

# **Death of a Hero**

**A Ranger's Apprentice Lost Story**  
**Ranger's Apprentice, prequel**

**by John Flanagan, 1944–**

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## **1**

IT HAD BEEN A LONG, HARD THREE DAYS.

Will had been on a tour of the villages surrounding Castle Redmont. It was something he did on a regular basis, keeping in touch with the villagers and their headmen, keeping track of the everyday goings-on. Sometimes, he had learned,

little pieces of gossip, seemingly trivial at the time, could become useful in heading off future trouble and friction within the fief.

It was part of being a Ranger. Information, no matter how unimportant it might seem at first glance, was a Ranger's lifeblood.

Now, late in the afternoon, as he rode wearily up to the cabin set among the trees, he was surprised to see lights in the windows and the silhouette of someone sitting on the small verandah.

Surprise turned to pleasure when he recognized Halt. These days Will's mentor was an infrequent visitor to the cabin, spending most of his time in the rooms provided for him and Lady Pauline in the castle.

Will swung down from the saddle and stretched his tired muscles gratefully.

"Hullo," he said. "What brings you here? I hope you've got the coffee on."

"Coffee's ready," Halt replied. "Tend to your horse and then join me. I need to talk to you." His voice sounded strained.

Curiosity piqued, Will led Tug to the stable behind the cabin, unharnessed him, rubbed him down and set out feed and fresh water. The little horse butted his shoulder gratefully. He patted Tug's neck, then headed back to the cabin.

Halt was still on the verandah. He had set out two cups of hot coffee on a small side table and Will sat in one of the wood-and-canvas chairs and sipped gratefully at the refreshing brew. He felt the warmth of it flowing through his chilled, stiff muscles. Winter was coming on and the wind had been cold and cutting all day.

He gazed at Halt. The gray-bearded Ranger seemed strangely ill at ease. And despite his claim that he needed to talk to Will, once the usual greetings were out of the way, he seemed almost reluctant to begin the conversation.

"You had something to tell me?" Will prompted.

Halt shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Then, with an obvious effort, he plunged in.

"There's something you should know," he said. "Something I probably should have told you long ago. It's just... the time never seemed right."

Will's curiosity grew. He had never seen Halt in such an uncertain mood. He waited, giving his mentor time to settle his thoughts.

"Pauline thinks it's time I told you," Halt said. "So does Arald. They've both known about it for some time. So maybe I should just... get on with it."

"Is it something bad?" Will asked, and Halt looked directly at him for the first time in several minutes.

"I'm not sure," he said. "You might think so."

For a moment, Will wondered if he wanted to hear it, whatever it might be. Then, seeing the discomfort on Halt's face, he realized that, good or bad, it was something that his teacher had to get off his chest. He gestured for Halt to continue.

Halt paused for a few more seconds, then he began.

"I suppose it starts after the final battle against Morgarath's forces, at Hackham Heath. They'd been retreating for several days. Then they stopped and made a stand. We'd broken their main attack and we were forcing them back. But they were rallying on the right, where they'd found a weak point in our line..."

### ***South of Hackham Heath***

“SIRE! THE RIGHT FLANK IS IN TROUBLE!”

Duncan, the young King of Araluen, heard the herald’s shout above the terrible din of battle. The clash of weapons and shields, the screaming and sobbing of the wounded and dying, the shouted orders of commanders rallying their troops and the involuntary, inarticulate cries of the soldiers themselves as they cut and stabbed and shoved against the implacable enemy formed an almost deafening matrix of sound around him.

Duncan thrust once more at the snarling Wargal before him, felt the sword go home and saw the snarl change to a puzzled frown as the creature realized it was already dead. Then he stepped back, disengaging himself from the immediate battle—physically and mentally.

A young knight from the Araluen Battleschool quickly took his place in the line, his sword already swinging in a murderous arc as he stepped forward, cutting through the Wargal front rank, like a scythe through long grass.

Duncan rested for a moment, leaning on his sword, breathing heavily. He shook his head to clear it.

“Sire! The right flank—” the herald began again, but Duncan waved a hand to stop him.

“I heard you,” he said.

It was three days since the battle at Hackham Heath, where Morgarath’s army had been routed by a surprise attack from their rear, led by the Ranger Halt. The enemy were in full retreat. By rights, Morgarath should have surrendered. His continued resistance was simply costing more and more casualties to both sides. But the rebellious lord was never concerned with preserving lives. He knew he was defeated, but still he wanted to inflict as many casualties as possible on Duncan and his men. If they were to be victorious, he would make them pay dearly for their victory.

As for his own forces, he cared little for their losses. They were nothing more than tools to him and he was willing to keep throwing them against the royal army, sacrificing hundreds of troops but causing hundreds of casualties in the process.

So for three days, he had retreated to the southeast, turning where the terrain favored him to fight a series of savage and costly battles. He had picked the spot for this latest stand well. It was a narrow plain set between two steep hills, and recent rain had softened the ground so that Duncan could not deploy his cavalry. It was up to the infantry to throw themselves against the Wargals in hard, slogging, desperate fighting.

And always lurking in the back of Duncan’s mind was that one mistake from him, one lucky throw of the dice for Morgarath, could see the Wargal army gain the initiative once more. Fortune in battle was a fickle mistress and the war that Duncan had hoped was ended at Hackham Heath was still there to be won—or lost by a careless order or an ill-considered maneuver.

Momentum, Duncan thought. It was all-important in a situation like this. It was vital to maintain it. Keep moving forward. Keep driving them back. Hesitate, even for a few minutes, and the ascendancy could revert to the enemy.

He glanced to his left. The flank on that side, predominantly troops from Norgate and Whitby, reinforced by troops from some of the smaller fiefs, was forging ahead strongly. In the center, the armies from Araluen and Redmont were having similar success. That was to be expected. They were the four largest fiefs in the Kingdom, the backbone of Duncan's army. Their knights and men-at-arms were the best trained and disciplined.

But the right flank had always been a potential weakness. It was formed from a conglomerate of Seacliff, Aspienne and Culway fiefs, and because the three fiefs were all about the same size, there was no clear leader among them. Knowing this, Duncan had appointed Battlemaster Norman of Aspienne Fief as the overall commander. Norman was an experienced leader, most capable of melding such a disparate force together.

As if he were reading the King's thoughts, the herald spoke again.

"Battlemaster Norman is dying, sire. A Wargal burst through the lines and speared him. Norman has been taken to the rear, but I doubt he has long to live. Battlemasters Patrick and Marat are unsure what to do next, and Morgarath has taken advantage of the fact."

Of course, thought Duncan, Morgarath would have recognized the banners of the smaller fiefs on that flank and guessed at the possible confusion that might result if the commander were put out of action. Once Norman was down, the rebel commander had undoubtedly sent one of his elite companies of shock troops to attack the right flank.

Momentum again, Duncan thought. Only this time it was working against him. He peered keenly toward the fighting on the right flank. He could see the line had stopped moving forward, saw his men take the first hesitant step backward. He needed a commander to take charge there and he needed him fast. Someone who wouldn't hesitate. Someone with the force of personality to rally the troops and get them going forward once more.

He glanced around him. Arald of Redmont would have been his choice. But Arald was being tended by the healers. A crossbow quarrel had hit him in the leg and he was out of action for the rest of the battle. Arald's young Battlemaster, Rodney, had taken his place and was fighting furiously, urging the Araluen forces forward. He couldn't be spared.

"They need a leader..." Duncan said to himself.

"I'll go." A calm voice spoke from behind him.

Duncan spun around and found himself looking into the steady, dark eyes of Halt, the Ranger. The dark black beard and untrimmed hair hid most of his features, but those eyes held a look of steadiness and determination. This was not a man who would bicker over command or dither over what had to be done. He would act.

Duncan nodded. "Go on then, Halt. Get them moving forward again or we're lost. Tell Patrick and Marat—"

He got no further. Halt smiled grimly. "Oh, I'll tell them, all right," he said. Then he swung up onto the small shaggy horse that was standing by him and galloped away toward the right flank.

### 3

ABELARD'S HOOVES THUNDERED DULLY ON THE SOFT TURF AS they drew near to the trouble spot. Now that he was closer, Halt could see that the Wargal attack was being spearheaded by one of Morgarath's special units. They were all larger than normal, selected for size and strength and savagery.

And they cared nothing for their own losses as they battered their way forward. Maces, axes and heavy two-handed swords rose and fell and swept in horizontal arcs.

Men from the Araluen army fell before them as they advanced in a solid wedge shape.

Halt was still forty meters away and he knew he would arrive too late. The Araluen line had bowed backward before the onslaught. Any second now it would crumble unless he acted.

He reined Abelard to a sliding stop.

"Steady," he said, and the little horse stood rock-still for him, disregarding the terrifying cacophony of battle and the awful, metallic smell of fresh blood.

Halt unslung his bow and stood in his stirrups. Then he began to shoot. He had three arrows in the air before the first struck the Wargal leading the attacking wedge. Halt had chosen his most powerful bow for the battle, one with a ninety-pound draw weight at full extension. Forty meters was point-blank range for such a weapon. The heavy, black-shafted arrow slammed through the beast's corselet of toughened leather and bronze plates and dropped him where he stood. Then, in rapid succession, the next two arrows struck home and two more Wargals died. Then more and more arrows arrived, each with a deadly *hiss-thud*, as Halt emptied his quiver in a devastating display of accuracy.

He aimed for the Wargals at the head of the wedge, so that as they fell they impeded the progress of those behind them. It was the sort of shooting no ordinary archer would attempt. If he missed, he might well send his arrows into the backs of the Araluen soldiers facing the Wargals.

But Halt was no ordinary archer. He didn't miss.

Out of arrows, he urged Abelard forward once more. As he reached the rear of the line, he dropped from the saddle and ran to join the struggling troops. On the way, he stopped, tossed his cloak to one side and picked up a round shield lying discarded in the grass—the Ranger two-knife defense was no use against a Wargal's heavy weapons. He hesitated a second, looking at a long sword that lay beside a dead knight's outstretched hand. But it was a weapon he was unfamiliar with and he discarded the notion of using it. He was used to his saxe knife, and its heavy, razor-sharp blade would be perfect for close fighting. He drew the saxe now as he ran forward, forcing his way between the soldiers.

"Come on!" he shouted. "Follow me! Push them back!"

The soldiers parted before him until he was at the front of the line and facing a huge, snarling Wargal squad leader. The brute was only a little taller than Halt but was massive in the shoulders and chest and probably weighed twice as much as he did. Halt saw the red mouth open as the Wargal bared his fangs at this new enemy. A spiked mace swung horizontally at him and he ducked beneath it, instantly coming upright and driving forward with the saxe, sinking it deep into the beast's ribs.

He saw a sword coming from the left, blocked it with the shield, then kicked the huge Wargal off the point of his saxe, sending the dying monster sprawling.

"Come on!" he shouted again, slashing his blade across another Wargal's throat and springing forward. He dodged another sword and stabbed twice at a Wargal facing him, buffeting it aside with the shield as it doubled over in agony. The Wargals were immensely powerful. But they were clumsy, and Halt had the speed and reflexes of a snake. He ducked and weaved and cut and stabbed, carving a path forward. And now he sensed someone moving up behind him, heard another voice echoing his cry.

"Come on! Forward! Push them back."

The hesitation in the Wargals' attack caused by Halt's volley of arrows, and his sudden appearance as he darted forward and took the fight to the enemy, gave the Araluen soldiers new heart. They began to follow Halt and his unidentified companion, moving forward once more.

Halt turned momentarily to glance back. He saw a stockily built sergeant a pace behind him and to his right, armed with a spear. As Halt looked, the sergeant thrust the spear forward, skewering a Wargal so that it screeched in agony. The man grinned at him.

"Keep going, Ranger! You're getting in my way!"

Behind him, others were following, forming their own wedge now and driving deeper and deeper into the Wargal line.

Halt faced the front once more. A Wargal came at him, ax drawn back for a killing blow. The sergeant's spear shot forward over Halt's shoulder, taking the Wargal in the throat and stopping it dead.

"Thanks!" Halt called, without looking. Two more Wargals were coming at him. He sidestepped the sword thrust of the first, felt his foot turn as he trod on the arm of a dead enemy, and tumbled sideways to the ground.

The second Wargal had swung a club at him and the stumble probably saved his life. The club struck only a glancing blow instead of shattering his skull with a direct hit. But it stunned him and he hit the ground, losing his grip on the saxe knife. He tried to rise but was hampered by the shield on his left arm. Dully, he realized that the Wargal with the club was standing on the shield, preventing his rising. He looked up, still dazed by the glancing blow, and saw the club go up again.

So, this is it, he thought. He wondered why he felt such a stolid acceptance of his own death. Maybe the blow to the head had slowed him down. He watched, waiting calmly, fatalistically, for the club to descend.

Then a flicker of light blazed over him, gleaming off a spearhead that buried itself in the Wargal's chest. The force behind the spear thrust shoved the creature backward. It gave a hoarse screech of pain and fell, passing out of Halt's line of

sight. The sergeant jumped nimbly over Halt's fallen form, dragged his spear free of the dead Wargal's body and stood with feet braced wide apart, protecting Halt from further attacks. He thrust again with the spear and another Wargal retreated hastily. Then a battleax smashed down onto the spear shaft, and the heavy iron head went spinning away, leaving the sergeant with nothing more than the two-and-a-half-meter ash spear shaft.

Halt's head swam and his vision blurred. The blow to the head had definitely done him some damage. His limbs were weak and he couldn't find the strength to rise. The scene before him seemed to unfold at a slow, dreamlike pace.

The sergeant took one look at the headless spear, shrugged, then whirled the heavy ash shaft in a circle, smashing it against another Wargal's helmet. Holding the shaft in both hands now, like a quarterstaff, he thrust underarm at a second enemy, driving the end deep into the Wargal's midsection.

"Look out!" Halt's attempted shout of warning was nothing more than a croak. He had seen a third Wargal, crouching low and concealed behind his companions, a jagged-edged sword ready to thrust.

One of the injured Wargals grabbed at the spear shaft, dragging the sergeant off balance, and the sword blade shot forward like a serpent striking. Red blood flowed from the sergeant's side where the sword had taken him. But still he didn't falter. He jerked the spear shaft free of the enemy's grip and, with an overhand action as if he were casting a spear, slammed it straight forward, hitting the Wargal who had wounded him straight between the eyes with the blunt end of the shaft.

The Wargal screamed and fell, throwing his hands to his shattered forehead and dropping the sword as he did so. Instantly, the sergeant seized it, tossing the spear shaft aside. Now he struck left and right with blinding speed and opened great slashing wounds in two more Wargals. One fell where he stood, while the other spun away, blundering into his companions, knocking two of them over. The sergeant parried a short iron spear thrust coming from his right. Another stabbed out from the left and struck him in the thigh. More blood flowed. Yet still he fought on. He killed the Wargal behind the spear with almost contemptuous ease. Then he slashed and cut left and right with the sword, taking a dreadful toll on any enemy who came within its reach. A knife thrust cut him in the side. He ignored it and dispatched the knife wielder with a backhanded slash.

Then Halt saw something he thought he'd never see.

As the bloodstained figure drove forward, sword rising and falling, hacking and cutting and slashing and stabbing, a tide of fear swept over the Wargals.

Morgarath's handpicked shock troops, who up until now had feared nothing short of mounted, armored knights, fell back in terror before the bloodied, death-dealing figure with the sword.

And as they did so, the men of the Araluen army found new heart and swept forward in the wake of the sergeant. He was badly wounded, but he continued fighting until his comrades surged past him, slamming into the demoralized Wargals and screaming in triumph.

For a moment, the sergeant stood in an empty space on the battlefield. Then, as the second rank of Araluen fighters poured past him to reinforce the first, and the

Wargal line broke and retreated in total confusion, their hoarse, wordless screams filling the air, his knees gave way and he sagged to the ground.

The noise of the battle moved away from them, receding like a tide, and Halt finally managed to free his arm from the shield, still pinned to the ground by a Wargal's dead body. He tried to rise to his feet, but the effort was beyond him. Instead, he crawled painfully to the fallen sergeant, dragging himself over the sprawled bodies of the Wargals the man had killed.

In spite of his wounds, the sergeant was still breathing, and he turned his head painfully as the Ranger approached. He managed a weak smile.

"We showed them, Ranger, didn't we?"

Halt could barely hear the voice, and his own was a croak as he answered. "That we did. What's your name, sergeant?"

"Daniel."

Halt gripped his forearm. "Hold on, Daniel. The healers will be here soon."

He tried to put as much encouragement into the words as possible. But the sergeant shook his head.

"Too late for me." Suddenly the man's eyes were filled with urgency. He tried to rise but fell back.

"Rest easy," Halt told him, but Daniel raised his head wearily and leaned toward him.

"My wife..." he managed to gasp. "My wife and the baby. Promise me you'll..." He coughed and blood rolled down his chin.

"I'll look out for them," Halt told him. "But don't worry. You'll be fine. You'll see them soon."

Daniel nodded and let his head fall back. He took a long, shuddering breath. Then he seemed to relax, and his breathing became easier, as if Halt's promise had lifted an enormous burden from his mind.

Halt heard voices then, and footsteps nearby. Then gentle hands were rolling him over and he found himself looking up at the concerned faces of a pair of medical orderlies who were setting down a litter beside him. He gestured weakly toward Daniel.

"I'm all right," he said. "Take the sergeant first."

The nearest orderly glanced quickly at Daniel, and shook his head.

"Nothing we can do for him," he said. "He's dead."

## 4

HALT WOKE.

For a few seconds, he wondered where he was. He was lying on his back, staring at the canvas roof of a large pavilion. He could hear people moving quietly nearby, speaking in lowered voices. Somewhere, farther away, a man was moaning. He tried to turn his head but a sudden flash of agony greeted the movement and he grunted in pain.

He raised his hand to his forehead and felt a thick bandage there. Then the memory began to come back to him.



The battle with the Wargals. He remembered that. Remembered the club that had caught him on the side of the head. That must be the cause of the flaring headache he now felt. And he remembered a sergeant. What was his name? David? No! Daniel. Daniel had saved his life.

Then he was overcome with sadness as he remembered the words of the litter bearer. Daniel was dead.

How long had he been here? He remembered that as the medical orderlies had lifted him onto the litter, he had lost consciousness. It seemed that it had happened only minutes ago. He tried to rise and the headache speared him behind the eyes again. Once more, he grunted in pain, and this time a face came into his field of vision, looking down at him.

"You're awake," the orderly said, and smiled encouragingly at him. He reached down and laid a palm on Halt's forehead, testing for fever. Seemingly satisfied that there was none, he touched the bandage lightly, making sure it was still tight.

"How... long..." Halt's voice was slurred and his throat was thick and dry. The orderly held a cup of cool water to his lips, raised his head carefully and allowed him to drink. The water felt wonderful. He gulped at it and choked, coughing so that water bubbled out of his mouth. The action of coughing set his head aching again and he closed his eyes in pain.

"Still feeling it, I see?" the orderly said. "Well, the healers said there's no serious damage. You just need a few more days' rest to let the headache settle down."

"How long... have I been here?"

The orderly pursed his lips. "Let's see. They brought you in the evening before yesterday, so I'd say about thirty-six hours."

Thirty-six hours! He'd lain here asleep for a day and a half! A sudden chill of fear struck through him.

"Did we win?" he said. He remembered that the Wargals had retreated ahead of Daniel's attack, but that might have been a localized event.

The orderly smiled, nodding his head. "Oh yes indeed. Morgarath and his brutes were thoroughly beaten. Someone referred to it as a rout. I hear you had a little to do with that, as a matter of fact?"

He added the last curiously, as if interested to hear more about Halt's battlefield escapades. But the Ranger waved that aside.

"So Morgarath is retreating again?" he asked.

"Yes. The cavalry are pursuing the enemy, of course. But the rest of the army is still here. Not for long, though. They'll be moving out soon."

"Moving out where?"

"Disbanding. The war's over. The men will be going back to their farms and their families. And none too soon."

Farms and families. The words stirred another memory in Halt's mind. Daniel had spoken of a wife and baby. And Halt had promised to help them. But now he realized that he had no idea where they were, and if the army was really disbanding, he might never find them. He sat up without thinking and swung his legs over the side of the bed, then doubled over as the crippling pain hit him. The orderly tried to restrain him.

"Please! Lie still, Ranger! You need to rest."

But Halt seized his forearm and managed to stand, swaying, by the bed. He blinked several times. The pain eased a little. But it was still there.

"I don't have time," he said. "Get me something for this headache. I've got to find out where he lived."

He remembered that the men he had been sent to lead were a mixed group from Seacliff, Aspienne and Culway. The soldiers around him when he forced his way through to the front rank had worn the crest of a black badger on their tunics. He had seen the same crest on Daniel's. He had no idea what group marched under that banner, so he headed for the command tent, and the King's Battlemaster.

When he reached the command center, he found the Battlemaster gone. Of course, he was leading the pursuit that was hounding Morgarath and the Wargals back to the southeast corner of the kingdom. But his secretary was still there, making notes as to casualties, replacements and promotions. He glanced up as Halt entered, and smiled warmly. The entire army had heard of Halt's feats during the battle.

"Good morning, Ranger," he said. Then he noticed the bloodstained bandage and saw how Halt swayed as he entered the tent, reaching out to steady himself against the tabletop where the secretary sat.

"Are you all right?" he said anxiously. He rose and hurried to find a bench for Halt. The Ranger dropped onto it gratefully. He blinked several times. His vision was still blurry. He hoped that was only temporary. He couldn't imagine shooting with such poor vision.

"Just a headache," he said. "I need some information. I took command of troops on the right wing in the final stages of the battle—"

"Indeed you did!" the secretary said warmly. "The whole army has heard about it."

"There was a soldier. A sergeant named Daniel. He actually led the charge when I was knocked down. Did anyone mention his full name, or would anyone have a record of where he lived?"

But the clerk was shaking his head. "I don't keep the full roster. Each individual force looks after that for their own men. What unit did he belong to?"

"I'm not sure. They wore a black badger as their crest."

The clerk's eyes narrowed in concentration for a few seconds, then his expression cleared. "A black badger? That'd be Captain Stanton's company, from Aspienne Fief. They're camped over to the north, on a small hill. Stanton was badly wounded before you rallied his men. He's been invalided back to Castle Aspienne. But his sergeant major should be able to help you."

"Thanks for your help." Halt left the tent. He paused for a moment, looking to the north. On a low hill several hundred meters away, he could see a group of tents clustered around a banner. It was too far to make out the device on the flag, but he could see that it was black in color. He headed toward the tents.

As was the custom, the banner marked the position of the commanding officer's tent. As Halt drew closer, he could see that he had been right. The device on the flag was a black badger. He paused at the open entrance. The command tent was larger than the simple four-man units that surrounded it. The commander and his staff worked here, so it was used as a company office. At the rear, a separate section was screened off, forming the captain's living quarters. Now, of course,

that would be vacant. But a burly figure was sitting at a table in the front section, frowning over sheets of paper. He was an older man, somewhat grizzled and with an unmistakable look of experience and authority—undoubtedly the sergeant major the clerk had mentioned. He looked up as Halt stepped into the tent, taking in the Ranger cloak and the bandage around his head.

"You look as if you've been in the wars," he said, grinning. Halt allowed himself a faint smile.

"Just one. Same one you've been in. I'm trying to find a home address for one of your men. A sergeant by the name of Daniel."

The grin faded and the sergeant major shook his head sadly. "Daniel? He was a good man. We lost him in the final battle, I'm afraid."

"I know. He saved my life just before he died."

The older man regarded Halt with increased interest. "Oh," he said, "you're that Ranger, are you?" He rose from behind the table and offered his hand. "It's an honor to meet you. My name's Griff."

Halt shifted uncomfortably. He disliked being the center of attention. It wasn't his way. He preferred to move unobtrusively through life, going unnoticed wherever possible. But he shook the man's hand. "I'm called Halt," he said.

Griff waved him to a seat and sat down himself once more. He pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"Not sure I can tell you too much. Everything was pretty rushed when we mobilized the army, and Daniel was new to the fief. He and his wife had moved from Norgate not long before the war began." He indicated the piles of paper and scrolls on the table that was serving as a desk. "We didn't get time to put down all the men's details before we had to march out. I'm trying to catch up on it now."

"Can you tell me anything about him?" Halt asked.

"He had a farm, I believe, somewhere in the southeast part of Aspienne. But where it might be, I have no idea."

"Did he have any friends in the company who might know?"

The sergeant major was shaking his head before Halt even finished the question.

"He may have. Although as a sergeant he would have kept a little separate from the other men. You could ask around. He had command of the sixth squad. You'll find them one row over and halfway down."

"I'm obliged," Halt said. He rose to his feet, wincing once more as the pain lanced through his forehead. He put a hand on the table to steady himself and Griff looked at him with some concern.

"Should you be up and around? You don't look so good."

Halt shook his head—and immediately wished he hadn't. "I'll be fine," he said. "Just a bit of a knock. I'm better off in the fresh air than in a stuffy healer's tent."

"That's true." Griff looked back at the forms and papers on his desk with a degree of disappointment, as if he'd been hoping they'd fill themselves in while he talked. "Well... sorry I can't be of more help."

Halt waved a hand in acknowledgment. "Every little bit of information helps," he said.

He strolled down the neat tent lines, cutting through between two tents to reach the next row across. About ten meters farther down, he saw a placard mounted on

top of a spear shaft with the numeral 6 on it. He looked down the next five tents and there was a similar marker, this time bearing the number 7. Five tents, four men to each, that made twenty men in the squad. Assuming they had all survived, which he knew they hadn't. Three soldiers were lounging in the sun outside the first tent. They looked up as his shadow fell across them. There was a hint of suspicion in their eyes, but since Crowley and he had re-formed the Ranger Corps, Halt was becoming used to that. Officers and sergeant majors might value the skills Rangers brought to the army, but the rank-and-file soldiers tended to be ill at ease around the gray-and-green-clad figures. He knew there were wild rumors circulating that Rangers practiced sorcery.

"Good morning," he said evenly.

The men nodded, craning their necks to look up at him. They were seated on low stools. One was patching a ripped jerkin, a second was whittling a stick with a knife and the third was chewing slowly on a piece of dried beef. From where Halt stood, it looked as if the beef was winning the struggle. Halt indicated a spare stool, a few feet away.

"Mind if I join you for a few minutes?" he asked.

The man patching his jerkin nodded. "Why not?" he said, his tone neither welcoming nor dismissive.

His companion with the beef jerky was staring at Halt, a frown of recognition on his face. "I know you," he said thoughtfully, trying to place the memory. Then it came to him. "You were at the battle!" he said. "We were being driven back and suddenly you were there, shoving forward and slashing away at the Wargals and yelling at us to follow you. You did an outstanding job. Outstanding!" He turned to the others. "Did you see him? First of all, he dropped at least a dozen of them with his bow, then he darted in among them, slashing and stabbing. And look at him! He's barely bigger than a boy."

Halt raised an eyebrow at that. He wasn't the largest of men, but he knew the soldier was stretching it a little. However, he could see that no insult was intended, so he let the comment pass.

"Your sergeant gave me a hand," he said, and the man nodded vigorously.

"He did! He took them on when you went down. Must have killed a dozen of them too!"

Halt smiled quietly at that. The man was inclined to exaggerate. "He did a great job," he agreed.

The jerky chewer turned to his friends. "Did you see the sarge?"

Both of them shook their heads.

"We were farther over, on the right," the jerkin patcher replied. "All we saw was that the line was about to break and run, then it started to move forward again. Then the Wargals were running instead."

But the question had been rhetorical and the beef chewer was keen to continue his story.

"He did four or five of them with his spear. Then one of them chopped the head off it and he used it like a quarterstaff, spinning it around, knocking them over like ninepins. Then he grabbed a sword and killed eight or nine of them before they got him." He looked to Halt for confirmation. "You saw it, Ranger! How many do you reckon he killed?"

"At least eight," Halt said. He saw no reason to contradict the man. The atmosphere was suddenly a lot more welcoming than it had been at first. "I wanted some information about him," he said. "Any idea where he lived?"

He was disappointed to see the three faces cloud over in a now familiar expression of uncertainty.

"Sorry," said the man who had been extolling Daniel's deeds and courage. "He was new to the unit and the area. Got promoted quickly."

"That's right," said one of the others, laying aside the patched jerkin. "The captain liked the look of him. Made him a sergeant almost immediately. Apparently, he'd had some military experience in Norgate before he came to Aspienne."

"He was promoted so quickly, we didn't really have time to get to know him," said the man who had been whittling. "I think I heard him mention a farm somewhere..." He trailed off, unsure of his facts. There was an awkward silence. Halt made a move to rise from the stool, thinking that once again his efforts to trace Daniel's family were doomed to failure. The first man who had spoken, the beef jerky chewer, seemed to come to a decision.

"You could try Kord and Jerrel," he said. "They might have an idea."

"If they'd tell you," the man with the repaired jerkin put in.

Halt looked from one to the other. "I take it you're not fond of these two?"

The three men exchanged glances. Then the one who had suggested the two names answered him.

"They're a pair of liars and cheats. They run a dice game and they tried to make a friend of Daniel initially, playing up to him and inviting him to play. My guess is they were letting him win at dice to get in his good books. But he saw through their scheme before long and they found themselves doing their fair share of fatigue duties. So they dropped him."

"What makes you think they'd know where he lived?" Halt asked, and again there was an awkward pause. Finally, the whittler spoke.

"They always wanted to know where everyone lived. Always asking you questions about where you came from, what you did back home. Can't prove anything, but I reckon they were keeping a record, planning to go back after the war and rob people."

"Particularly those who'd been killed in battle," the jerkin patcher said heavily. "They'd know the families would be easy prey. It's the sort of thing they'd do, all right. They probably know where to find the sergeant's farm."

"The trick will be getting them to tell you," the beef jerky chewer said, and the others nodded. Halt looked around the small circle of faces, seeing the distaste for the two vultures called Kord and Jerrel.

"How would I get to meet these two?" he asked.

The jerkin patcher raised an eyebrow.

"Play dice with them," he said. "But be prepared to lose."

PRIVATE JERREL OF THE BLACK BADGER COMPANY WAS WORKING on a pair of dice. He'd finished the first one and he was almost done with the second. He was filing off two of the sharp corners on the die, rounding them slightly so that they would tend to roll to a preselected point, showing a score of six more often than sheer chance would allow. It wasn't as reliable as his alternative method of fixing a pair of dice. That involved carefully inserting weights to make it fall with the selected side faceup. But sanding the corners increased his chance of a winning roll.

In his pocket, he had a pair of counterweighted dice, carefully doctored to show scores of one and two. But weighting dice was a tricky business. It took a long time to remove all signs that something had been inserted in the little cubes. His other pair had been confiscated some days previously by a passing officer. Now he had to resort to rounding the corners to replace them. You needed two pairs of doctored dice to fleece a new victim. You used one pair to get him interested, letting him win the first few rolls. Then, when he thought his luck was in, you suggested raising the stakes. And when he agreed, you switched the dice so he'd roll a losing number.

A shadow fell across the entrance to the tent and Jerrel hastily shoved the die and the small file under a blanket. The entrance to the tent was blocked for a moment as a man entered. Jerrel looked up, frowning. The newcomer carried a kit bag and a sheathed sword and sword belt. He was wearing a soldier's uniform with a black badger on the left breast. He looked around the interior of the tent, saw an empty bunk and dropped his belongings on it.

"Who the devil are you?" Kord asked. He'd been lying back on his own bunk on the opposite side of the tent and the displeasure was obvious in his voice. He and Jerrel had enjoyed having the tent to themselves. Their four tent mates had been killed or wounded in the battle. Now, it seemed, they had a new man joining them.

"Name's Arratay," the newcomer said. "I've been transferred from second squad. Sergeant major said for me to bunk in here."

He was a short man, slightly built but with powerful shoulders and a deep chest. His beard and hair were ragged and unkempt. He had a grubby bandage wound around his head. Above it, the hair was black and the eyes were dark and piercing. Like a bird of prey, Jerrel thought. Then he smirked at the idea. It was more likely that the stranger would become prey for him and Kord—once he had a chance to finish working on that pair of dice. Even so, he didn't want the stranger in the tent with them.

"Find somewhere else to bunk," Jerrel said shortly. "We're full here."

"There's only two of you," Arratay said reasonably, looking around the tent.

"You heard him," Kord said. "Now get out of here."

Arratay shrugged. "If you say so..."

"I do," Kord said. "So get out."

Shrugging, the newcomer picked up his kit and left the tent. Jerrel smiled at Kord. That had been easy, he thought. Then his face darkened as he heard a loud voice outside the tent.

"You there! A-ratty—or whatever you call yourself! Where d'you think you're going? I told you to bunk in tent forty-three, didn't I?"

"The tent's full, sergeant major," Arratay replied.

"The blazes it is!" Kord and Jerrel exchanged exasperated glances as they heard heavy footsteps approaching. Then the tent flap was thrown back and the bulky frame of Sergeant Major Griff filled the entrance.

"My aunty's mustache it's full! Get in here!" He glared at the two occupants. "You two make room!" he bellowed.

"Yes, sar'major," Jerrel said sullenly. Kord managed a grunt in reply. As Arratay reentered the tent, Griff stepped in front of him to bar his way, his hands on his hips in an aggressive posture.

"As for you, A-ratty, you can report to the cookhouse and scrub rubbish bins and cook pots for the rest of the day. That might remind you next time to do as I tell you!"

"Yes, sar'major," the small man said. His eyes were down, not meeting the temporary commander's. But as Griff stalked out of the room, Arratay made an insulting gesture toward his back. Then he turned, shrugging, to Jerrel and Kord. "Sorry about that," he said.

They exchanged a look, then Jerrel stood and took Arratay's pack, placing it on an empty bunk.

"Can't be helped. Griff can be a real pain. Better get along to the cookhouse or he'll be at you again." He caught Kord's eye. As soon as Arratay had gone, they'd go through his kit to see if there was anything worth stealing. Kord nodded unobtrusively. The same thought was going through his mind.

Arratay sighed and turned to go. As he reached the entrance, Kord called after him, "When you've finished your work detail, maybe you'd like a little game of dice?"

Arratay smiled at them. "That sounds like fun," he said.

Kord threw up his hands in mock exasperation.

"Another winning throw! Where does your luck come from, Arratay?"

The small trooper grinned happily as he raked in his earnings. He'd thrown three winning scores in a row and now there was a respectable pile of coins on the low table where the three of them were seated.

"Just my lucky day, I suppose," he said, pushing forward a new wager and shaking the dice in their cup. The bone cubes rattled together, then he cast them onto the table.

"Double six again!" Jerrel said. "I don't believe it!" He looked at Kord. "I think we've got a professional in the tent." Kord nodded gloomily, but Arratay merely laughed.

"Not me, boys. It's just clean living and a clear conscience. Want to raise the stakes?" He said it casually, but he noticed the quick, furtive look that passed between the two men.

Kord agreed, after a brief show of reluctance. "Well, I might be crazy, but why not? It'll give us a chance to win some of our money back."

"Or I'll clean you out sooner." Arratay smiled. He put another bet forward, waited till they matched it, then rolled again. Eleven this time, but still an automatic winner.

"Can't you roll anything but fives and sixes?" Jerrel said.

"Not when I'm running hot." Arratay smiled again, but his eyes narrowed as this time, instead of letting him reclaim the dice, Kord picked them up and handed

them to him. He's made the switch, Halt thought. He took the dice, placed them in the cup, shook them and rolled.

The other two gave an ironic cheer as the dice turned faceup to show a two and a one.

"Three!" said Jerrel. "And about time!"

It was a simple game. Eleven and twelve were automatic winners. Two and three were losers. Any other score didn't count. The gambler simply threw again until he won or lost. Halt grimaced as the others scooped in the money he'd bet. The dice passed to Jerrel and he threw a six. Then a four, then a two. Halt won back a small fraction of what he had lost on his last throw. Kord took the dice and fumbled as he placed them in the cup.

He's switched them again, Halt thought. And sure enough, Kord threw an eleven, then a twelve, winning two small hands, before switching the dice once more so that he lost, then handing the dice on to Halt. In the process of handing them over, he switched them again for the winning dice. The two cheats didn't want Arratay, as they thought he was called, losing enthusiasm too soon. The game went on, Halt winning some hands, losing others, but generally staying just ahead of breaking even.

The two cheats kept plying him with wine, which he surreptitiously managed to empty into an old boot when they weren't watching. But he pretended to become more and more affected by the drink, slurring his words and laughing foolishly when he won.

"Big day tomorrow," he said after they had been playing for some time. "We're moving out early and heading south."

His two companions reacted with surprise at that.

"South?" said Kord. "Why south? We're supposed to head home and disband."

Halt shook his head and peered at them owlishly. "Not anymore. Not anymore," he said, tapping the side of his nose with his forefinger. "The Wargals are putting up a stiffer resistance than expected. Morgarath has them under firm control again and Duncan needs extra men. We're them," he added after a pause.

He could see that this news had the effect he'd desired. Kord and Jerrel exchanged a glance. Then Jerrel questioned him further.

"Where'd you hear this?" he asked.

Halt jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the general direction of the administration section of the camp.

"At the cookhouse," he said. "The cooks had taken delivery of extra rations to prepare for us."

Now the two cheats looked thoroughly concerned. Cookhouse rumors were the source of much intelligence among the rank and file. And they had a reputation for accuracy. Halt, of course, had heard no such rumors. But he hoped that the thought of an imminent departure for the south might force Kord and Jerrel's hand. If they were planning to rob Daniel's farm, this might precipitate things.

He leaned forward, peering with bleary eyes at the table.

"Now where are those dice?" he asked. "It's my throw again."

"Here you are," Kord said, passing him the dice and throwing cup. He had just lost the last throw and it was Halt's turn again. Halt was reasonably sure that he'd been handed the losing dice. His suspicions were confirmed by Jerrel's next words.



"It's getting late," he said. "Let's put it all on one last big pot. What do you say?"

Kord pretended to look doubtful. "It's up to Arratay."

Halt shrugged. "Why not?" he said. "I feel my luck's coming back."

They all shoved their remaining money into the center of the table. Halt reached for his tankard and took a deep swig—the biggest he'd had all night. Then, as he clumsily set the tankard down, he spilled the remaining wine on the table, flicking it toward Jerrel so that a red tide flowed across the rough wood and into his lap. Jerrel sprang backward with a curse.

"Look out!" he said.

"Sorry. Sorry," Halt replied thickly. But in the confusion, he'd switched the losing dice for another pair that he'd had in his jerkin pocket. He'd prepared them that afternoon while he was supposed to be at the cookhouse, and they were shaved so that they would show a twelve at each throw.

He shook them, muttering to them as he did so, then spilled them out onto the table.

"Bad lu—" began Kord, already reaching for the money. Then he stopped as he saw two sixes gleaming up at him, like two sets of teeth in two tiny skulls.

"How did you...?" Jerrel stopped as he realized he'd give the game away if he went any further. Arratay might be drunk. But he wasn't that drunk.

Halt grinned foolishly at the dice, and scooped them up. "Lucky dice!" he said. "I love these dice!"

He pretended to kiss them noisily, and switched them once more for the losing pair he'd been handed originally. That done, he slipped his own dice into his pocket and dropped the others back onto the table as he began to rake in his winnings.

"No hard feelings, boys," he said. "I'll give you a chance for revenge tomorrow."

"Yes. Of course. Tomorrow," Kord said. But his tone told Halt that there would be no game the next night. And there'd be no sign of Kord or Jerrel, either.

Half an hour later, Halt lay on his back, breathing heavily and noisily through his mouth as he feigned sleep. His two tent mates were talking in lowered voices. They had waited until they were sure Halt was fully asleep. Kord was testing the dice, rolling them over and over again and constantly getting a losing score as a result.

"I don't understand," he said quietly. "It's simply not possible for him to roll a twelve with these dice."

"Careful," Jerrel told him, casting a quick glance in Halt's direction. But his companion waved his caution aside.

"Aaah, he's out like a light," he said. "Did you see how much he drank? He's full as a boot."

Halt's mouth twitched slightly in amusement. There was definitely a full boot in the tent, he thought. His loud breathing was making it difficult to hear what the others were saying, so he stirred, muttered something and rolled onto his side, facing away from them. The snoring stopped as he was no longer on his back, but he kept his breathing deep and even. Kord and Jerrel hesitated as he stirred, but soon relaxed when it became obvious he hadn't woken.

Once again, Kord tested the dice. Once again, they rolled a three.

"Give it away," Jerrel told him angrily. "It was an accident. They must have hit a crack or a dent in the tabletop. Besides, we've got more important things to think about."

Reluctantly, Kord stowed the dice away in his pocket. "You mean this rumor about us heading south?"

Jerrel nodded. "Last thing we want is to get tied up in another campaign. It could go on for weeks, and we've got places to be. If we're held up, there's a chance that family members will arrive to help the widows and we'll miss our chance."

Turned away from them as he was, Halt could allow himself a scowl of anger. It was true, he thought; the two of them were planning to rob the families of men killed in the battle.

"So what's your plan?" Kord asked.

Jerrel paused, then came to a decision. "I say we pull out tonight. We'll leave an hour or two before dawn and get on the road north. We'll hit the sergeant's farm first. That's the closest."

"We'll be flogged if they catch us deserting," Kord said, but Jerrel dismissed the protest.

"They won't catch us. With all the recent losses, odds are they won't even be sure we're gone."

"Griff will know. I got a feeling he has his eye on us."

Kord snorted derisively. "Griff will be too busy doing his job and the captain's job to worry about us. He'll probably think it's good riddance. Now let's turn in. We'll need to get started early."

"What about him?" Jerrel asked, jerking a thumb toward Halt's still figure. Kord hesitated.

"I'd like to knock him on the head and take our money back," he said. "But if we kill him, Griff will have to take notice of the fact. He'd be sure to send men after us. Best if we leave him."

## 6

HALT HEARD THEM LEAVE JUST BEFORE THREE IN THE MORNING. They were thieves and they were accustomed to moving quietly. But the Ranger's senses were finely tuned and he was a light sleeper. He listened to their stealthy movements and quiet footsteps as they gathered their kits together and stole out into the night. The moon had risen and set hours ago and there was a scattered cloud cover riding on the wind, sending bands of shadows scudding across the silent camp.

Kord and Jerrel had no trouble eluding the sentries. The men on watch were tired and bored as they neared the end of their three-hour shift. And besides, they were more inclined to look for intruders from outside the camp than people leaving from inside. The rumor that the company would be heading south and continuing the campaign was a false one Halt had concocted to force the thieves' hand, so with the company due to return home and disband in the near future, there was little reason for men to desert.

He waited fifteen minutes to give the two time to clear the camp perimeter, then rolled out of his blankets and ghosted out of the tent after them. He retrieved his own clothes from the company command tent. Griff was waiting for him, a shaded lantern throwing a dim light over the interior.

"They took the bait?" he asked.

Halt nodded. He changed clothes and placed the heavy purse containing his winnings on the table.

"You can put this into the company fund," he said. He knew most companies contributed to a fund that was used to help the families of those who lost their lives on campaign. Griff nodded his thanks.

"If you catch them, feel free to bring them back here," he said. "I'd be quite happy to see to their future discomfort."

"Oh, I'll catch them, all right," Halt told him. "And when I do, it'll be up to them how I deal with them."

He shook hands with the sergeant major and went to the rear of the tent, where Abelard was waiting. He swung up into the saddle and trotted out of the camp. He made no attempt at concealment, identifying himself to the sentries as he went.

He found the north road and held Abelard down to a walk. He didn't want to catch up to the two men too quickly. Concealed in his Ranger cloak, they might not recognize him as their erstwhile tent mate, but the sight of a Ranger traveling the same road might panic them into abandoning their plans for the time being.

As dawn came and the first gray light stole over the countryside, he increased his pace. Before long, he rounded a bend and caught sight of two figures trudging along the high road, several hundred meters in front of him. Thankfully, the headache and blurred vision that had plagued him were gone and he had no trouble recognizing the two men—Kord tall and wiry, Jerrel more compact and solidly built. He checked Abelard and moved off the road, where the dark green of the trees would conceal them from view.

When Kord and Jerrel rounded another bend and disappeared from sight, he cantered slowly after them.

He proceeded in that fashion for the rest of the day. As the light improved, he was able to make out their tracks on the dusty road—their hobnailed army sandals left an easily followed trail. He fell farther back, only closing up again when the light began to fail in the late afternoon. As dusk was falling, the two men moved off the highway and made camp.

He spent the night wrapped in his cloak, leaning against a tree and watching the light of their fire. He dozed in brief snatches, confident that Abelard would wake him if there were any movement from the distant camp. He woke cold and cramped in the early-morning light. The fire had died before dawn and there was a thin spiral of smoke rising from it. After half an hour, he saw the two men rising and moving around their campsite. Abelard was back in the trees and there was no need for Halt to seek concealment. Wrapped in his cloak, he would be invisible, even if they looked directly at him. His stomach grumbled as they relit their fire and he smelled bacon frying. After that, the smell of coffee brewing made his mouth water. He contented himself with a discreet mouthful of cold water from his canteen. It was a poor substitute.

The pair was slow in getting moving. Halt shifted uncomfortably a few times, waiting for them to get on the road. Finally, they rolled their packs and struck camp, heading north once more. He waited until they had rounded the next bend in the road, then moved to where Abelard waited inside the trees. He tightened the girth straps—he had left the horse saddled through the night in case of an emergency—mounted and rode slowly after them.

When he reached the bend, he dismounted and went ahead to peer around, down the next stretch of road.

There was no sign of them.

For a moment, his heart raced with panic. This stretch of road was at least three hundred meters long—and there was no way they could have reached the far end before he rounded the bend. Where had they gone? Had they become aware that they were being followed? Perhaps they'd gone to ground somewhere along the road and were now waiting in ambush for whoever was behind them. Or had they moved more quickly than he had judged, and were now beyond the far bend?

He forced himself to calm down. Both those theories were possibilities, he admitted. But it was more likely that they had moved off the high road onto a side track somewhere along the way. They were inside Aspienne Fief now and they could be close to Daniel's farm. He remounted Abelard and tapped his heels into the horse's side.

The temptation was to gallop full out to see if there was, in fact, a turnoff. But doing so would cause noise and would risk drawing their attention. He trotted the little horse gently along the hard surface of the high road.

Forty meters along, he found what he was looking for. A narrow side trail led off from the main road. It was well traveled and seemed to have been established for some time. He glanced along it, but it wound and twisted through the trees and there was no sign of Kord and Jerrel. But as he studied the ground, he saw a familiar footprint. Kord's right boot was worn down on the inside—the result of an uneven stance. There in the sand that formed the path's surface, Halt could see the distinctive track. He swung down from the saddle and led Abelard along the track. It wouldn't do to come upon them unexpectedly.

Presently, he began to smell wood smoke, then the rich and distinctive odor of a farmyard. It was a mixture of manure, fresh-cut hay and large animals that told him he was nearing Daniel's farm. Then he heard a sound that confirmed the fact.

Somewhere close to hand, a woman screamed.

## 7

HALT DROPPED ABELARD'S REINS AND BEGAN TO RUN. THE HORSE would follow along, he knew. Another scream came through the trees. The first had been a shout of fear and alarm. This one had anger mixed in. He ran faster, the saxe knife and quiver thumping on his hip and shoulder as his feet hit the ground. Belatedly, he realized that he would have been better off remounting and riding Abelard. But no sooner had the thought occurred than he burst into a clearing

where a small thatched farmhouse stood, smoke curling lazily from its chimney, several cows moving uneasily in the fenced-off paddock beside the house.

Another defiant scream, then a man's voice raised in anger and the unmistakable sound of a blow. A gasp of pain from the woman.

"My husband will kill you for that!" she cried.

"Your husband's dead!" a sneering voice replied. "And you'll join him if you don't do as you're told. You and the baby!"

Halt heard a quick sob of grief from the woman at these words. Seething with rage, he hit the farmhouse door with his shoulder and burst into the dim room inside.

He took in the details instantly. A woman crouched in the far corner, close to the cooking hearth, her arms spread protectively over a cradle. Jerrel stood over her, his hand raised to hit her again, frozen in the act as the door crashed back on its leather hinges.

To Halt's left, Kord was rummaging through a chest, hurling clothes and household pieces in all directions as he searched for items of value. He, too, froze at the sudden appearance of the Ranger. Then recognition dawned as he made out the dark, bearded face.

"You!" he snarled. "What are you doing here?"

He didn't wait for an answer but lunged to his feet, drawing the cheap sword that he wore at his waist and surging across the room to swing a downward cut at Halt.

The Ranger's actions were instinctive. He sidestepped the savage sword stroke, swaying to his right, and simultaneously drew the saxe knife with his left hand. He was bringing the big knife up to a defensive position when Kord's momentum drove him onto the blade. Kord looked down in horror as the razor-sharp hardened steel slid easily through the rusty links of his chain-mail vest.

He gasped and blood welled out of his mouth. His eyes went dull and his knees gave way. Halt jerked the knife free of the falling body and spun to face Jerrel, who was still trying to take in the rapid sequence of events. Then Jerrel's eyes hardened and he drew his own sword, stepping deliberately forward, not rushing as Kord had done, presenting the sword point first and letting it sway back and forth, threatening the smaller man who faced him.

The woman dropped back on her haunches beside the cot, watching in wide-eyed horror as the scene unfolded before her.

Jerrel advanced another pace. Halt switched the saxe to his right hand and withdrew warily. He was confident that he could handle the soldier, in spite of the apparent disparity in their weapons. Swordsmen often underestimated the lethal potential of a saxe knife, he knew. Still, he was prepared to let Jerrel make the first move, and so draw him into closer range, where the saxe would be effective.

Jerrel feinted with the blade. Halt, watching his eyes, saw no commitment there and ignored the movement. His apparent calm infuriated Jerrel. Halt saw the hot anger welling up in his eyes.

"You're a dead man, Arratay," Jerrel said through clenched teeth.

Halt smiled. "That's been said before. Yet here I am."

He took another pace backward, conscious of Kord's still body on the beaten earth floor of the farmhouse, just beside and behind him.

Jerrel darted the sword blade out at him. This time it was no feint and Halt was ready for it. He flicked it aside with the saxe, the two blades ringing together for a second. The speed and ease of his response raised a worm of doubt in Jerrel's mind. He had the longer weapon. He had the advantage. Yet this bearded figure in the strange mottled cloak seemed completely at ease.

He was thinking about this when Arratay, as he knew him, lunged forward with the short, gleaming saxe. Jerrel leaped backward, yelping in surprise, and managed to swipe his sword across in a clumsy parry, just in time. For the first time, he realized that he might be outmatched. He was about to drop his weapon and plead for mercy when something totally unexpected happened.

Halt felt an iron grip on his left ankle, then the leg was jerked from under him, sending him sprawling awkwardly on the farmhouse floor.

As he fell, he turned and found himself looking into Kord's face. The eyes were filled with hatred, the lips curled back in one last snarl of triumph. With his final breath, Kord had managed to take his revenge on the small man who had ruined everything for them. Now the eyes went blank as the life left his body.

Jerrel, who was never too quick on the uptake, saw that his opponent was, for the moment, helpless before him. With a cry of triumph, he raised the sword in both hands, point down, and stepped forward, preparing to drive it into the prone body on the floor. Halt struggled to rise but knew it was too late. The gleaming sword point began to descend.

Then a figure came from nowhere and crashed into Jerrel, clinging to him and knocking him sideways, sending the sword spinning out of his grasp. Halt dodged sideways as the weapon fell close to him, then realized what had happened.

The woman had launched herself at Jerrel, landing on his back and clinging there like a wildcat as she raked at his face and eyes with her nails.

The thief staggered under the impact, turning so that the two of them crashed into the kitchen table, sending it spinning, then cannoned into the wall, smashing halfway through the close-woven willow sticks daubed with mud. Unable to dislodge the grim, clinging figure on his back, Jerrel twisted so that he was facing her and, drawing his heavy-bladed dagger, struck out desperately at her.

She cried out in pain and released her grip, falling back, hands clutching at the savage wound in her left side. Blood covered her hands instantly, soaking the white cotton material of her shift as she sank to one knee. Then Halt was upon Jerrel, grasping the man's knife hand and forcing it upward while he drew his throwing knife and rammed it deep into his body. Jerrel gave a grunt of pain. The heavy dagger fell from his hand and for a moment he was supported only by Halt's grip on his right wrist. Then, as the Ranger released him, he sagged to his knees, looking up at Halt, his eyes showing shock at the fact that this was the way his life was to end. He fell over sideways, his hands desperately trying to stem the flow of blood from the wound. Halt stood warily for a second, making sure that Jerrel was truly finished. His recent experience with Kord had made him careful. Then, satisfied that Jerrel wasn't about to rally for another attack, he knelt quickly beside the stricken woman.

Her face was white and drawn with the savage pain of the wound. Halt looked at the amount of blood she had lost already and knew she had no chance of surviving. She looked up at the stranger who had tried to save her, whom she had

saved with her desperate attack on Jerrel. She saw the sadness in the dark eyes looking down at her and knew the truth. She was dying. Yet there was something she had to know.

"My... husband..." she managed to gasp. "Is he really dead?"

Halt hesitated. He was tempted to lie to her, to comfort her. But he knew he could never carry off the lie. He nodded. "Yes," he said. "You'll soon be with him."

He saw the sudden look of anguish in her face as her eyes turned toward the cot in the corner of the room.

"Our son..." she said, and coughed blood as she spoke. Then she made a massive effort and recovered herself. "Don't leave him with the villagers... He'll have no life with them... We're strangers here... They'll work him to death..."

Halt nodded. Daniel and his wife were new arrivals in the area. They wouldn't have friends in the village to take care of their infant son. An orphan would be a burden to most villagers. His only worth would be as a worker—a virtual slave.

"I'll take care of him," he said gently, and the woman reached up and seized his hand in a surprisingly strong grip.

"Promise me," she said, and he placed his other hand over hers.

"I promise."

She studied his eyes for several seconds and seemed to find reassurance there. She released his hand and sank back onto the blood-soaked floor. She spoke again, but her voice was so soft, he didn't hear the words. He bent to her, turning his ear to her mouth.

"Tell me again," he said, and this time he could make out the whispered words.

"His name is Will."

"It's a good name," he told her. But she didn't hear him. She was already dead.

## 8

HE BURIED THE WOMAN IN A SMALL CLEARING BEYOND THE HOME paddock, marking the grave with a stone. He didn't know her name, or the family name. So he inscribed the stone with a simple legend: A BRAVE MOTHER.

Kord and Jerrel deserved no such treatment. They had destroyed a happy, loving family, so he dragged their bodies into the woods, leaving them for the foxes and crows.

The baby slept quietly in his cot while Halt attended to these matters. As Halt sat nursing a cup of coffee in the disarranged house, the infant woke and muttered quietly. Halt noted with approval that he didn't cry.

"I expect you're hungry," he said. He had a warmed bowl of cow's milk and a clean linen cloth ready. He twisted the end of the cloth into a narrow shape and dipped it into the milk, then placed it by the baby's mouth. The lips formed around the cloth twist and the baby sucked the milk from it. Halt dipped it into the bowl again and repeated the process. The system was time-consuming but it seemed to work. The baby watched him as it fed, big, serious brown eyes staring at him over the milk-soaked cloth.

"The question is," Halt said, "what am I to do with you?"

The farm, he knew, would revert to the baron of the fief, who would appoint another tenant family to work it. So there was nothing for the infant to inherit. He couldn't leave him here—as the mother had so desperately pointed out. And he couldn't raise the baby himself. He simply wasn't equipped to look after a baby, nor was he in any position to do so. His work as a Ranger would keep him absent from home for long periods and the baby would be left alone and uncared for.

But an idea was forming. Baron Arald had created a Ward at Castle Redmont where the orphans of men and women who died in his service were cared for. It was a bright, cheerful place, staffed by kind, affectionate people, and there were several recent additions to the ranks of children being cared for there. A baby girl called Alyss, and another boy—Horace, his name was.

Will would know warmth and companionship there. And as he grew, he would be given a choice of different vocations to follow. All in all, it seemed like an ideal solution.

"Problem is," Halt told the watchful infant, "we can't let on that I've brought you there. Folk are suspicious of Rangers. If they thought you were associated with me, they might tread warily around you."

Rangers had an aura of mystery and uncertainty about them. And that could have drawbacks for the child. People often feared things they didn't understand, and he didn't want that fear transferring itself to young Will. Better if his background remained a mystery.

"Which it is," Halt mused. "I don't even know your last name."

He considered that. He could ask around the district. But as he had learned, the family was new to the area and people might not know their names. In addition, he would have to reveal his plans for the baby, and he wasn't sure if what he was planning was exactly legal. Will was the child of two subjects of the local baron and Halt technically had no right to carry him off to another fief.

But then, in his lifetime, Halt had often ignored what was technically legal. Technicalities didn't appeal to him. All too often, they simply got in the way of doing the right thing.

He dipped the cloth in the last of the milk and held it to the baby's mouth. Will sucked eagerly, his eyes still fixed on the Ranger.

"Yes, the Ward is the best place for you," Halt told him. "And it's best if you're anonymous. I'll tell Arald, of course, in confidence. But nobody else will know. Just the two of us. What do you say?"

To his surprise, the baby emitted a loud burp, then smiled at him. A ghost of a smile touched Halt's bearded face in reply.

"I'll take that as agreement," he said.

Four days later, just before the first gray streaks of light heralded the dawn, a dark figure carrying a basket stole across the courtyard of Castle Redmont, to the building that housed the Ward.

Setting the basket down on the steps outside the door to the Ward, Halt reached in and moved the blanket away from the baby's face. He placed the note that he had composed into the basket, at the baby's feet.

*His mother died in childbirth.*

*His father died a hero.*



*Please care for him. His name is Will.*

A tiny hand emerged from the blankets and gripped his forefinger.

"I'd swear you were shaking hands good-bye," Halt whispered. Then, gently disengaging himself, he stroked the baby's forehead.

"You'll be fine here, young Will. With the parents you had, I suspect you'll grow to be quite a person."

He glanced around, saw no sign of anyone watching, then reached up and rapped sharply on the Ward door before melting away into the shadows of the courtyard.

The Ward's staff was already up and about, and he heard the door open a few minutes later, then the cry of surprise.

"Why, it's a baby! Mistress Aggie, come quick! Someone's left a baby on the doorstep!"

Wrapped in his cloak, hidden in the shadows of the huge wall, Halt watched as several women came bustling out, crying out in surprise at the sight of the baby. Then they took him inside, closing the door behind them. He felt an unfamiliar prickling sensation in his eyes and a strange sense of loss.

"Good-bye for now, Will," he whispered. "I'll be keeping an eye on you."

Halt felt that same prickling sensation once more as he finished the story. He turned away slightly so that Will couldn't see the tears that had formed in his eyes.

"But, Halt, why didn't you tell me for all those years? Why did you say my mother died in childbirth?"

"I thought it would be easier on you," Halt said. "I thought if you knew your mother had been murdered, it might make you bitter. And, as I said, I thought it would be easier on you if nobody knew of my involvement. If I'd said your mother was murdered, people would have started asking questions. I didn't want that. I wanted you to be accepted."

Will nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose so."

The older Ranger shifted uncomfortably.

"There was something else..."

Will opened his mouth, then closed it. He sensed it would be better to let Halt speak in his own time.

Eventually, his mentor said, in a low voice that Will could barely hear, "I was afraid you'd hate me."

Will recoiled in astonishment at the words. "Hate you? How could I hate you? Why would I hate you?"

Now Halt turned back to face him, and Will could see the anguish in his eyes. "Because I was responsible for the deaths of both your parents!" The words came out violently, as if they were torn from him. "Daniel died saving my life in battle. Then your mother came to my aid when I was fighting Jerrel. If she hadn't done so, she'd still be alive."

"And you'd be dead," Will pointed out. But Halt shook his head.

"Maybe. Maybe not. But the fact remains, it was my fault that your family was destroyed, and up until now I was unable to tell you. I thought you might blame me."

"Halt, it wasn't your fault. Who could blame you? You were keeping a promise you made to my father. Blame Morgarath. Blame the Wargals. Or blame Kord and Jerrel. That's where the fault lies. Not on your shoulders."

Watching Halt, Will now saw those shoulders sag with relief.

"That's what Pauline said you'd say," Halt whispered, and Will put an arm around him. It felt strange to be comforting the man who had comforted him so much over the years.

"Halt, you didn't destroy my family. That was fate. You gave me a second chance at having a family. You gave me a whole new life. How could I hate you for that? Besides," he added, "can you imagine me as a farmer?"

He felt Halt's shoulders begin to shake, and for a moment he was afraid the older man was weeping. Then he realized with relief that he was laughing.

"No," his teacher said, "I certainly can't see you as a farmer. Farmers are disciplined folk."

They both laughed at the thought of Will plowing and planting. Then, after a while, the young Ranger grew serious.

"I would like to see my mother's grave," he said, and Halt nodded.

"I'll take you there."

And then they said nothing more, but sat together in companionable silence as the shadows lengthened and the sun finally set.

