

# 1



IN THE NORTH, HE KNEW, THE EARLY WINTER GALES, DRIVING THE rain before them, would send the sea crashing against the shore, causing white clouds of spray to burst high into the air.

Here, in the southeastern corner of the kingdom, the only signs of approaching winter were the gentle puffs of steam that marked the breath of his two horses. The sky was clear blue, almost painfully so, and the sun was warm on his shoulders. He could have dozed off in the saddle, leaving Tug to pick his way along the road, but the years he had spent training and conditioning in a hard and unforgiving discipline would never allow such an indulgence.

Will's eyes moved constantly, searching left to right, right to left, close in and far ahead. An observer might never notice this constant movement—his head remained still. Again, that was his training: to see without being seen; to notice without being noticed. He knew this part of the kingdom was relatively untroubled. That was why he had been assigned to the Fief of Seacliff. After all, a brand-new, just-commissioned Ranger was hardly going to be handed one of the kingdom's trouble spots. He smiled idly at the thought. The

prospect of taking up his first solo posting was daunting enough without having to worry about invasion or insurrection. He would be content to find his feet here in this peaceful backwater.

The smile died on Will's lips as his keen eyes saw something in the middle distance, almost concealed by the long grass beside the road.

His outward bearing gave no sign that he had noticed anything out of the ordinary. He didn't stiffen in his seat or rise in the stirrups to look more closely, as the majority of people might have done. On the contrary, he appeared to slouch a little more in the saddle as he rode—seemingly disinterested in the world around him. But his eyes, hidden in the deep shadow under the hood of his cloak, probed urgently. Something had moved, he was sure. And now, in the long grass to one side of the road, he thought he could see a trace of black and white—colors that were totally out of place in the fading greens and new russets of autumn.

Nor was he the only one to sense something out of place. Tug's ears twitched once and he tossed his head, shaking his mane and letting loose a rumbling neigh that Will felt in the barrel-like chest as much as heard.

"I see it," he said quietly, letting the horse know that the warning was registered. Reassured by Will's low voice, Tug quieted, though his ears were still pricked and alert. The packhorse, ambling contentedly beside and behind them, showed no interest. But it was a transport animal pure and simple, not a Ranger-trained horse like Tug.

The long grass shivered once more. It was only a faint movement but there was no wind to cause it—as the hanging clouds of steam from the horses' breath clearly showed. Will shrugged his shoulders slightly, ensuring that his quiver was clear. His massive

longbow lay across his knees, ready strung. Rangers didn't travel with their bows slung across their shoulders. They carried them ready for instant use. Always.

His heart was beating slightly faster than normal. The movement in the grass was barely thirty meters away by now. He recalled Halt's teaching: *Don't concentrate on the obvious. They may want you to miss something else.*

He realized that his total attention had become focused on the long grass beside the road. Quickly, his eyes scanned left and right again, reaching out to the tree line some forty meters back from the road on either side. Perhaps there were men hiding in the shadows, ready to charge out while his attention was distracted by whatever it was that was lying in the grass at the road's edge. Robbers, outlaws, mercenaries, who knew?

But he could see no sign of men in the trees. He touched Tug with his knee and the horse stopped, the packhorse continuing a few paces before it followed suit. His right hand went unerringly to the quiver, selected an arrow and laid it on the bowstring in less than a second. He shrugged back the hood so that his head was bare. The longbow, the small shaggy horse and the distinctive gray and green mottled cloak would identify him as a Ranger to any observer, he knew.

"Who's there?" he called, raising the bow slightly, the arrow nocked and ready. He didn't draw back yet. If there was anyone skulking in the grass, they'd know that a Ranger could draw, fire and hit his mark before they had gone two paces.

No answer. Tug stood still, trained to be rock steady in case his master had to shoot.

"Show yourself," Will called. "You in the black and white. Show yourself."

The stray thought crossed his mind that only a few moments ago he had been daydreaming about this being a peaceful backwater. Now he was facing a possible ambush by an unknown enemy.

"Last chance," he called. "Show yourself or I'll send an arrow in your direction."

And then he heard it, possibly in response to his voice. A low whimpering sound: the sound of a dog in pain. Tug heard it too. His ears flicked back and forth and he snorted uncertainly.

A dog? Will thought. A wild dog, perhaps, lying in wait to attack? He discarded the idea almost as soon as it formed in his mind. A wild dog wouldn't have made any sound to warn him. Besides, the sound he had heard had been one of pain, not a snarl or a warning growl of anger. It had been a whimper. He came to a decision.

In one fluid movement, he removed his left foot from the stirrup, crossed his right leg over the saddle pommel and dropped lightly to the ground. Dismounting in that fashion, he remained at all times facing the direction of possible danger, with both hands free to shoot. Had the need arisen, he could have loosed his first shot as soon as his feet touched the ground.

Tug snorted again. In moments of uncertainty like this, Tug preferred to have Will safely in the saddle, where the little horse's quick reflexes and nimble feet could take him quickly out of danger.

"It's all right," Will told the horse briefly, and walked quietly forward, bow at the ready.

Ten meters. Eight. Five . . . he could see the black and white clearly now through the dry grass. And now, as he was closer, he saw something else in the black and white: the matted brown of dried blood and the rich red of fresh blood. The whimper came again and finally Will saw clearly what it was that had stopped them.

He turned and gave the “safe” hand signal to Tug, and the horse responded by trotting forward to join him. Then, setting the bow aside, Will knelt beside the wounded dog lying in the grass.

“What is it, boy?” he said gently. The dog turned its head at the sound of the voice, then whimpered again as Will touched it gently, his eyes running over the long, bleeding gash in its side, stretching from behind the right shoulder back to the rear haunch. As the animal moved, more fresh blood welled out of the wound. Will could see one eye as the dog lay, apparently exhausted, on its side. It was filled with pain.

It was a border shepherd, he realized, one of the sheepdogs bred in the northern border region, and known for their intelligence and loyalty. The body was black, with a pure white ruff at the throat and chest and a white tip to the bushy tail. The legs were white and the black fur repeated again at the dog’s head, as if a cowl had been placed over it, so that the ears were black, while a white blaze ran up the muzzle and between the eyes.

The gash in the dog’s side didn’t appear to be too deep and the chances were that the ribcage had protected the dog’s vital organs. But it was fearfully long and the wide-gaping edges were even, as if they had been cut by a blade. And it had bled a lot. That, he realized, would be the biggest problem. The dog was weak. It had lost a lot of blood. Perhaps too much.

Will rose and moved to his saddlebags, untying the medical kit that all Rangers carried. Tug eyed him curiously, satisfied now that the dog represented no threat. Will shrugged and gestured to the medical kit.

“It works for people,” he said. “It should be all right for a dog.”

He returned to the injured animal, touching its head softly. The

dog tried to raise its head but he gently held it down, crooning encouraging words to it as he opened the medical pack with his free hand.

"Now let's take a look at what they've done to you, boy," he said.

The fur around the wound was matted with blood and he cleaned it as best he could with water from his canteen. Then he opened a small container and carefully smeared the paste it contained along the edges of the gash. The salve was a painkiller that would numb the wound so that he could clean it and bandage it without causing more pain to the dog.

He allowed a few minutes for the salve to take effect, then began applying an herbal preparation that would prevent infection from setting in and help the wound heal. The painkiller was working well and his ministrations seemed to be causing no problem for the dog, so he used it liberally. As he worked, he saw that he had misnamed the dog by calling it "boy." It was a female.

The border shepherd, sensing that Will was helping, lay still. Occasionally, she whimpered again. But not in pain. The sound was more a sound of gratitude. Will sat back on his haunches, head to one side as he surveyed the now cleaned injury. Fresh blood still seeped from the gash and he knew he would have to close it. Bandaging was hardly practical, however, with the thick fur of the dog and the awkward position of the gash. He shrugged, realizing that he would have to stitch it.

"Might as well get on with it while the salve's still working," he told the animal. She lay with her head on the ground, but one eye swiveled around to watch him as he worked.

The shepherd obviously felt the sensation of the needle as he quickly put in a dozen stitches of fine silk thread and drew the lips

of the wound together. But there seemed to be no pain and, after an initial flinching reaction, she lay still and allowed him to continue.

Finished, Will rested one hand gently on the black-and-white head, feeling the softness of the thick fur. He had done his job well but it was obvious that the dog would be unable to walk.

“Stay here,” he said softly. “Stay.”

The dog lay obediently as he moved to the packhorse and began rearranging its load.

There were two long satchels, holding books and personal effects, on either side of the packsaddle. They left a depression between them and he found a spare cloak and several blankets to line the space until he had a soft, comfortable nest in which the dog could lie—with enough space for her to move a little, but snug enough to hold her securely in place.

Crossing back to where she lay, he slid his arms under the warm body and gently lifted her, talking all the time in a low crooning voice. The salve was effective but it didn't last long and he knew she would be hurting again soon. The dog whimpered once, then held her peace as he lifted her into position in the space he had prepared. Again, he fondled her head, scratching the ears gently. She moved her head slightly to lick his hand. The small movement seemed to exhaust her. He noted with interest that her eyes were two different colors. Till this moment, he had seen only the left eye, the brown one, as the dog lay on her side. Now, as he moved her, he could see that the right eye was blue. It gave her a raffish, mischievous look, he thought, even in her current low condition.

“Good girl,” he told her. Then, as he turned back to Tug, he realized that the little horse was eyeing him curiously.

“We've got a dog,” he said. Tug shook his head and snorted, *Why?*