

The Ranger's Apprentice
Book 6: The Siege of Macindaw

CHAPTER ONE

Gundar Hardstriker, captain and helmsman of the Skandian ship Wolfcloud, chewed disconsolately on a stringy piece of tough smoked beef.

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

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

Now his ship was ruined, her keel irreparably broken, her hull twisted. She was good for nothing but turning into lumber and firewood as the winter weather wrapped its cold hands further around them. So far he had been able to avoid stripping the ship, but he knew he couldn't wait much longer. They would need the wood to build more substantial huts and to burn as firewood. But as long as she still looked like a ship, even with that damnable twist to her hull, he could retain some sense of his pride at being a skirl, or ship's captain.

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

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

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

Surprisingly, the Ranger had offered to feed them. He'd even invited them to a banquet that night in the castle, along with the local dignitaries and their wives. Gundar's smile broadened at the memory of that evening as he recalled how his rough-and-tumble sailors had stayed on their best manners, humbly asking their table companions to pass the meat, please, or requesting just a little more ale in their drinking mugs. These were men who were accustomed to cursing heartily, tearing legs off roast boar with their bare hands and occasionally swilling their ale straight from the keg. Their attempts at mingling with polite society would have been the basis of some great stories back in Skandia.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They had food enough, thanks to the Ranger, and he needed time to think of some way out of this mess. Maybe, when the weather improved, they could build a small boat from Wolfcloud's timbers. He sighed. He just didn't know. He was a helmsman, not a shipwright. He looked around the little camp. On a hillock beyond the clearing where he sat, they had buried the two men Buttle had killed. They couldn't even give them a proper funeral pyre, as was traditional among Skandians. Gundar blamed himself for their deaths. After all, he was the one who had ordered the prisoner set free.

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

“You know, I rather think I agree,” said a voice from behind him. Gundar leapt to his feet and spun round, his hand dropping to the sword at his belt.

“Thurak’s horns!” he cried. “Where the devil did you spring from?”

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

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

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

“If you’re a ghost,” he said, “we mean you no disrespect. And if you’re not a ghost, tell me who you are—or you soon will be one.” The creature laughed gently. “Well said, Gundar Hardstriker, well said indeed.” Gundar felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. The tone was friendly enough, but somehow this . . . thing . . . knew his name. That could only mean some kind of super-natural power was at work here.

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

“Oh, come on, Gundar, don’t you recognize me?” he said cheerfully. Memory stirred. This was no raddled, haggard ghost, certainly. It was a young face, with a shock of tousled brown hair above deep brown eyes and a wide grin. A familiar face. And in a rush, Gundar remembered where he had seen that strange, shifting pattern in a cloak before.

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

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

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

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

“He was murdered by that snake Buttle,” he said.

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

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

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

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

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

Will sat on a log by one of the fires, underneath a shelter formed by the wolfship’s big, square mainsail. “So, Will Treaty,” said Gundar, “what brings you here?”

Will looked around the circle of bearded, craggy faces that surrounded him. He smiled at them. “I’m looking for fighting men,” he said. “I plan to sack a castle, and I hear you people are rather good at that.”

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