Will and gestured for him to go before her, even though she was possibly an inch taller than he was. That was typical of Jenny. She knew how Will agonized over the fact that he was the smallest of all the castle wards. As Will moved into the line, Martin's voice stopped him.

"Not you! The girl's next." Jenny shrugged apologetically and moved into the place Martin had indicated. Will took the last place in the line, wishing Martin hadn't made his lack of height so apparent." Come on! Smarten up, smarten up! Let's see you at attention there," Martin continued, then broke off as a deep voice interrupted him.

"I don't believe that's totally necessary, Martin." It was Baron Arald, who had entered, unobserved, by way of a smaller door behind his massive desk. Now it was Martin who brought himself to what he considered to be a position of attention, with his skinny elbows held out from his sides, his heels forced together so that his unmistakably bowed legs were widely separated at the knees, and his head thrown back.

Baron Arald raised his eyes to heaven. Sometimes his secretary's zeal on these occasions could be a little overwhelming. The Baron was a big man, broad in shoulder and waist and heavily muscled, as was necessary for a knight of the realm. It was well known, however, that Baron Arald was fond of his food and drink, so his considerable bulk was not totally attributable to muscle.

He had a short, neatly trimmed black beard that, like his hair, was beginning to show the traces of gray that went with his forty-two years. He had a strong jaw, a large nose and dark, piercing eyes under heavy brows. It was a powerful face, but not an unkind one, Will thought. There was a

surprising hint of humor in those dark eyes. Will had noted it before, on the occasions when Arald had made his infrequent visits to the wards' quarters to see how their lessons and personal development were progressing.

"Sir!" Martin said at top volume, causing the Baron to wince slightly. "The candidates are assembled!"

"I can see that," Baron Arald replied patiently. "Perhaps you might be good enough to ask the Craftmasters to step in as well?"

"Sir!" Martin responded, making an attempt to click his heels together. As he was wearing shoes of a soft, pliable leather, the attempt was doomed to failure. He marched toward the main door of the study, all elbows and knees. Will was reminded of a rooster. As Martin laid his hand on the door handle, the Baron stopped him once more.

"Martin?" he said softly. As the secretary turned an inquiring look back at him, he continued in the same quiet tone, "Ask them. Don't bellow at them. Craftmasters don't like that."

"Yes, sir," said Martin, looking somewhat deflated. He opened the door and, making an obvious effort to speak in a lower tone, said, "Craftmasters. The Baron is ready now" The Craftschoo heads entered the room in no particular order of precedence. As a group, they admired and respected one another and so rarely stood on strict ceremonial procedure. Sir Rodney, head of the Battleschool, came first. Tall and broad-shouldered like the Baron, he wore the standard battledress of chain mail shirt under a white surcoat emblazoned with his own crest, a scarlet wolfshead. He had earned that crest as a young man, fighting the wolfships of the Skandian sea raiders who constantly harried the kingdom's east coast. He wore a sword belt and sword, of course. No knight would be seen in public without one. He was around the Baron's age, with blue eyes and a face that would have been

remarkably handsome if it weren't for the massively broken nose. He sported an enormous mustache but, unlike the Baron, he had no beard.

Next came the Horsemaster, responsible for the care and training of the castle's mighty battlehorses. He had keen brown eyes, strong, muscular forearms and heavy wrists. He wore a simple leather vest over his woolen shirt and leggings. Tall riding boots of soft leather reached up past his knees.

Lady Pauline followed. Slim, gray-haired and elegant, she had been a considerable beauty in her youth and still had the grace and style to turn men's heads. Lady Pauline, who had been awarded the title in her own right for her work in foreign policy for the kingdom, was head of the Diplomatic Service in Redmont. Baron Arald regarded her abilities highly and she was one of his close confidants and advisers. Arald often said that girls made the best recruits to the Diplomatic Service. They tended to be more subtle than boys, who gravitated naturally to Battleschool. And while boys constantly looked to physical means as the way of solving problems, girls could be depended on to use their wits.

It was perhaps only natural that Nigel, the Scribemaster, followed close behind Lady Pauline. They had been discussing matters of mutual interest while they waited for Martin to summon them. Nigel and Lady Pauline were close friends as well as professional colleagues. It was Nigel's trained scribes who prepared the official documents and communiques that were so often delivered by Lady Pauline's diplomats. He also advised on the exact wording of such documents, having an extensive background in legal matters. Nigel was a small, wiry man with a quick, inquisitive face that reminded Will of a ferret. His hair was glossy black, his features were thin and his dark eyes never ceased roaming the room.

Master Chubb, the castle cook, came in last of all. Inevitably, he was a fat, round-bellied man, wearing a cook's white jacket and tall hat. He was

known to have a terrible temper that could flare as quickly as oil spilled on a fire, and most of the wards treated him with considerable caution. Florid-faced and with red, rapidly receding hair, Master Chubb carried a wooden ladle with him wherever he went. It was an unofficial staff of office. It was also used quite often as an offensive weapon, landing with a resounding crack on the heads of careless, forgetful or slow-moving kitchen apprentices. Alone among the group, Jenny saw Chubb as something of a hero. It was her avowed intention to work for him and learn his skills, wooden ladle or no wooden ladle.

There were other Craftmasters, of course. The Armorer and the Blacksmith were two. But only those Craftmasters who currently had vacancies for new apprentices would be represented today." The Craftmasters are assembled, sir!" Martin said, his voice rising in volume. Martin seemed to equate volume and the importance of the occasion in direct proportion. Once again, the Baron raised his eyes to heaven." So I see," he said quietly, then added, in a more formal tone, "Good morning, Lady Pauline. Good morning, gentlemen."

They replied and the Baron turned to Martin once more. "Perhaps we might proceed?"

Martin nodded several times, consulted a sheaf of notes he held in one hand and marched to confront the line of candidates. "Right, the Baron's waiting! The Baron's waiting! Who's first?" Will, eyes down, shifting nervously from one foot to the other, suddenly had the strange sensation that someone was watching him. He looked up and actually started with surprise as he met the dark, unfathomable gaze of Halt, the Ranger.

Will hadn't seen him come into the room. He realized that the mysterious figure must have slipped in through a side door while everyone's attention was on the Craftmasters as they made their entrance. Now he stood behind

the Baron's chair and slightly to one side, dressed in his usual brown and gray clothes and wrapped in his long, mottled gray and green Ranger's cloak. Halt was an unnerving person. He had a habit of coming up on you when you least expected it-and you never heard his approach. The superstitious villagers believed that Rangers practiced a form of magic that made them invisible to ordinary people. Will wasn't sure if he believed that-but he wasn't sure he disbelieved it either. He wondered why Halt was here today. He wasn't recognized as one of the Craftmasters and, as far as Will knew, he hadn't attended a Choosing session prior to this one.

Abruptly, Halt's gaze cut away from him and it was as if a light had been turned off. Will realized that Martin was talking once more. He noticed that the secretary had a habit of repeating statements, as if he were followed by his own personal echo." Now then, who's first? Who's first?" The Baron sighed audibly. "Why don't we take the first in line?" he suggested in a reasonable tone, and Martin nodded several times.

"Of course, my lord. Of course. First in line, step forward and face the Baron."

After a moment's hesitation, Horace stepped forward out of the line and stood at attention. The Baron studied him for a few seconds. "Name?" he said, and Horace answered, stumbling slightly over the correct method of address for the Baron.

"Horace Altman, sir... my lord."

"And do you have a preference, Horace?" the Baron asked, with the air of one who knows what the answer is going to be before hearing it.

"Battleschool, sir!" Horace said firmly. The Baron nodded. He'd expected as much. He glanced at Rodney, who was studying the boy thoughtfully,

assessing his suitability. "Battlemaster?" the Baron said. Normally he would address Rodney by his first name, not his title. But this was a formal occasion. By the same token, Rodney would usually address the Baron as "sir." But on a day like today, "my lord" was the proper form.

The big knight stepped forward, his chain mail and spurs chinking slightly as he moved closer to Horace. He eyed the boy up and down, then moved behind him. Horace's head started to turn with him." Still," Sir Rodney said, and the boy ceased his movement, staring straight ahead.

"Looks strong enough, my lord, and I can always use new trainees. "He rubbed one hand over his chin. "You ride, Horace Altman?"

A look of uncertainty crossed Horace's face as he realized this might be a hurdle to his selection. "Well... no, sir. I..." He was about to add that castle wards had little chance to learn to ride, but Sir Rodney interrupted him.

"No matter. That can be taught." The big knight looked at the Baron and nodded. "Very well, my lord. I'll take him for Battleschool, subject to the usual three-month probationary period."

The Baron made a note on a sheet of paper before him and smiled briefly at the delighted, and very relieved, youth before him." Congratulations, Horace. Report to Battleschool tomorrow morning. Eight o'clock sharp."

"Yes, sir!" Horace replied, grinning widely. He turned to Sir Rodney and bowed slightly. "Thank you, sir!"

"Don't thank me yet," the knight replied cryptically. "You don't know what you're in for."

Chapter 3

"Who's next then?" Martin was calling as Horace, grinning broadly, stepped back into the line. Alyss stepped forward gracefully, annoying Martin, who had wanted to nominate her as the next candidate.

"Alyss Mainwaring, my lord," she said in her quiet, level voice. Then, before she could be asked, she continued, "I request an appointment to the Diplomatic Service, please, my lord."

Arald smiled at the solemn-looking girl. She had an air of self-confidence and poise about her that would suit her well in the Service. He glanced at Lady Pauline.

"My lady?" he said.

She nodded her head several times. "I've already spoken to Alyss, my lord. I believe she will be an excellent candidate. Approved and accepted."

Alyss made a small bow of her head in the direction of the woman who would be her mentor. Will thought how alike they were-both tall and elegant in their movements, both grave in manner. He felt a small surge of pleasure for his oldest companion, knowing how much she had wanted this selection. Alyss stepped back in line and Martin, not to be forestalled this time, was already pointing to George.

"Right! You're next! You're next! Address the Baron."

George stepped forward. His mouth opened and closed several times, but nothing came out. The other wards watched in surprise. George, long

regarded by them all as the official advocate for just about everything, was overcome with stage fright. He finally managed to say something in a low voice that nobody in the room could hear. Baron Arald leaned forward, one hand cupped behind his ear.

"I'm sorry, I didn't quite get that," he said.

George looked up at the Baron and, with an enormous effort, spoke in a just-audible voice. "G-George Carter, sir. Scribe school, sir."

Martin, ever a stickler for the proprieties, drew breath to berate him for the truncated nature of his address. Before he could do so, and to everyone's evident relief, Baron Arald stepped in. "Very well, Martin. Let it go. "Martin looked a little aggrieved, but subsided. The Baron glanced at Nigel, his chief scribe and legal officer, one eyebrow raised in question.

"Acceptable, my lord," he said, adding, "I've seen some of George's work and he really does have a gift for calligraphy."

The Baron looked doubtful. "He's not the most forceful of speakers, though, is he, Scribemaster? That could be a problem if he has to offer legal counsel at any time in the future."

Nigel shrugged the objection aside. "I promise you, my lord, with proper training that sort of thing represents no problem. Absolutely no problem at all, my lord."

The Scribemaster folded his hands together into the wide sleeves of the monk like habit he wore as he warmed to his theme.

"I remember a boy who joined us some seven years back, rather like this one here, as a matter of fact. He had that same habit of mumbling to his

shoes—but we soon showed him how to overcome it. Some of our most reluctant speakers have gone on to develop absolute eloquence, my lord, absolute eloquence."

The Baron drew breath to comment, but Nigel continued in his discourse.

"It may even surprise you to hear that as a boy, I myself suffered from a most terrible nervous stutter. Absolutely terrible, my lord. Could barely put two words together at a time."

"Hardly a problem now, I see," the Baron managed to put in dryly, and Nigel smiled, taking the point. He bowed to the Baron.

"Exactly, my lord. We'll soon help young George overcome his shyness. Nothing like the rough and tumble of Scribeschool for that. Absolutely."

The Baron smiled in spite of himself. The Scribeschool was a studious place where voices were rarely, if ever, raised and where logical, reasoned debate reigned supreme. Personally, on his visits to the place, he had found it mind-numbing in the extreme. Anything less like a rough and tumble atmosphere he could not imagine.

"I'll take your word for it," he replied, then to George he said, "Very well, George, request granted. Report to Scribeschool tomorrow."

George shuffled his feet awkwardly. "Mumble-mumble-mumble," he said and the Baron leaned forward again, frowning as he tried to make out the low-pitched words.

"What was that?" he asked.

George finally looked up and managed to whisper, "Thank you, my lord." He hurriedly shuffled back to the relative anonymity of the line.

"Oh," said the Baron, a little taken aback. "Think nothing of it. Now, next is..."

Jenny was already stepping forward. Blond and pretty, she was also, it had to be admitted, a little on the chubby side. But the look suited her, and at any of the castle's social functions, she was a much sought-after dance partner with the boys in the castle, both her yearmates in the Ward and the sons of castle staff as well.

"Master Chubb, sir!" she said now, stepping forward right to the edge of the Baron's desk. The Baron looked into the round face, saw the eagerness shining there in the blue eyes, and couldn't help smiling at her.

"What about him?" he asked gently and she hesitated, realizing that, in her enthusiasm, she had breached the protocol of the Choosing.

"Oh! Your pardon, sir...my...Baron...your lordship," she hastily improvised, her tongue running away with her as she mangled the correct form of address.

"My lord!" Martin prompted her. Baron Arald looked at him, eyebrows raised.

"Yes, Martin?" he said. "What is it?" Martin had the grace to look embarrassed. He knew that his master was intentionally misunderstanding his interruption. He took a deep breath, and said in an apologetic tone, "I... simply wanted to inform you that the candidate's name is Jennifer Dalby, sir."

The Baron nodded at him, and Martin, a devoted servant of the heavy bearded man, saw the look of approval in his lord's eyes. "Thank you, Martin. Now, Jennifer Dalby..."

"Jenny, sir," said the irrepressible girl, and he shrugged resignedly. "Jenny, then. I assume that you are applying to be apprenticed to Master Chubb?"

"Oh, yes, please, sir!" Jenny replied breathlessly, turning adoring eyes on the portly, red-haired cook. Chubb scowled thoughtfully and considered her." Mmmmm... could be, could be," he muttered, walking back and forth in front of her. She smiled winningly at him, but Chubb was beyond such feminine wiles.

"I'd work hard, sir," she told him earnestly.

"I know you would!" he replied with some spirit. "I'd make sure of it, girl. No slacking or lollygagging in my kitchen, let me tell you." Fearing that her opportunity might be slipping away, Jenny played her trump card.

"I have the right shape for it," she said. Chubb had to agree that she was well rounded. Arald, not for the first time that morning, hid a smile." She has a point there, Chubb," he put in, and the cook turned to him in agreement." Shape is important, sir. All great cooks tend to be... rounded." He turned back to the girl, still considering. It was all very well for the others to accept their trainees in the wink of an eye, he thought. But cooking was something special.

"Tell me," he said to the eager girl, "what would you do with a turkey pie?"

Jenny smiled dazzlingly at him. "Eat it," she answered immediately. Chubb rapped her on the head with the ladle he carried. "I meant what would you do about cooking it?" he asked.

Jenny hesitated, gathered her thoughts, then plunged into a lengthy technical description of how she would go about constructing such a masterpiece. The other four wards, the Baron, his Craftmasters and Martin listened in some awe, with absolutely no comprehension of what she was saying. Chubb, however, nodded several times as she spoke, interrupting as she detailed the rolling of the pastry.

"Nine times, you say?" he said curiously and Jenny nodded, sure of her ground.

"My mother always said: 'Eight times to make it flaky and once more for love,'" she said. Chubb nodded thoughtfully.

"Interesting. Interesting," he said, then, looking up at the Baron, he nodded. "I'll take her, my lord."

"What a surprise," the Baron said mildly, then added, "Very well, report to the kitchens in the morning, Jennifer."

"Jenny, sir," the girl corrected him again, her smile lighting up the room.

Baron Arald smiled. He glanced at the small group before him. "And that leaves us with one more candidate." He glanced at his list, then looked up to meet Will's agonized gaze, gesturing encouragement.

Will stepped forward, nervousness suddenly drying his throat so that his voice came out in barely a whisper.

"Will, sir. My name is Will."

Chapter 4

"Will? Will who?" Martin asked in exasperation, flicking through the sheets of paper with the candidates' details written on them. He had only been the Baron's secretary for five years and so knew nothing of Will's history. He realized now that there was no family name on the boy's papers and, assuming he had let this mistake slip past, he was annoyed at himself.

"What's your family name, boy?" he asked severely. Will looked at him, hesitating, hating this moment.

"I... don't have..." he began, but mercifully the Baron interceded.

"Will is a special case, Martin," he said quietly, his look telling the secretary to let the matter go. He turned back to Will, smiling encouragement.

"What school did you wish to apply for, Will?" he asked.

"Battleschool, please, my lord," Will replied, trying to sound confident in his choice. The Baron allowed a frown to crease his forehead and Will felt his hopes sinking.

"Battleschool, Will? You don't think you're... a little on the small side?" the Baron asked gently. Will bit his lip. He had all but convinced himself that if he wanted this badly enough, if he believed in himself strongly enough, he would be accepted-in spite of his obvious shortcomings.

"I haven't had my growing spurt yet, sir," he said desperately. "Everybody says that." The Baron rubbed his bearded chin with thumb and

forefinger as he considered the boy before him. He glanced to his Battlemaster.

"Rodney?" he said.

The tall knight stepped forward, studied Will for a moment or two, then slowly shook his head.

"I'm afraid he's too small, my lord," he said. Will felt a cold hand clutch his heart.

"I'm stronger than I look, sir," he said. But the Battlemaster was unswayed by the plea. He glanced at the Baron, obviously not enjoying the situation, and shook his head.

"Any second choice, Will?" the Baron asked. His voice was gentle, even concerned.

Will hesitated for a long moment. He had never considered any other selection.

"Horseschool, sir?" he asked finally.

Horseschool trained and cared for the mighty battlehorses that the castle's knights rode. It was at least a link to Battleschool, Will thought. But Ulf, the Horsemaster, was shaking his head already, even before the Baron asked his opinion.

"I need apprentices, my lord," he said, "but this one's too small. He'd never control one of my battlehorses. They'd stomp him into the ground as soon as look at him."

Will could only see the Baron through a watery blur now. He fought desperately to keep the tears from sliding down his cheeks. That would be the ultimate humiliation: to be rejected from Battleschool and then to break down and cry like a baby in front of the Baron, all the Craftmasters and his wardmates.

"What skills do you have, Will?" the Baron was asking him.

Will racked his brain. He wasn't good at lessons and languages, as Alyss was. He couldn't form neat, perfect letters, the way George did. Nor did he have Jenny's interest in cooking.

And he certainly didn't have Horace's muscles and strength.

"I'm a good climber, sir," he said finally, seeing that the Baron was waiting for him to say something. It was a mistake, he realized instantly. Chubb, the cook, glared at him angrily.

"He can climb, all right. I remember when he climbed up a drainpipe into my kitchen and stole a tray of sweetcakes that were cooling on the windowsill."

Will's jaw dropped with the unfairness of it all. That had been two years ago! He was a child then and it was a mere childish prank, he wanted to say. But now the Scribemaster was talking too.

"And just this last spring he climbed up to our third-floor study and turned two rabbits loose during one of our legal debates. Most disruptive. Absolutely!"

"Rabbits, you say, Scribemaster?" said the Baron, and Nigel nodded emphatically.

"A male and a female rabbit, my lord, if you take my meaning?" he replied. "Most disruptive indeed!" Unseen by Will, the very serious Lady Pauline put one elegant hand in front of her mouth. She might have been concealing a yawn. But when she removed the hand, the corners of her mouth were slightly uptilted still.

"Well, yes," said the Baron. "We all know how rabbits are."

"And, as I said, my lord, it was spring." Nigel went on, in case the Baron had missed the point. Lady Pauline gave vent to an unladylike cough. The Baron looked in her direction, in some surprise.

"I think we get the picture, Scribemaster," he said, then returned his gaze to the desperate figure who stood in front of him. Will kept his chin up and stared straight ahead. The Baron felt for the young lad in that moment. He could see the tears welling up in those lively brown eyes, held back only by an infinite determination. Willpower, he thought abstractedly, recognizing the play on the boy's name. He didn't enjoy putting the boy through all this, but it had to be done. He sighed inwardly.

"Is there any one of you who could use this boy?" he said.

Despite himself, Will allowed his head to turn and gaze pleadingly at the line of Craftmasters, praying that one of them would relent and accept him. One by one, silently, they shook their heads.

Surprisingly, it was the Ranger who broke the awful silence in the room.

"There is something you should know about this boy, my lord," he said. Will had never heard Halt speak before. His voice was deep and soft-spoken, with the slightest burr of a Hibernian accent still noticeable.

He stepped forward now and handed the Baron a sheet of paper, folded double. Arald unfolded it, studied the words written there and frowned.

"You're sure of this, Halt?" he said.

"Indeed, my lord."

The Baron carefully refolded the paper and placed it on his desk. He drummed his fingers thoughtfully on the desktop, then said:

"I'll have to think on this overnight."

Halt nodded and stepped back, seeming to fade into the background as he did so. Will stared anxiously at him, wondering what information the mysterious figure had passed on to the Baron. Like most people, Will had grown up believing that Rangers were people who were best avoided. They were a secretive, arcane group, shrouded in mystery and uncertainty, and that uncertainty led to fear.

Will didn't like the thought that Halt knew something about him—something that he felt was important enough to bring to the Baron's attention today, of all days. The sheet of paper lay there, tantalizingly close, yet impossibly far away.

He realized that there was movement around him and the Baron was speaking to the other people in the room.

"Congratulations to those who were selected here today. It's a big day for all of you, so you're free to have the rest of the day off and enjoy yourselves. The kitchens will provide a banquet for you in your quarters and for the rest of the day you have free run of the castle and the village.

"Tomorrow, you'll report to your new Craftmasters first thing in the morning. And if you'll take a tip from me, you'll make sure you're on time." He smiled at the other four, then addressed Will, with a hint of sympathy in his voice.

"Will, I'll let you know tomorrow what I've decided about you. "He turned to Martin and gestured for him to show the new apprentices out. "Thank you, everyone," he said, and left the room through the door behind his desk.

The Craftmasters followed his lead, then Martin ushered the former wards to the door. They chatted together excitedly, relieved and delighted that they had been selected by the Craftmasters of their choice.

Will hung back behind the others, hesitating as he passed the desk where that sheet of paper still lay. He stared at it for a moment, as if somehow he could see through to the words written on the reverse side. Then he felt that same sensation that he had felt earlier, that someone was watching him. He looked up and found himself staring into the dark eyes of the Ranger, who remained behind the Baron's high-backed chair, almost invisible in that strange cloak of his.

Will shuddered in a sudden frisson of fear and hurried out of the room.

Chapter 5

It was long after midnight. The flickering torches around the castle yard, already replaced once, had begun to burn low again. Will had watched patiently for hours, waiting for this moment-when the light was uncertain and the guards were yawning, in the last hour of their shift.

The day had been one of the worst he could remember. While his yearmates celebrated, enjoying their feast and then spending their time in lighthearted horseplay through the castle and the village, Will had slipped away to the silence of the forest, a kilometer or so from the castle walls. There, in the dim green coolness beneath the trees, he had spent the afternoon reflecting bitterly on the events of the Choosing, nursing the deep pain of disappointment and wondering what the Ranger's paper said.

As the long day wore on, and the shadows began to lengthen in the open fields beside the forest, he came to a decision.

He had to know what was on the paper. And he had to know tonight.

Once night fell, he made his way back to the castle, avoiding villagers and castle folk alike, and secreted himself in the branches of the fig tree again. On the way, he slipped unnoticed into the kitchens and helped himself to bread, cheese and apples. He munched moodily on these, barely tasting them, as the evening passed and the castle began to settle down for the night.

He observed the movements of the guards, getting a feeling for their timing as they went on their regular rounds. In addition to the guard troop, there was a sergeant on duty at the doorway of the tower that led to Baron

Arald's quarters. But he was overweight and sleepy and there was little chance that he would pose a risk to Will. After all, he had no intention of using the door or the stairway.

Over the years, his insatiable curiosity, and a penchant for going places where he wasn't supposed to, had developed within him the skill of moving across seemingly open space without being seen.

As the wind stirred the upper branches of the trees, they created moving patterns in the moonlight-patterns that Will now used to great effect. He instinctively matched his movement to the rhythm of the trees, blending easily into the pattern of the yard, becoming part of it and so being concealed by it. In a way, the lack of obvious cover made his task a little easier. The fat sergeant didn't expect anyone to be moving across the open space of the yard. So, not expecting to see anyone, he failed to do so.

Breathless, Will flattened himself against the rough stone of the tower wall. The sergeant was barely five meters away and Will could hear his heavy breathing, but a small buttress in the wall hid him from the man's sight. He studied the wall in front of him, craning back to look up. The Baron's office window was a long way up, and farther around the tower. To reach it, he would have to climb up, then work his way across the face of the wall, to a spot beyond the point where the sergeant stood guard, then up again to the window. He licked his lips nervously. Unlike the smooth inner walls of the tower, the huge blocks of stone that comprised the tower's outer wall had large gaps between them. Climbing would be no problem. He'd have plenty of foot- and handholds all the way up. In some places, the stone would have been worn smooth by the weather over the years, he knew, and he'd have to go carefully. But he'd climbed all the other three towers at some time in the past and he expected no real difficulty with this one.

But this time, if he were seen, he wouldn't be able to pass it off as a prank. He would be climbing in the middle of the night to a part of the castle where he had no right to be. After all, the Baron didn't post guards on this tower for the fun of it. People were supposed to stay away unless they had business here.

He rubbed his hands together nervously. What could they do to him? He had already been passed over in the Choosing. Nobody wanted him. He was condemned to a life in the fields already. What could be worse than that?

But there was a nagging doubt at the back of his mind: He wasn't absolutely sure that he was condemned to that life. A faint spark of hope still remained. Perhaps the Baron would relent. Perhaps, if Will pleaded with him in the morning, and explained about his father and how important it was for him to be accepted for Battleschool, there was a very faint chance that his wish would be granted. And then, once he was accepted, he could show how his eagerness and dedication would make him a worthy student, until his growing spurt happened.

On the other hand, if he were caught in the next few minutes, not even that small chance would remain. He had no idea what they would do to him if he were caught, but he could be reasonably sure that it wouldn't involve being accepted into Battleschool.

He hesitated, needing some slight extra push to get him going. It was the fat sergeant who provided it. Will heard the heavy intake of breath, the shuffling of the man's studded boots against the flagstones as he gathered his equipment together, and he realized that the sergeant was about to make one of his irregular circuits of his beat. Usually, this entailed going a few meters around the tower to either side of the doorway, then returning to his original position. It was more for the purpose of staying awake than

anything else, but Will realized that it would bring them face-to-face within the next few seconds if he didn't do something.

Quickly, easily, he began to swarm up the wall. He made the first five meters in a matter of seconds, spread out against the rough stone like a giant, four-legged spider. Then, hearing the heavy footsteps directly below him, he froze, clinging to the wall in case some slight noise might alert the sentry.

In fact, it seemed that the sergeant had heard something. He paused directly below the point where Will clung, peering into the night, trying to see past the dappled, moving shadows cast by the moon and the swaying trees. But, as Will had thought the night before, people seldom look up. The sergeant, eventually satisfied that he had heard nothing significant, continued to march slowly around the tower.

That was the chance Will needed. It also gave him the opportunity to move across the tower face so that he was directly below the window he wanted. Hands and feet finding purchase easily, he moved almost as fast as a man could walk, all the time going higher and higher up the tower wall.

At one point, he looked down and that was a mistake. Despite his good head for heights, his vision swam slightly as he saw how far he had come, and how far below him the hard flagstones of the castle yard were. The sergeant was coming back into view-a tiny figure when seen from this height. Will blinked the moment of vertigo away and continued to climb, perhaps a little more slowly and with a little more care than before.

There was a heart-stopping moment when, stretching his right foot to a new foothold, his left boot slipped on the weather-rounded edge of the massive building blocks, and he was left clinging by his hands alone as he desperately scrabbled for a foothold. Then he recovered and kept moving.

He felt a surge of relief as his hands finally closed over the stone window ledge and he heaved himself up and into the room, swinging his legs over the sill and dropping lightly inside.

The Baron's office was deserted, of course. The three-quarter moon streamed light in through the big window.

And there, on the desk where the Baron had left it, was the single sheet of paper that held the answer to Will's future. Nervously, he glanced around the room. The Baron's huge, high-backed chair stood like a sentry behind the desk. The few other pieces of furniture loomed dark and motionless. On one wall, a portrait of one of the Baron's ancestors glared down at him, accusingly.

He shook off these fanciful thoughts and crossed quickly to the desk, his soft boots making no noise on the bare boards of the floor. The sheet of paper, bright white with the reflected moonlight, was within reach. Just look at it, read it and go, he told himself. That was all he had to do. He stretched out a hand for it.

His fingers touched it.

And a hand shot out of nowhere and seized him by the wrist! Will shouted aloud in fright. His heart leaped into his mouth and he found himself looking up into the cold eyes of Halt the Ranger.

Where had he come from? Will had been sure there had been nobody else in the room. And there had been no sound of a door opening. Then he remembered how the Ranger could wrap himself in that strange, mottled, gray-green cloak of his and seem to melt into the background, blending with the shadows until he was invisible.

Not that it mattered how Halt had done it. The real problem was that he had caught Will, here in the Baron's office. And that meant the end to all Will's hopes.

"Thought you might try something like this," said the Ranger in a low voice.

Will, his heart pounding from the shock of the last few moments, said nothing. He hung his head in shame and despair.

"Do you have anything to say?" Halt asked him, and Will shook his head, unwilling to look up and meet that dark, penetrating gaze. Halt's next words confirmed Will's worst fears.

"Well, let's see what the Baron thinks about this," he said.

"Please, Halt! Not..." Then Will stopped. There was no excuse for what he had done and the least he could do was face his punishment like a man. Like a warrior. Like his father, he thought.

The Ranger studied him for a moment. Will thought he saw a brief flicker of... recognition? Then the eyes darkened once more.

"What?" Halt said curtly. Will shook his head.

"Nothing."

The Ranger's grip was like iron around his wrist as he led Will out the door and onto the wide, curving staircase that led up to the Baron's living quarters. The sentries at the head of the stairs looked up in surprise at the sight of the grim-faced Ranger and the boy beside him. At a brief signal from Halt, they stood aside and opened the doors into the Baron's apartment.

The room was brightly lit and, for a moment, Will looked around in confusion. He was sure he had seen the lights go out on this floor while he waited and watched in the tree. Then he saw the heavy drapes across the window and understood. In contrast to the Baron's sparsely furnished working quarters below, this room was a comfortable clutter of settees, footstools, carpets, tapestries and armchairs. In one of these, Baron Arald sat, reading through a pile of reports.

He looked up from the page he was holding as Halt entered with his captive.

"So you were right," said the Baron, and Halt nodded.

"Just as I said, my lord. Came across the castle yard like a shadow. Dodged the sentry as if he wasn't there and came up the tower wall like a spider."

The Baron set the report down on a side table and leaned forward. "He climbed the tower, you say?" he asked, a trifle incredulously.

"No rope. No ladder, my lord. Climbed it as easily as you get on your horse in the morning. Easier, in fact," Halt said, with just the ghost of a smile.

The Baron frowned. He was a little overweight and sometimes he needed help getting on his horse after a late night. He obviously wasn't amused by Halt's reminding him of the fact.

"Well now," he said, looking sternly at Will, "this is a serious matter."

Will said nothing. He wasn't sure if he should agree or disagree. Either course had its dangers. But he wished Halt hadn't put the Baron in a bad

mood by referring to his weight. It certainly wouldn't make things any better for him.

"So, what shall we do with you, young Will?" the Baron continued. He rose from his chair and began to pace. Will looked up at him, trying to gauge his mood. The strong, bearded face told him nothing. The Baron stopped his pacing and fingered his beard thoughtfully.

"Tell me, young Will," he said, facing away from the miserable boy, "what would you do in my place? What would you do with a boy who broke into your office in the middle of the night and tried to steal an important document?"

"I wasn't stealing, my lord!" The denial burst from Will before he could contain it. The Baron turned to him, one eyebrow raised in apparent disbelief. Will continued weakly, "I just... wanted to see it, that's all."

"Perhaps so," said the Baron, that eyebrow still raised. "But you haven't answered my question. What would you do in my place?"

Will hung his head again. He could plead. He could apologize. He could ask for mercy. He could try to explain. But then he squared his shoulders and came to a decision. He had known the consequences of being caught. And he had chosen to take the risk. He had no right now to plead for forgiveness.

"My lord..." he said, hesitantly, knowing that this was a decisive moment in his life. The Baron regarded him, still half turned from the window.

"Yes?" he said, and Will somehow found the resolve to go on.

"My lord, I don't know what I'd do in your place. I do know there is no excuse for my actions and I will accept whatever punishment you decide."

As he spoke, he raised his face to look the Baron in the eye. And in doing so, he caught the Baron's quick glance to Halt. There was something in that glance, he saw. Strangely, it was almost a look of approval, or agreement. Then it was gone.

"Any suggestions, Halt?" the Baron asked, in a carefully neutral tone.

Will looked at the Ranger now. His face was stern, as it always was. The grizzled gray beard and short hair made him seem even more disapproving, more ominous.

"Perhaps we should show him the paper he was so keen to see, my lord," he said, producing the single sheet from inside his sleeve.

The Baron allowed a smile to break through. "Not a bad idea," he said. "I suppose, in a way, it does spell out his punishment, doesn't it?"

Will glanced from one man to the other. There was something going on here that he didn't understand. The Baron seemed to think that what he had just said was rather amusing. Halt, on the other hand, wasn't sharing in the fun.

"If you say so, my lord," he replied evenly. The Baron waved a hand at him impatiently.

"Take a joke, Halt! Take a joke! Well, go on and show him the paper."

The Ranger crossed the room and handed Will the sheet he had risked so much to see. His hand trembled as he took it. His punishment? But how had

the Baron known he would deserve punishment before the actual event?

He realized that the Baron was watching him expectantly. Halt, as ever, was an impassive statue. Will unfolded the sheet and read the words Halt had written there.

The boy Will has the potential to be trained as a Ranger.

I will accept him as my apprentice.

Chapter 6

Will stared at the words on the paper in utter confusion.

His first reaction was one of relief. He wasn't to be condemned to a lifetime of farmwork. And he wasn't to be punished for his actions in the Baron's study. Then that initial sense of relief gave way to a sudden, nagging doubt. He knew nothing about Rangers, beyond myth and superstition. He knew nothing about Halt-apart from the fact that the grim, gray-cloaked figure had made him feel nervous whenever he was around.

Now, it seemed, he was being assigned to spend all his time with him. And he wasn't sure that he liked the idea at all.

He looked up at the two men. The Baron, he could see, was smiling expectantly. Apparently, he felt that Will should greet his decision as good news. He couldn't see Halt's face clearly. The deep cowl of his cloak left his face in shadow.

The Baron's smile faded slightly. He appeared a little puzzled by Will's reaction to the news-or rather, his lack of any visible reaction,

"Well, what do you say, Will?" he asked, in an encouraging tone. Will drew a deep breath.

"Thank you, sir...my lord," he said uncertainly. What if the Baron's earlier joke about the note containing his punishment was more serious than he thought? Maybe being assigned to be Halt's apprentice was the worst punishment he could have chosen. But the Baron certainly didn't look as if he thought so. He seemed to be very pleased with the idea, and Will knew

he wasn't an unkind man. The Baron gave a little sigh of pleasure as he lowered himself into an armchair. He looked up at the Ranger and gestured toward the door.

"Perhaps you might give us a few moments alone, Halt? I'd like to have a word with Will in private," he said. The Ranger bowed gravely.

"Certainly, my lord," he said, the voice coming from deep inside the cowl. He moved, silently as ever, past Will and out through the door that led to the corridor outside. The door closed behind him with barely a sound, and Will shivered. The man was uncanny!

"Sit down, Will." The Baron gestured to one of the low armchairs facing his own. Will sat nervously on the edge of it, as if poised for flight. The Baron noted his body language and sighed.

"You don't seem very pleased with my decision," he said, sounding disappointed. The reaction puzzled Will. He wouldn't have thought a powerful figure like the Baron would care one way or another what an insignificant ward would think about his decisions. He didn't know how to answer, so he sat in silence, until finally the Baron continued.

"Would you prefer to work as a farmhand?" he asked. He couldn't believe that a lively, energetic boy like this could possibly prefer such a dull, uneventful life, but maybe he was wrong. Will hurriedly reassured him on that score.

"No, sir!" he said hastily. The Baron made a small, questioning gesture with his hands.

"Well then, would you prefer that I punished you somehow for what you've done?"

Will started to speak, then realized that his answer might be insulting and stopped. The Baron gestured for him to continue.

"It's just that... I'm not sure you haven't, sir," he said. Then, noticing the frown that creased the Baron's forehead as he said the words, he hurried on: "I... I don't know much about Rangers, sir. And people say..." He let the words trail off. It was obvious that the Baron held Halt in some esteem and Will didn't think it was politic for him to point out that ordinary people feared Rangers and thought they were warlocks. He saw that the Baron was nodding, and a look of understanding had replaced the perplexed expression he had been wearing.

"Of course. People say they're black magicians, don't they?" he agreed and Will nodded, not even realizing he was doing so. "Tell me, Will, do you find Halt to be a frightening person?"

"No, sir!" Will said hastily, then, as the Baron held his gaze, he reluctantly added, "Well... maybe a bit." The Baron leaned back, steepling his fingers together. Now that he understood the reasons for the boy's reluctance, he berated himself mentally for not foreseeing them. After all, he had a better knowledge of the Ranger Corps than he could expect of a young boy just turned fifteen who was subjected to the usual superstitious mutterings of the castle staff.

"The Rangers are a mysterious group of people," he said. "But there's nothing about them to be frightened of-unless you're an enemy of the kingdom." He could see that the boy was hanging on his every word, and he added, jokingly, "You're not an enemy of the kingdom, are you, Will?"

"No, sir!" Will said in sudden fright, and the Baron sighed again.