



Ranger's Apprentice

THE ROYAL RANGER

A NEW BEGINNING

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JOHN FLANAGAN

ABOUT THE BOOK

Will, you took an oath to the Ranger Corps. Does it mean nothing to you now?

A senseless tragedy has destroyed your life. You are determined to punish those responsible, but you must not turn your back on the Ranger Corps.

Now a routine mission has uncovered a shocking web of crime. Soon you will be forced to choose between taking the dark path of revenge, and saving innocent lives . . .

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RANGERS' APPRENTICE

THE ROYAL RANGER

BOOK 12

RHCP DIGITAL

For my family



CHARACTER PROFILES



WILL has been a Ranger for many years, having trained with the legendary Ranger Halt. Delivered to Castle Redmont as an orphan, he does not know the true story of his parents. When he was younger he dreamed of becoming a Knight, but he found his true path as a Ranger. Will is known for his loyalty and bravery, and has proven himself in countless battles. Now a grown man, he has recently been struck with personal tragedy, and the once mischievous and spirited young man has grown grim and humourless, and is now driven by a black passion for revenge.

MADDIE – or, to give her formal title, Princess Madelyn of Araluen – is the 15-year-old daughter of Princess Regent Cassandra and Sir Horace. Bright and cheerful, she frequently defies the wishes of her parents to spend her time hunting game in the forests around Castle Araluen. Though she is heir to the throne, she does not wish to spend her life in a protective cocoon, and longs for a chance to learn the skills necessary for leading men into battle.

HALT is a renowned member of the Ranger Corps, known for his mysterious ways and his unstoppable nature. Halt is a superb archer and uses a massive longbow. Like all Rangers his skill with the bow is uncanny, deadly accurate, and devastatingly swift. Although he rarely shows emotions, he thinks of

Will as his son. He is now officially retired, but still occasionally carries out missions at the request of the Corps Commandant.

HORACE is the premier Knight of the Kingdom. Like Will he was an orphan, and grew up as a ward of Castle Redmont. As a younger boy he used to bully Will, but now they are firm friends, having helped each other out on countless missions. He later married Princess Cassandra, the heir to the throne of Araluen, and his daughter will one day rule as Queen. He is dependable, loyal to the knightly code of conduct, and known for his hearty appetite.

GILAN was once Halt's apprentice and is the only Ranger who carries a sword. He is tall and humorous, in sharp contrast to his former master. He is generally considered the best in the Corps at unseen movement. For all his jokes and light-hearted manner, Gilan is serious about being a Ranger, and his skills have seen him promoted quickly to the upper ranks of the Corps.

JORY RUHL is a former mercenary who now leads a gang of criminals who have been preying on villages in Anselm and its neighbouring fiefs, capturing children and demanding ransoms from their parents. Having shown he is prepared to murder innocents to preserve his freedom, Will is determined to stop him and his gang at any cost.

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.





IT HAD BEEN a poor harvest in Scanlon Estate. The wheat crop had been meagre at best, and the apple orchards had been savaged by a blight that left three-quarters of the fruit blemished and rotting on the trees.

As a result, the share farmers, farm labourers, orchardists and fruit pickers were facing hard times, with three months to go before the next harvest, during which time they would have nowhere near enough to eat.

Squire Dennis of Scanlon Manor was a kind-hearted man. He was also a practical one and, while his kind-hearted nature urged him to help his needy tenants, his practical side recognised such an action as good business. If his farmers and labourers went hungry, chances were they would move away, in search of work in a less stricken region. Then, when good times returned to Scanlon Estate, there would be insufficient workers available to reap the harvest.

Dennis had acquired considerable wealth over the years and could ride out the hard times ahead. But he knew that such an option wasn't available to his workers. Accordingly, he decided to invest some of his accumulated wealth in them. He set up a workers' kitchen, which he paid for himself, and opened it to the needy who lived on his estate. In that way, he ensured that his people received at least one good meal a day. It was nothing fancy – usually a soup, or a porridge made from oats. But it was hot and nourishing

and filling and he was confident that the cost would be more than repaid by the continuing loyalty of his tenants and labourers.

The kitchen was in the parkland in front of the manor house. It consisted of rows of trestle tables and benches, and a large serving table. These were sheltered from the worst of the weather by canvas awnings stretched over poles above them, creating a large marquee. The sides were left open. In bad weather, this often meant that the wind and rain blew around the tables. But farm folk are of hardy stock and the arrangement was far better than eating in the open.

In fact, kitchen was a misnomer. All the cooking was done in the vast kitchen inside the manor house, and the food was carried out to be served to the hungry tenants and their families. The estate workers understood that the food was provided free of charge. But it was a matter of principle that any who could afford a small payment would do so. Most often, this was in the form of a few copper coins, or of produce – a brace of rabbits or a wild duck taken at the pond.

The kitchen operated for the two hours leading up to dusk, ensuring that the workers could enjoy a night's sleep without the gnawing pains of hunger in their bellies.

It was almost dusk when the stranger pushed his way through to the serving table.

He was a big man with shoulder-length dirty blond hair. He was wearing a wagoner's leather vest, and a pair of thick gauntlets were tucked into his belt, alongside the scabbard that held a heavy-bladed dagger. His eyes darted continually from side to side, never remaining long in one spot, giving him a hunted look.

Squire Dennis's chief steward, who was in charge of the serving table, looked at him suspiciously. The workers' kitchen was intended for locals, not for travellers, and he'd never seen this man before.

'What do you want?' he asked, his tone less than friendly.

The wagoner stopped his darting side-to-side looks for a few seconds and focused on the man facing him. He was about to bluster and threaten but the

steward was a heavily built man, and there were two powerful-looking servants behind him, obviously tasked with keeping order. He nodded at the cauldron of thick soup hanging over the fire behind the serving table.

‘I want food,’ he said roughly. ‘Haven’t eaten all day.’

The steward frowned. ‘You’re welcome to soup, but you’ll have to pay,’ he said. ‘Free food is for estate tenants and workers only.’

The wagoner scowled at him, but he reached into a grubby purse hanging from his belt and rummaged around. The steward heard the jingle of coins as he sorted through the contents, letting some drop back into the purse. He deposited three pennigs on the table.

‘That do?’ he challenged. ‘That’s all I’ve got.’

The steward raised a disbelieving eyebrow. He’d heard the jingle of coins dropping back into the purse. But it had been a long day and he couldn’t be bothered with a confrontation. Best to give the man some food and get rid of him as soon as possible. He gestured to the serving girl by the soup vat.

‘Give him a bowl,’ he said.

She dumped a healthy portion into a wooden bowl and set it before him, adding a hunk of crusty bread.

The wagoner looked at the tables around him. Many of those seated were drinking noggins of ale as well. There was nothing unusual in that. Ale was relatively cheap and the squire had decided that his people shouldn’t have a dry meal. There was a cask behind the serving table, with ale dripping slowly from its spigot. The wagoner nodded towards it.

‘What about ale?’ he demanded.

The steward drew himself up a little straighter. He didn’t like the man’s manner. He might be paying for his meal, but it was a paltry amount and he was getting good value for his money.

‘That’ll cost extra,’ he said. ‘Two pennigs more.’

Grumbling, the wagoner rummaged in his purse again. He showed no sign of embarrassment at producing more coins after claiming that he had none. He tossed them on the table and the steward nodded to one of his men.

‘Give him a noggin,’ he said.

The wagoner took his soup, bread and ale and turned away without another word.

‘And thank you,’ the steward said sarcastically, but the blond man ignored him. He threaded his way through the tables, studying the faces of those sitting there. The steward watched him go. The wagoner was obviously looking for someone and, equally obviously, hoping not to see him.

The servant who had drawn the ale stepped close to him and said in a lowered voice, ‘He looks like trouble waiting to happen.’

The steward nodded. ‘Best let him eat and be on his way. Don’t give him any extra, even if he offers to pay.’

The serving man grunted assent, then turned as a farmer and his family approached the table, hopefully looking at the soup cauldron.

‘Step up, Jem. Let’s give you and your family something to stick your ribs together, eh?’

Holding his soup bowl and ale high to avoid bumping them against the people seated at the tables, the wagoner made his way to the very rear of the marquee, close by the sandstone walls of the great manor house. He sat at the last table, on his own, facing the front, where he could see new arrivals as they entered the big open tent. He began to eat, but with his eyes constantly flicking up to watch the front of the tent, he managed to spill and dribble a good amount of the soup down his beard and the front of his clothes.

He took a deep draught of his ale, still with his eyes searching above the rim of the wooden noggin. There was only a centimetre left when he set it down again. A serving girl, moving through the tables and collecting empty plates, paused to look into the noggin. Seeing it virtually empty, she reached for it. But the wagoner stopped her, grasping her wrist with unnecessary force so that she gasped.

‘Leave it,’ he ordered. ‘Haven’t finished.’

She snatched her wrist away from his grip and curled her lip at him.

‘Big man,’ she sneered. ‘Finish off your last few drops of ale then.’

She stalked away angrily, turning once to glare back at him. As she did, a frown came over her face. There was a cloaked and cowled figure standing

directly behind the wagoner's chair. She hadn't seen him arrive. One moment, there was nobody near the wagoner. Then the cloaked man appeared, seemingly having risen out of the earth. She shook her head. That was fanciful, she thought. Then she reconsidered, noting the mottled green and grey cloak the man wore. It was a Ranger's cloak, and folk said that Rangers could do all manner of unnatural things – like appearing and disappearing at will.

The Ranger stood directly behind the wagoner's chair. So far, the ill-tempered man had no idea that he was there.

The shadow of the cowl hid the newcomer's features. All that was visible was a steel-grey beard. Then he slipped back the cowl to reveal a grim face, with dark eyes and grey, roughly trimmed hair to match the beard.

At the same time, he drew a heavy saxe knife from beneath the cloak and tapped its flat side gently on the wagoner's shoulder, leaving it resting there so the wagoner could see it with his peripheral vision.

'Don't turn around.'

The wagoner stiffened, sitting bolt upright on his bench. Instinctively, he began to turn to view the man behind him. The saxe rapped on his shoulder, harder this time.

'I said don't.'

The command was uttered in a more peremptory tone, and some of those nearby became aware of the scene playing out at the table. The low murmur of voices died away to silence as more people noticed. All eyes turned towards the rear table, where the wagoner sat, seemingly transfixed.

Somewhere, someone recognised the significance of the grey mottled cloak and the heavy saxe knife.

'It's a Ranger.'

The wagoner slumped as he heard the words, and a haunted look came over his face.

'You're Henry Wheeler,' the Ranger said.

Now the haunted look changed to one of abject fear. The big man shook his head rapidly, spittle flying from his lips as he denied the name.

‘No! I’m Henry Carrier! You’ve got the wrong man! I swear.’

The Ranger’s lips twisted in what might have been a smile. ‘Wheeler . . . Carrier. Not a very imaginative stretch if you’re planning to change your name. And you should have got rid of the Henry.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about!’ the wagoner babbled. He began to turn to face his accuser. Again, the saxe rapped him sharply on the shoulder.

‘I told you. Don’t turn around.’

‘What do you want from me?’ The wagoner’s voice was rising in pitch. Those watching were convinced that he knew why the grim-faced Ranger had singled him out.

‘Perhaps you could tell me.’

‘I haven’t done anything! Whoever this Wheeler person is, it’s not me! I tell you, you’ve got the wrong man! Leave me be, I say.’

He tried to put a sense of command into the last few words and failed miserably. They came out more as a guilt-laden plea for mercy than the indignation of an innocent man. The Ranger said nothing for a few seconds. Then he said three words.

‘The Wyvern Inn.’

Now the guilt and fear were all too evident on the wagoner’s face.

‘Remember it, Henry? The Wyvern Inn in Anselm Fief. Eighteen months ago. You were there.’

‘No!’

‘What about the name Jory Ruhl, Henry? Remember him? He was the leader of your gang, wasn’t he?’

‘I never heard of no Jory Ruhl!’

‘Oh, I think you have.’

‘I never have! I was never at any Wyvern Inn and I had nothing to do with the . . .’

The big man stopped, realising he was about to convict himself with his words.

‘So you weren’t there, and you had nothing to do with . . . what exactly, Henry?’

‘Nothing! I never did nothing. You’re twisting my words! I wasn’t there! I don’t know anything about what happened!’

‘Are you referring to the fire that you and Ruhl set in that inn, by any chance? There was a woman killed in that fire, remember? A Courier. She got out of the building. But there was a child trapped inside. Nobody important, just a peasant girl – the sort of person you would consider beneath your notice.’

‘No! You’re making this up!’ Wheeler cried.

The Ranger was unrelenting. ‘But the Courier didn’t think she was unimportant, did she? She went back into the burning building to save her. She shoved the girl out through an upper-floor window, then the roof collapsed and she was killed. Surely you remember now?’

‘I don’t know any Wyvern Inn! I’ve never been in Anselm Fief. You’ve got the wrong –’

Suddenly, with a speed that belied his bulk, the wagoner was on his feet and whirling to his right to face the Ranger. As he began the movement, his right hand snatched the dagger from his belt and he swung it in a backhanded strike.

But, fast as he was, the Ranger was even faster. He had been expecting some sudden, defiant movement like this as the desperation had been mounting in Wheeler’s voice. He took a swift half step backwards and the saxe came up to block the wagoner’s dagger. The blades rang together with a rasping clang, then the Ranger countered the wagoner’s move with his own. Pivoting on his right heel, he deflected the dagger even further with his saxe and followed the movement with an open-palmed strike with his left hand, hitting Wheeler on the ridge of his jawline.

The wagoner grunted in shock and staggered back. His feet tangled in the bench he’d been sitting on and he stumbled, crashing over to hit the edge of the table, then falling with a thud to the ground.

The wagoner lay there, unmoving. An ominous dark stain began to spread across the turf.

‘What’s going on here?’ The steward moved from behind the serving table, with his two assistants in tow. He looked at the Ranger, who met his gaze steadily. Then the Ranger shrugged, gesturing towards the still figure on the ground. The steward tore his gaze away, knelt and reached to turn the heavy figure over.

The wagoner’s eyes were wide open. The shock of what had happened was frozen on his face. His own dagger was buried deep in his chest.

‘He fell on his knife. He’s dead,’ the steward said. He looked up at the Ranger, but saw neither guilt nor regret in his dark eyes.

‘What a shame,’ said Will Treaty. Then, gathering his cloak around him, he turned and strode from the tent.



THE FIRST STREAKS of light were staining the eastern sky. In the parkland surrounding Castle Araluen, birds began singing to herald the coming day – at first in ones or twos, but gradually swelling into a general, joyous chorus. Occasionally, one could be seen flitting between the well-spaced trees, in search of food.

The large castle drawbridge was currently raised. That was a matter of course. It was raised every night at nine o'clock, even though Araluen had been at peace for some years now. Those in command of the castle knew that the peace could be shattered without warning. As King Duncan had said some years previously, 'No one ever died from being too careful.'

There was a small wooden footbridge in place across the moat – little more than a pair of planks with rope hand rails. It could be quickly withdrawn in the event of an attack. At its outer end, a pair of sentries stood watch. There were more lookouts on the castle walls, of course. Multiple pairs of eyes scanned the well-tended parkland that stretched for several hundred metres on all sides of the castle, and the thickly wooded forest beyond.

As the two sentries watched, one of them nudged his companion.

'Here she comes,' he said.

A slim figure had emerged from the trees and was striding up the gently sloping grassed field to the castle. The newcomer was dressed in a thigh-length leather hunting vest, belted at the waist and worn over a long-sleeved, thick woollen shirt and wool breeches. The breeches were tucked into knee-high boots of soft, untanned leather.

There was nothing about the figure to indicate that it was a girl. The sentry's knowledge arose from the fact that this was a regular occurrence. The fifteen-year-old girl often sneaked away from the castle to hunt in the forest, much to the fury of her parents. The castle sentries found this amusing. She was a popular figure among them, bright and cheerful and always ready to share the proceeds of a successful hunt. As a result, they turned a blind eye to her comings and goings, although they didn't advertise the fact. Her mother, after all, was the Princess Regent Cassandra, and no low-ranking soldier would risk her ill favour, or that of her husband, Sir Horace, the premier knight of the Kingdom.

As Maddie – or, to give her her formal title, Princess Madelyn of Araluen – came closer, she recognised the men on post. They were two of her favourites and her face lit up with a smile.

'Morning, Len. Morning, Gordon. I see you've had a quiet night.'

The sentry called Gordon smiled back at her. 'That was until a fierce warrior maiden burst out of the forest just now and threatened the castle, your highness,' he said.

She frowned at him. 'What have we said about this *your highness* business? It's all a bit too formal for five o'clock in the morning.'

The sentry nodded and corrected himself. 'Sorry, Princess.'

He glanced back up at the walls of the castle. One of the sentries there waved in acknowledgement of the fact that they had recognised the princess as well. 'I assume your parents don't know you've been out hunting?'

Maddie wrinkled her nose. 'I didn't want to bother them,' she said innocently. Gordon raised an eyebrow and grinned conspiratorially. 'I'm perfectly safe, as you can see.'

The sentry called Len shrugged uncertainly. 'The forest can be dangerous, Princess. You never know.'

Her grin widened. 'Not too dangerous for a fierce warrior maiden, surely? And I'm not defenceless, you know. I've got my saxe and my sling.'

She touched the long double leather thong that was hanging loosely around her neck. Then, as mention of the sling reminded her of something, she delved into the laden game bag slung over her shoulder.

'By the way, I got a hare and a couple of wood pigeons. Can you use them?'

The sentries exchanged a quick glance. They knew that if Maddie suddenly produced fresh-killed game in the castle, questions would be asked as to how she had obtained it. On the other hand, the addition of some fresh meat would be a welcome change to the soldiers' table.

Gordon hesitated. 'The pigeons are all right, Princess. But the hare? If my wife's found cooking that up, folks might think I'd been poaching.'

Only the King, his family, or senior officials and warriors had the right to take game such as hares in the environs of the castle. Rangers, of course, hunted wherever they chose, with a fine disregard for such matters. Ordinary people were allowed to hunt smaller animals such as rabbits, pigeons and duck. But a hare was a different matter. A peasant or soldier could be fined for taking one.

Maddie made a dismissive gesture. 'If anyone asks, say I gave it to you. I'll back you up.'

'I wouldn't want to get you into trouble.' Gordon hesitated still, his hand halfway out for the hare.

Maddie laughed carelessly. 'Wouldn't be the first time. Probably wouldn't be the last. Take it. And you take the pigeons, Len.'

The sentries finally gave in, taking the game and chorusing their thanks. Maddie brushed their gratitude aside.

'Think nothing of it. I don't want to throw them away and see good food go to waste. And you're saving me a lot of explanations.'

The guards stowed the animals in the small sentry box that gave them shelter in bad weather. Maddie waved to them and stepped lightly across the

footbridge, letting herself into the small wicket beside the main castle gate. The two sentries smiled at each other. This was one of the perks of being assigned to the outside sentry post.

‘She’s a nice kid,’ Len said.

Gordon, who was the older of the two by some years, agreed. ‘Like her mother,’ he said. Then he added thoughtfully, ‘Mind you, Princess Cassandra used to stalk *us* when she sneaked out of the castle as a girl.’

Len raised his eyebrows. ‘Really? I hadn’t heard that.’

‘Oh yes.’ Gordon nodded, remembering. ‘She practised her stalking skills on the sentries. Then she’d let fly with *her* sling and hit the heads of our spears. A right terror, she was, until we got used to her tricks.’

Len was trying to equate the current Princess Cassandra – the caretaker ruler of the Kingdom – with the picture his companion had drawn of a wild, adventurous tomboy terrorising the castle guards.

‘You’d never pick it now. She’s so calm and dignified, isn’t she?’



‘WHERE THE BLIND, BLUE, BLITHERING BLAZES HAVE YOU BEEN?’ the calm and dignified Princess Cassandra demanded.

Maddie froze in shock as her mother’s words echoed round the living room of the royal apartment.

She had tiptoed up the tower stairs and crept silently into the room, unlatching the door carefully, then opening it quickly to prevent any long, lingering squeaks from the hinges. The interior was in darkness, with heavy drapes across the window and only a few glowing embers in the fire grate.

She had paused just inside the door, senses alert for any sound or any hint of another’s presence in the room. She had taken off her boots before climbing the stairs and now held them in her left hand. Satisfied that her parents were still asleep in their chamber, she had begun stepping carefully across the thick carpet towards her own suite of rooms.

Then her mother – as skilled in the art of ambush as most mothers are – had startled her with her furious, echoing roar.

Maddie froze in mid-stride, one foot poised above the carpet. She looked frantically around the room. She had been convinced that it was empty. Now she made out the dim form of her mother seated in a large, high-backed armchair.

‘Mum!’ she said, recovering quickly. ‘You startled me!’

‘I startled you?’ Cassandra rose from the chair and crossed the room to face her daughter. She was in her nightgown, with a heavy robe over it to protect her from the chill. An observer would have remarked on the similarity between the two women. Both were small in stature, slender and graceful in their movements. Both had green eyes and attractive features. And both had the same determined tilt to their chins. In times past, people had mistaken them for sisters and it was no surprise that they had. They shared the same mass of blonde hair, although there were occasional grey streaks in Cassandra’s now – testament to the strain that she had been under, managing the Kingdom for her invalid father these past three years.

‘I startled *you*?’ she repeated from closer range, her voice rising a few tones with incredulity.

‘I thought you were asleep,’ Maddie said, trying an innocent smile. In fact, she was sure her mother had been asleep when she had left the apartment, several hours before. She had peered into the royal bedchamber to make sure of it.

‘I thought *you* were asleep,’ her mother replied. ‘I seem to recall that at the ninth hour you made a big fuss about how tired you were.’

She feigned an enormous yawn. Maddie was uncomfortably aware that it was an excellent impersonation of her own performance the previous evening.

‘Oh, I’m *soooo* tired!’ Cassandra said, still mimicking her in an exaggerated little girly voice. ‘I’m afraid I’m off to bed right away.’

‘Ah . . . yes,’ Maddie said. ‘Well, I woke up. I was starving, so I went down to the kitchens to get something to eat.’

‘Carrying your boots,’ Cassandra observed. Maddie looked down at them, as if seeing them for the first time.

‘Um . . . I didn’t want to get mud all over the carpet,’ she said quickly. Too quickly. Speaking quickly often results in a mistake.

‘That would be mud from the kitchen,’ Cassandra said evenly.

Maddie opened her mouth to reply, but could think of nothing to say. She shut it again.

‘Madelyn, are you crazy?’ Cassandra said, her anger finally bursting like water gushing through a fractured dam. ‘You’re a princess, the heir to the throne after me. You can’t go gallivanting off in the forest in the dead of night. It’s just too dangerous!’

‘Mum, it’s just a forest. It’s not dangerous. I know what I’m doing. I saw a badger,’ she added, as if that would excuse what she’d been doing.

‘Oh well, if you saw a badger, that makes it all right!’ Cassandra’s sarcasm cut like a whip. ‘Why didn’t you mention the badger immediately? Now I can go back to bed and sleep peacefully because I know you weren’t in any danger. How could you be if you saw a blasted badger?’

‘Mother . . .’ Maddie began in a tone that implied her mother was being unreasonable. Maddie only called Cassandra ‘mother’ when she was exasperated by what she saw as obsessive, over-controlling behaviour.

Cassandra was all too well aware of that fact and her eyes flashed with anger.

‘Don’t you *Mother* me, Madelyn!’ she snapped.

Madelyn’s shoulders straightened and she stood a little taller. She was two centimetres shorter than her mother and, at times like this, she felt that deficiency put her at a disadvantage.

‘Then don’t you *Madelyn* me!’ she retorted crisply. Cassandra only called her by her full, formal name when she felt she was being irresponsible, immature and infuriating.

‘I’ll *Madelyn* you any time I please, young lady!’

Maddie rolled her eyes. ‘Oh, we’re on to *young lady* now, are we?’ she said wearily. She made a beckoning gesture with her hands. ‘Let it all out. Let’s hear the litany of my sins. I’m a terrible girl. I’m irresponsible. I’m a disgrace to the royal house of Araluen.’

She stood facing her mother, one hand on her hip in a petulant pose, as totally infuriating as only a teenage girl can be when she knows she’s in the wrong but refuses to admit it.

Cassandra’s hand twitched and she felt an overwhelming urge to slap her daughter. She shoved her hands into the pockets of the gown to prevent any

such action. She took a deep breath and lowered her voice.

‘There are bears in that forest, Madelyn. What would you do if you ran into one?’

‘Dondy says that if you meet a bear, you crouch down, stay still and don’t make eye contact.’ Dondy was the royal forester and hunt master.

‘He also says that’s a last resort and it’s only successful half the time.’

‘Then I’d run the other way. Or climb a tree. A small, thin tree so he couldn’t climb after me.’ She added the last quickly, before Cassandra could point out that bears were able to climb trees.

It was obvious that she wasn’t going to surrender this point. Cassandra changed tack. ‘There are criminals too. Brigands and bandits and outlaws. They hide out in the forest.’

‘They’re pretty few and far between these days. Dad has seen to that,’ Maddie replied. Horace had recently conducted a series of armed sweeps to drive the outlaws from their lairs in the forest.

‘It’d only take one. You’re well known. You could be kidnapped and held to ransom.’

‘He’d have to catch me first,’ Maddie said stubbornly.

Cassandra turned away, throwing her hands in the air in resignation. ‘Mind you, we’d have to be willing to pay to get you back,’ she muttered. Her tone indicated that this would be no certainty.

The door to the bedroom opened, emitting a shaft of light into the dark room. Horace entered. His hair was tousled and his nightshirt was tucked into his trousers. His feet were bare. So was the blade of the sword in his right hand. It glinted in the light of the lantern he held in his left hand, sending random reflections darting around the walls.

‘What’s going on?’ he said. Seeing only his wife and daughter in the room, he set the sword to one side, leaning it against the wall. He held the lantern higher, studying his daughter in its light.

‘You’ve been hunting again,’ he said. His tone was a mix of anger and resignation.

‘Dad, I’ve just been out for an hour . . .’ Maddie began, sensing that her father might be more reasonable than Cassandra. She knew she could usually bring him round to her way of thinking.

‘I’ve been waiting over two hours,’ Cassandra snapped. ‘I found your bed empty and I’ve been sitting here ever since.’

Horace shook his head. Any hopes that he would be more forgiving than her mother were dashed by his next words.

‘Are you stupid, Maddie? Or are you just determined to defy your mother and me? It’s got to be one or the other, so tell me. Which is it?’

It wasn’t fair, Maddie thought, the way adults gave you two equally damning alternatives and insisted you pick one. She folded her arms and dropped her eyes from her father’s angry gaze.

‘I’m waiting,’ Horace said.

Maddie set her jaw. She glared at her angry parents and they glared back. At last, Cassandra couldn’t endure the silence.

‘Maddie, you’re the heir to the throne. You’ll rule Araluen one day –’ she began, and Maddie seized on the opening she’d created.

‘And how can I do that if you keep me locked up in a protective cocoon? If I know nothing about facing danger and making decisions and thinking quickly?’

‘What?’ her mother said, frowning. But Maddie kept going.

‘If I were a boy, Dad would be teaching me how to fight and ride and lead men in battle . . .’

‘I taught you to ride,’ Horace said, but she shook her head impatiently.

‘If I do become queen, how can I order men to go out and fight for me if I don’t know the first thing about it myself?’

‘You’ll have advisers,’ Cassandra said. ‘People who do know these things.’

‘Not the same! I’ll be expected to make decisions.’ She pointed a finger at her mother. ‘Of all people, you should understand that! When you were my age, you fought the Wargals, were abducted by Skandians and commanded archers against the Temujai. You fought alongside Dad!’

‘That was by accident. I didn’t set out to do those things!’

‘But you *did* choose to go to Arrida and fight the Tualaghi. And you chose to go to Nihon-Ja and rescue Dad. You killed the snow tiger –’

‘Alyss killed it,’ Cassandra put in but Maddie ignored the interruption.

‘And you used to sneak out into the forest and practise with your sling . . .’

Cassandra’s head snapped up. ‘Who told you that?’

‘Grandpa. He said he used to be worried sick about you.’

‘Your grandfather talks too much,’ Cassandra said, thin-lipped. ‘In any event, even if I did do those things, that doesn’t say you should do them too.’

‘But people respect you! They know you’ve faced danger! That’s all I’m asking: some of that same respect! And I’m bored! I want some excitement in my life!’

‘Well, this is not the way to get it!’ Cassandra said.

‘Then how? Tell me that? I don’t want to spend my days learning needlework and geography and Gallican grammar and irregular verbs! I want to learn more important things.’

‘Maybe we can work something out . . .’ Horace said doubtfully. He could see a grain of sense in what his daughter was saying.

But she rounded on him immediately. ‘Like what? What can we work out?’

He made a helpless gesture in the air. ‘I don’t know . . . something . . . we’ll see.’

Maddie finally erupted in anger. ‘Oh, great! *We’ll see*. The great parental excuse for doing nothing! That’s terrific, Dad! *We’ll see*.’

‘Don’t talk to me like that,’ Horace told her, although he was conscious of the fact that the phrase *we’ll see* was a tried and true parental tactic for postponing difficult decisions.

‘Why not? Will *we see* what happens to me if I do? What will *we see*?’ She leaned towards him, challenging him, her hands on her hips. Her entire body seemed to quiver with indignation and frustration.

‘All right. That’s it,’ Horace snapped. ‘You’re confined to your rooms for a week! I’ll put a sentry on the door and you will not leave!’

Maddie’s cheeks were flaming with self-righteous anger now. ‘That is so stupid and petty! I suppose *we’ll see* how it works out!’ she yelled.

‘Make it two weeks,’ Horace said, every bit as angry as she was. She took a breath to reply and he tilted his head to one side. ‘Planning on trying for three weeks?’

She hesitated, then saw the look in his eyes. She turned away and stamped angrily to the door to her own rooms.

‘This is so unfair!’ she shouted, and slammed the door behind her.

Horace and Cassandra exchanged a long look. Horace shook his head, defeated, and put his arm around his wife’s shoulders.

‘That went well,’ he said.



HALT AND PAULINE eased their horses to a stop as the road emerged from the trees below Castle Araluen.

Neither had suggested it, nor had they exchanged a glance. It was simply a natural response to the sudden sight of the castle, with its soaring spires and turrets, and banners streaming bravely in the wind from a dozen different vantage points around the walls.

‘Impressive, isn’t it?’ Pauline said softly.

Halt glanced sidelong at her, a half smile on his face. ‘Always has been,’ he agreed. ‘Still, I wouldn’t trade it for Redmont.’

By comparison, Castle Redmont was solid and functional, with none of the grace and beauty that Araluen offered. But it was home. It was where Halt and Pauline had spent the greater part of their lives and where they had finally revealed their life-long love for each other.

Life at Redmont was also far less formal, which was more in line with Halt’s idea of how things should be. He had little time for the strictly ordered routines and occasions of the royal palace, with its rigid adherence to protocol and rank. He thought of such behaviour as useless tomfoolery and scowled whenever he was forced to attend any sort of formal event. Thankfully, the message he had received from Gilan indicated that there would be no formality attached to this visit.

They urged their horses forward in a slow trot, their hooves raising small puffs of dust that hung in the warm air. They were travelling alone, with just a single packhorse and without any escort. Not that they needed any. Even though Halt was now retired, and his hair had turned from pepper-and-salt grey to silver, he was still the most famous Ranger in the Kingdom, and a formidable opponent for any potential highwayman. The massive longbow he carried across his saddle was evidence of the fact.

‘Do you find it odd,’ Pauline asked, ‘to be summoned by your former apprentice?’

Halt pursed his lips. ‘It wasn’t so much a summons,’ he corrected her. ‘More a request.’

It was three years since Crowley had passed away. The Ranger Commandant had died peacefully in his sleep. It was an ironic end for his oldest friend. After a lifetime of battles and intrigue and danger, he had simply stopped breathing one night. He was found with his eyes open and a quizzical smile on his face. At least that was fitting, Halt thought. Crowley had been renowned for his impish sense of humour. He had obviously died thinking of something that amused him and Halt drew comfort from that fact.

With Crowley’s death, most people assumed that Halt would take on the mantle of Corps Commandant. But he had reacted with horror at the suggestion.

‘Paperwork, reports, organisation, sitting behind a desk listening to everyone’s complaints and problems. Can you see me doing that?’ he had said to Pauline at the time.

His wife had smiled, looking at his severe expression. ‘I don’t believe I can,’ she had agreed.

So the position was offered to Gilan, much to his surprise. He believed he was far too young for the job. But the appointment had been greeted with unanimous approval by his peers. Gilan was, along with Will Treaty, one of the most highly regarded of the younger men in the Corps – and one of the

most widely experienced, particularly in terms of international affairs. Gilan had travelled more widely, and seen more action, than most Rangers.

And he was used to being close to the corridors of power. His father was the Kingdom's Battlemaster and Gilan had a close personal relationship with Princess Cassandra and Sir Horace, the foremost knight of the Kingdom. Even more in his favour, in the eyes of the other Rangers, he had been mentored in his early days by Halt himself.

Will might have been considered for the job, although he was younger than Gilan. But while he and Halt were highly respected, even revered, as individuals, it was widely recognised that they preferred to act independently and had a penchant for bending the rules when they saw fit. Gilan, on the other hand, was more disciplined and organised, and more suited to the task of commanding and controlling an elite and disparate group like the fifty Rangers of Araluen.

'Do you suppose he's going to ask you to go on another mission?' Pauline asked, after they had ridden for a few minutes in silence. From time to time, even though he was retired, Halt agreed to undertake missions for Gilan.

Halt considered the question now, but shook his head.

'He would have said so in his letter,' he replied. 'He wouldn't ask me to come all this way if there was a chance that I'd say no. Besides, if he wanted me to go on a mission, why would he ask you to come to Castle Araluen? I get the feeling it's something personal.'

'You don't suppose Jenny's finally agreed to marry him?' Pauline said with a smile. It had been another surprise in the past few years when Jenny had decided that she had no wish to uproot herself and her thriving restaurant business from Redmont and follow Gilan to Castle Araluen. She loved him, they all knew. But she wanted to retain her individuality and her career.

'We'll do it one day,' Jenny had told Gilan. 'But at the moment you're either completely tied up with Ranger business or away on a mission somewhere. I've no wish to be the Commandant's wife.'

Gilan had been a little stung by her frank words. 'What if I meet someone else?' he had said, somewhat archly.

Jenny had shrugged. 'Then you're free to do as you please. But you won't meet anyone as good as me.'

She had been right. So they maintained their long-distance relationship, with Gilan taking any opportunity he could find to visit Redmont Fief and spend time with her. Each time they saw each other, he renewed his offer of marriage. And she renewed her postponement.

'I don't think so,' Halt replied now to Pauline's question. 'You know Jenny. If she'd decided to marry him, she would have been bubbling over with excitement.'

'True,' Pauline agreed. She sighed quietly. 'D'you think we set them all a bad example, waiting as long as we did?'

'I don't think it was a bad example,' Halt told her. 'Besides, the waiting kept you keen.'

She twisted in her saddle to look at him. It was a long, hard look, and Halt realised that he would pay for that sally. Perhaps not today, or tomorrow. But one day – probably when he least expected it. Still, it would be worth it. He rarely scored a point in verbal battles with his wife. She had a lifetime of practice in the Diplomatic Service.

They were close to the drawbridge now. It was lowered, as was the custom during daylight hours. Two sentries stood guard at the outer end. They came to attention and saluted the pair of riders. There was no need for Halt and Pauline to identify themselves. Their arrival was expected and they were widely recognised throughout the Kingdom, and particularly here in the capital.

'Ranger Halt, Lady Pauline,' said the more senior of the two. 'Welcome to Castle Araluen.'

He gestured to them to ride past, stepping aside to accentuate the invitation.

Halt nodded to the two men.

Pauline favoured the senior sentry with a beaming smile.

'Thank you, Corporal.' She leaned forward, looking more closely at the other man. 'And is that you, Malcolm Landers? I recall you helped me with

my horse last time I visited Araluen.'

The man's homely face broke into a delighted smile. 'True enough, my lady. He cast a shoe, as I remember.'

Halt shook his head slightly. His wife's ability to remember names and faces, even those of ordinary soldiers and men at arms, was a source of wonder to him. More of that diplomat training, he thought. Then he corrected himself. No, Pauline was genuinely interested in people. She liked people and she never forgot those who did her a good turn. He realised that her simple act of recognition and remembrance had won her a devoted follower. Malcolm Landers would now do anything for her.

Of course, he said silently to his horse, being a stunning beauty helps in these matters as well.

Not something that you'll ever be accused of, Abelard replied.

'Stop talking to your horse, dear,' Pauline said as they clopped their way across the drawbridge and under the raised portcullis.

He wondered how she knew that's what he'd been doing.

'I always know,' she said, and he wondered how she knew what he'd been wondering.

They were met in the courtyard by a young apprentice Ranger. Gilan had instituted a system whereby he 'borrowed' apprentices from their masters for two to three months, so they could assist him in his work as Commandant.

'It makes sense to give them a grounding in how the Corps is administered,' he had said to Halt. 'Who knows? Some day one of these boys may end up as Commandant.'

Halt had rolled his eyes at the thought. 'God help us,' he had said quietly.

'Good morning, Ranger Halt. Good morning, Lady Pauline,' the current Commandant-in-training greeted them. 'My name is Kane and I'm assisting the Commandant. The Commandant sends his apologies. He's addressing the final-year apprentice warriors at the Battleschool.' He looked nervously at the two visitors. 'He suggested that I show you to your rooms and he'll join

you as soon as he's free. He didn't know exactly when you were due to arrive,' he added apologetically.

Pauline favoured him with a smile. 'We understand. Gilan is a busy man, after all.'

Kane gestured to a stable hand who was standing ready nearby, shifting from one foot to another as he waited. 'Can I have Murray take care of your horses?' he suggested.

Halt hesitated. Pauline knew he preferred to look after Abelard himself. But she also knew that the young stable hand would boast for years to come about the fact that he had tended to Halt's horse.

'Let Murray do it, dear,' she said quietly.

Abelard tossed his head. *I agree. He'll do a better job than you. He'll show me extra respect.*

He'll show you extra apples is what you mean.

'Don't talk to your horse, dear. People are watching,' Pauline said quietly.

Halt turned a perplexed look towards her. 'How do you know when I'm doing that?'

She smiled at him. 'Your nose twitches,' she said.

A little bewildered, Halt allowed the stable boy to take Abelard's bridle in one hand. He led Pauline's horse with the other and headed for the stables. Halt and Pauline followed Kane to an upper floor of the keep tower, where a comfortable suite of rooms had been prepared for them. On the way, Kane kept glancing surreptitiously at the famous Ranger, fascinated by the fact that he kept staring down his nose and tweaking its tip between his forefinger and thumb.

Once they reached the suite of rooms set aside for them, Pauline declared that she would take a bath, and sent servants to fetch hot water.

'I'll pay my respects to King Duncan while you're bathing,' Halt said. Pauline nodded as she unpacked several gowns and hung them in the wardrobe.

'I'll see him later, when he's had time to prepare.'

Duncan had been bedridden now for many months, following a leg injury that wouldn't heal. Formerly powerfully built and full of energy, he was a shadow of his former self. He had lost weight and muscle tone, and Pauline, conscious of the King's sense of dignity, felt that he would want time to prepare himself to look his best before greeting a female visitor. Halt nodded sombrely.

'Good idea,' he said. 'I'll give him your regards.'

Prepared as he was, it was still something of a shock when Halt was ushered into the King's bedroom. It had been some months since he had last visited the King and he was depressed to see how far Duncan had degenerated. His cheeks were hollow and waxy, his eyes overbright and feverish. And his body was gaunt, the skin seeming to hang off it. The injured leg was propped out before him, under a mound of blankets.

They chatted about inconsequential matters for a few minutes. Halt realised that, although Duncan was delighted to see him – one of his oldest friends and staunchest supporters – the King was weak and tired quickly as they talked. Halt cut short his visit and made his farewells, but Duncan beckoned him closer to the bed. The King seized Halt's wrist in a claw-like hand and leaned forward.

'Halt, keep watch over Cassandra. It's not easy for her – running the Kingdom with me laid up in bed.'

Halt forced a laugh. 'I will, my lord, but you'll be up and about before too long and you can take charge again.'

Before he had finished, Duncan was shaking his head. 'Let's not fool ourselves, Halt. I don't have long. And when I'm gone, she'll need friends.' He paused, breathing with difficulty, his eyes closed for a few seconds. Then he opened them again. 'Thank god for Horace. She couldn't have chosen a better husband.'

The old Ranger smiled fondly at the thought of the honest young knight who was so utterly devoted to the princess. 'You couldn't say a truer word,' he replied. Ironic, he thought. Horace had been an orphan, born of unremarkable peasant stock. Soon he would become the most powerful and

influential man in the Kingdom, sitting at Cassandra's right hand as she ruled.

'She'll need him,' the King said. 'It's not easy for a woman to rule. There'll be those who resent her and try to test her. She'll need all the help she can get. From Horace. From you. And from Will.'

Halt nodded assurance at the King. 'We'll give it to her,' he said. Then he couldn't help smiling. 'But don't underestimate your daughter, my lord. She knows what she wants and she knows how to get it.'

A tired smile crossed Duncan's face. 'And from what I hear, her daughter is taking after her,' he said. He released his grip on Halt's wrist and, as if the effort had been too much for him, slumped back in the pillows, waving a weak hand in dismissal.

Halt crossed quietly to the door, deep in thought. As he laid his hand on the latch, he turned back to look at the King he had served for so many years. Duncan was already asleep, his chest rising and falling fitfully under the covers.

Sadly, Halt let himself out.

'None of us are getting younger,' he said, to no one in particular. Then he smiled. Abelard would have had a tart rejoinder to that, he thought.



IT WAS LESS than ten minutes after Halt returned to their guest rooms when Kane knocked at the door. ‘The Commandant is free now,’ he said. ‘He asks if you’ll join him in his office.’

Halt and Pauline followed the young Ranger as he led them down several levels to the administration section of the keep tower. The higher levels were given over to accommodation and suites.

Gilan’s office in the keep tower was light and breezy, with the shutters thrown wide open to admit the fresh air. Rangers hated to be cooped up, Pauline knew. Although sometimes their love of fresh air could be a little extreme. Fresh air was all very well. Fresh, cold air was something else. But she was aware of this trait and so she had worn a warm stole over her gown.

Gilan greeted Halt and Pauline happily, embracing them both and accepting a kiss on the cheek from Pauline. She regarded him fondly. She couldn’t help thinking of Halt’s two former apprentices as surrogate sons. She noted that his normally cheerful face carried a few more lines than it had when she had last seen him. The burden of responsibility, she thought.

Unlike Halt and Will, Gilan had remained cleanshaven. It gave him a youthful look that was at odds with his senior position in the Kingdom.

‘Gilan,’ she said, ‘you’re looking well.’ And apart from those wrinkles, he was.

He smiled at her. 'And you grow more beautiful every day, Pauline,' he replied.

'What about me?' Halt said, with mock severity. 'Do I grow more handsome every day? More impressive, perhaps?'

Gilan eyed him critically, his head to one side. Then he announced his verdict.

'Scruffier,' he said.

Halt raised his eyebrows. 'Scruffier?' he demanded.

Gilan nodded. 'I'm not sure if you're aware of recent advances in technology, Halt,' he said. 'But there's a wonderful new invention called scissors. People use them for trimming beards and hair.'

'Why?'

Gilan appealed to Pauline. 'Still using his saxe knife to do his barbering, is he?'

Pauline nodded, slipping her hand inside her husband's arm. 'Unless I can catch him at it,' she admitted. Halt regarded them both with a withering look. They both refused to wither, so he abandoned the expression.

'You show a fine lack of respect for your former mentor,' he told Gilan.

The younger man shrugged. 'It goes with my exalted position as your commander.'

'Not mine,' Halt said. 'I've retired.'

'So I can expect little in the way of deference from you?' Gilan grinned.

'No. I'll show proper deference . . . the day you train your horse to fly backwards around the castle's turrets.'

Pauline knew that these good-natured insults could continue for some time. She decided to interrupt the flow.

'What did you want to see us about, Gil? Are you planning to steal my husband away?' she asked.

Gilan had been on the point of delivering another carefully composed insult to his former teacher. Her direct question caught him off balance.

'What? Oh . . . no. Far from it. I wanted to talk to you. Both of you.'

Pauline indicated a low table, with four comfortable chairs set around it, arranged by the fireplace. 'Then shall we sit and talk?' she suggested.

But Gilan demurred. 'Not here. I want to talk to you two, and to Cassandra and Horace. They're expecting us in the royal apartments.'

As Commandant of the Rangers, Gilan could summon Halt and Pauline to Araluen. But he could hardly do the same to the Princess Regent and her consort, old friends or not. He led the way to the door, held it open for Halt and Pauline, then led the way to the stairs.

'Upstairs . . . downstairs . . . upstairs again. Do you have any pity for my creaking old bones?' Halt complained.

Gilan was walking briskly towards one of the spiralling staircases that led to the upper levels. 'Not a bit,' he tossed cheerfully over his shoulder.

Horace and Cassandra were waiting in the living room of the royal suite. Gilan tapped at the door and, when he heard Cassandra's response, he opened the door and ushered his two companions inside.

As they entered, Cassandra rose from her seat and moved to embrace them both.

'It's so good to see you!' she exclaimed. She could not have meant it more. The responsibility of running the Kingdom was a heavy burden and Halt and Pauline were more than friends. They were lifelong supporters. Halt, in particular, had spent many years as her adviser and protector in dangerous situations, from Skandia to the mountains of Nihon-Ja.

Horace waited until his wife had welcomed them, then he embraced them both in his turn. Halt studied him carefully.

'How's life in Castle Araluen?' he asked. Horace's honest face looked a little rueful.

'It's fine,' he said. 'But I miss the old days.'

'You mean the old days when you could skive off with this rascal to all corners of the earth and avoid responsibility?' his wife put in.

'Exactly,' Horace said in a tone so heartfelt that they all laughed.

Halt turned his gaze on the princess. 'I seem to remember you doing a certain amount of skiving off yourself.'

She waved a hand in a negative gesture. 'Let's not discuss that now,' she said.

There was a light tap on the door that led to Madelyn's rooms.

'Come in,' Cassandra called, and the door opened to admit the young princess.

'Halt. Lady Pauline. How wonderful to see you.'

Madelyn hesitated for a second, then, seeming to come to a decision, crossed the room and embraced them both. While she was hugging Pauline, Halt happened to glance at her parents. As he did, he sensed the unmistakable tension in the room. Cassandra, who had never been able to hide her feelings from Halt, had a slight frown, and Horace was looking decidedly uncomfortable. Madelyn stepped back from hugging Pauline and nodded a greeting to Gilan.

Horace cleared his throat awkwardly. 'Very well, Madelyn,' he said. 'You've said your hellos. Now off you go.' He gestured towards the door leading to her apartment. Maddie smiled at the new arrivals, and retraced her steps.

'We'll talk later,' Halt called after her. He had an easy relationship with Maddie and had served as her confidant many times in the past.

She gave him a sad little smile. 'Of course,' she said, and closed the door.

Halt looked curiously at his two old friends. 'Trouble in paradise?' he said gently.

Cassandra gave an annoyed shrug. 'Oh, she's just so exasperating, Halt!' she said. 'She's headstrong and irresponsible, and so infuriating. And if you try to speak to her about it, she huffs and sighs and rolls her eyes so that you simply want to strangle her!'

Halt rubbed his beard thoughtfully. 'Sounds serious,' he said. 'Huffing and sighing and eye rolling, you say? I've never heard of a teenage girl behaving like that.'

'You can joke about it, Halt,' Horace put in. 'You don't have to put up with it. She's had Cassandra worried sick. She sneaks off into the forest at the dead of night, alone. We've restricted her to her quarters for two weeks. Maybe that will teach her a lesson.'

Halt's expression told his old friend that he doubted it. A headstrong girl like Maddie would only become more stubborn with that sort of restriction.

Horace saw the sceptical expression and felt he had to add more. 'She's taking risks and she just assumes she can take care of herself. That forest can be dangerous!'

'But basically, she's a sensible girl, isn't she?' Halt asked. 'And I imagine she could look after herself. She's good with a saxe. I taught her, after all. And I hear she's pretty good with that sling of hers.'

'Who told you that?' Cassandra said sharply. Halt spread his hands in a defensive gesture.

'Your father might have mentioned it. I was chatting with him an hour ago.'

'Father talks too much,' Cassandra said, a scowl crossing her face.

Halt smiled tolerantly at her. Over the years, he'd learned that parents tended to be the toughest critics of their own children. Grandparents and uncles – and he classed himself as an honorary uncle to Maddie – tended to see the fuller picture, and be able to discount any minor aberrations in behaviour, gauging them against the child's overall reasonable nature.

Pauline knew it too. But she also knew that nothing could be more annoying to parents than an outsider telling them that an errant child wasn't anywhere near as bad as they were making out.

'Perhaps it's none of our business, Halt . . .' she began.

'No. It's all right,' Cassandra said.

'What does she do in the forest?' Halt asked her.

'She tracks animals. And she hunts.'

'Is she any good?'

Cassandra shrugged uncertainly. Horace answered before he could stop to think.

'Apparently yes. She never comes back empty-handed. But she gives the game to the castle guards.'

Cassandra looked at him. 'How do you know that?' she demanded.

Horace looked confused. He dropped his gaze from hers. 'I . . . err . . . I may have heard some of the guards discussing it.'

'And you didn't choose to share this with me?'

'I didn't think there was any point. I knew you'd just get angry about it.'

'And you were right! If you'd seen your way to –'

Pauline clapped her hands sharply. It was a measure of her personality and self-confidence that she would call the Princess Regent to order in such a peremptory fashion. And a measure of Cassandra's regard for the tall, blonde Courier that she would accept such brusqueness.

'Horace! Cassandra! That's enough!' They both stopped and looked at Pauline and she continued in a milder tone. 'You're not the first parents to be driven crazy by a teenage daughter. And you won't be the last. It's difficult, I know. But don't let it become too big a thing. Keep it in perspective. You need to maintain a united front, not bicker among yourselves.'

The two looked meekly down at their shoes. Halt smiled to himself again. They looked like naughty children rebuked by a stern parent.

'And it seems to me,' he said, 'she's not the first princess to go off in the woods at night looking for adventure.'

Cassandra screwed up her lip. 'Oh, don't you start.'

'Basically Maddie's a good kid,' he continued. 'She's smart and brave and resourceful. Because that's the way you've raised her.'

'Well,' said Gilan, a little impatiently, 'if that's settled for the moment, perhaps we could discuss the reason I asked to see you all.'

They turned to face him, wondering what he was going to say. They didn't have long to wait.

'It's Will,' he said. 'I'm very worried about him.'



‘IT’S BEEN EIGHTEEN months since Alyss’s death,’ Gilan said. ‘In that time, can any of you remember seeing Will laugh, or even smile?’

Sadly the others shook their heads. They exchanged uncomfortable looks. Then Pauline spoke.

‘It’s heart-breaking. He was always such a cheerful, happy person. Always grinning, always joking. These days, it’s as if a light has been extinguished inside him.’

‘Of course, we can’t expect him to just shake off the effects of losing Alyss in a few months,’ Halt put in. ‘She was his soul mate, after all, and losing her was a terrible shock to him.’



Alyss’s death had been the result of a terrible, tragic mischance. She had been returning, with a small escort, from the Celtic court, where she had been overseeing the renewal of the defence agreement between Araluen and Celtica. It was a routine trip and a routine mission. But on the way home, she had chanced upon a situation in Anselm, one of the southern fiefs.

For some months, a gang of criminals, led by a former mercenary named Jory Ruhl, had been preying on villages in Anselm and its neighbouring fiefs.

They would capture children then demand ransom payments from their parents. Since villagers weren't usually wealthy people, often the entire village would be forced to contribute to the ransom.

A local constable had received word that Ruhl and his gang were meeting one night at an inn called the Wyvern. Coincidentally, this was where Alyss had chosen to stay. The constable had organised a posse of volunteers and marched on the Wyvern with them.

Unfortunately, the attempted arrest was badly bungled. Ruhl received warning of the approaching posse and he and his men were making their escape when the constable and his force arrived on the scene. A fight broke out and one of the posse was killed. Seeking to create a diversion while they escaped, Ruhl and one of his men set fire to the inn. The dry thatching of the roof was soon ablaze and smoke filled the small saddling yard. Guests in the inn began streaming out, seeking safety, and soon, in the swirling smoke and the mass of shouting, frightened people, the constable had no way of knowing who was who. In the confusion, Ruhl and his four henchmen escaped into the forest.

Alyss and her three armed guards were among the guests who had escaped from the burning building. But as she stood in the saddling yard outside, the blonde Courier had looked up and saw a face at an upper window.

It was a five-year-old girl, struggling desperately to unfasten the latch on the window, which was jammed. As her panic grew, smoke filled the room and she began to cough, her eyes streaming. Blinded by the smoke and disoriented, she staggered away from the window and was lost to sight.

Without hesitation, Alyss plunged back into the burning inn, ignoring the warning cries from her guards. She fought her way up the staircase, which was already aflame, and headed for the front of the inn, her eyes closed and her face shielded from the raging heat by her forearm. She moved instinctively, feeling her way along the wall with her other hand.

She found the door latch and forced it open, lurching into the room where the girl had been. She dropped to her hands and knees, where there was a

small pocket of clearer air, and crawled towards the window. It was visible only as a vague square of light against the black, roiling smoke.

On the floor below the window, she could just make out the crumpled form of the young girl. Alyss crawled rapidly towards her and rolled her over, seeing with relief that her chest was still rising and falling as she breathed, striving hopelessly for a lungful of clean air. Alyss stood and drew her heavy dagger. She jammed it into the narrow gap between the window and its frame and jerked on it with all her strength. With a splintering crack, the window flew open, banging back against the outside wall. Alyss stooped and gathered the girl in her arms, heaving her up onto the sill. In the yard below, her guards were watching, horror written on their faces. They could see how badly the inn was aflame. The section where Alyss now stood was one of the few places untouched so far.

‘Catch her!’ Alyss yelled, and shoved the unconscious girl out the window, sending her sliding down the slope of the thatch. As the girl tumbled over the edge, the three guards moved forward to catch her. The weight of the falling body sent one of them sprawling in the dust and the other two staggered. But they managed to break the girl’s fall successfully. Then they looked back up to the window, where Alyss was beginning to clamber out.

A wall of flame shot up out of the thatch, between Alyss and the edge of the roof. The timbers and rafters below that point of the roof had been burning, unseen, for some minutes, and the fire suddenly broke through. Alyss was lost to sight. Then, with a terrible rumbling crash, the entire section of roof above and around where she was standing gave way and collapsed in a mass of flames and sparks. In a fraction of a second, there was nothing left but a gaping, smoking hole in the front of the inn. Then more timbers burned through and the entire front wall of the inn collapsed in on itself.

Alyss never had a chance.



‘I know,’ Gilan said now, breaking the long silence that had followed Halt’s statement. ‘It’s not an easy thing to get over.’

They had all cast their minds back to the terrible day when they had heard about Alyss’s death, seeing it in their minds as it had been described by Alyss’s distraught guards.

‘It was so typical of Alyss,’ Cassandra said quietly, ‘to give up her own life like that. Her guards said she never hesitated – just ran into the fire to save that girl.’

‘Maybe it wouldn’t have been so hard on Will if we’d been able to bury her,’ Pauline said. The fire had been so intense that Alyss’s body had never been recovered. ‘Funerals may be terribly sad affairs, but at least they give some sense of finality to the people left behind. I know I feel as if there’s a gap that hasn’t been filled. It must be so much worse for Will.’

Gilan waited a few seconds before he spoke again. ‘I can understand his grief and his sense of loss over this whole matter,’ he said. ‘That’s something he’ll have to come to terms with eventually. And I’m sure he will. But there’s something else.’

The others all looked at him curiously. But Halt sensed he knew what the young Commandant was talking about.

‘Jory Ruhl and his gang,’ Halt said quietly.

Gilan nodded. ‘He’s become embittered about the fact that they escaped. He’s set himself the task of catching them. He’s on a personal quest for revenge and the obsession is feeding the blackness in his mind and soul until he thinks about nothing else.’

Cassandra gave a sad little cry and put her hand to her throat. The thought of Will, her long-time companion – almost a surrogate brother – being driven and dominated by such a black passion brought tears to her eyes. She remembered their days together on the island of Skorghiyl long ago, when he had protected her and cared for her and kept her spirits up through the darkest of times. Remembered him in Arrida, coming to their rescue at the last moment, just as Halt had known he would.

You couldn't think of Will without seeing his unruly mop of brown hair and that cheerful grin on his face. Will had always been filled with an inner energy. He was enthusiastic and inquisitive, forever seeking something new and interesting in life. It was this trait that had led the Nihon-Jan people to christen him *chocho*, or butterfly. He seemed to flit cheerfully from one idea to another, from one event to the next.

Cassandra had seen Will several times since Alyss's death, although he tended to avoid his old friends. He was a grim-faced, grey-bearded figure these days. There was no sign of the old Will. Pauline was right. It was as if a light inside him had been extinguished.

'He needs something to take his mind off this idea of revenge,' Halt said. 'Can't you assign him to a mission – give him something to occupy his thoughts?'

'I've tried that,' Gilan said with a frown. He paused before continuing. 'He's refused on two occasions.'

Halt was shocked by the words. 'Refused? He can't do that!'

Gilan made a helpless gesture. 'I know, Halt. And so does Will. If it happens again, I'll have to suspend him from the Corps.'

'That would kill him,' Horace said.

Gilan looked at him. 'And he's well aware of it. But he doesn't care. And that means I can't afford to assign him another task. He'll refuse and I'll have to take action. At the same time, I can't afford to have my most effective Ranger sitting on his hands brooding about Jory Ruhl and his gang and planning how to catch them. All that aside, he's my friend and I hate seeing him this way.'

'I thought he'd already caught some of them?' Horace asked.

'Three of the five. He caught one only two weeks ago. Henry Wheeler was his name. Will confronted him and Wheeler tried to escape.'

'What happened?' Halt asked, although he dreaded to hear the answer. People didn't just 'escape' from someone as skilled and deadly as his old apprentice, and he didn't want to hear that Will had blood on his hands.

Gilan seemed to sense his thoughts. He shook his head abruptly.

‘Wheeler is dead. But it wasn’t Will’s doing. He tried to attack Will and fell on his own knife.’

Halt heaved a silent sigh of relief. ‘And the other two?’ he asked.

‘He captured them both and brought them in for trial and sentencing. Although he said to me that he was hoping they’d try to escape. I got the feeling that he even gave them several opportunities to do so. But they weren’t stupid enough to take them.’

There was a brief silence as they thought about their old friend.

‘What about Ruhl?’ Horace asked.

‘Will nearly caught him on one occasion,’ Gilan replied.

Halt looked up quickly. ‘I didn’t know that.’

Gilan nodded. ‘It wasn’t long after he started hunting them down. He got within five metres of him. Ruhl was on a punt, crossing a river. Will arrived just too late, after the punt had left the bank. They were face to face for a few seconds. But by the time Will had unslung his bow, Ruhl had taken cover behind some wool bales. Will tried to follow by climbing along the overhead cable that held the punt against the current. But when Ruhl reached the far bank, he cut through the cable and dropped Will in the river. He came close to drowning.’

‘So close,’ Halt muttered. ‘I imagine that makes it even worse for him.’

Gilan nodded agreement.

‘So, Gil,’ Pauline said, ever the one for practical action, ‘what do you suggest we do – other than simply talking about it and wringing our hands?’

Gilan hesitated. He was moving onto uncertain ground here, but his instinct told him the key to Will’s salvation lay with the people in this room – the ones closest to him.

‘Look,’ he said slowly, ‘we’re the ones he loves above all others. And the ones who love him. Maybe if we all talked to him together. If we got him into a room and told him how we’re worried for him, how we can see the harm this quest for revenge is doing to him, well, maybe the fact that we’re all saying it will get through to him. Maybe he’ll . . . I don’t know . . . snap out of it?’