



Scorpion Mountain (Brotherband Chronicles Book 5)

By John A. Flanagan

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Not waiting to see if the knife will strike true, the Brotherband again team up with Gilan to track down the would-be killers.

In this fifth book in the Brotherband Chronicles, old friends reemerge to take on new enemies as the worlds of Ranger's Apprentice and Brotherband join forces in battle!

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Scorpion Mountain (Brotherband Chronicles Book 5) By John A. Flanagan Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #35331 in eBooks
- Published on: 2014-12-02
- Released on: 2014-12-02
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

About the Author

John Flanagan grew up in Sydney, Australia, hoping to be a writer, and after a successful career in advertising and television, he began writing a series of short stories for his son, Michael, in order to encourage him to read. Those stories would eventually become *The Ruins of Gorlan*, Book 1 of the Ranger's Apprentice epic. Now with his companion series, Brotherband Chronicles, the novels of John Flanagan have sold millions of copies and made readers of kids the world over. Mr. Flanagan lives in the suburb of Manly, Australia, with his wife. In addition to their son, they have two grown daughters and four grandsons.

You can visit John Flanagan at

www.RangersApprentice.com

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Chapter One

"Whoa there, Tom! Steady on, fellow!"

Tom was a plow horse, well past middle age and resigned, like most of his placid breed, to the constant task of plodding up and down, hauling a plow that carved consecutive furrows in the rich earth of Halder farm. He wasn't accustomed to being stopped in mid-furrow and he turned his shaggy head to look at his owner, Devon Halder.

Devon, like his horse, was well past middle age. And the smock that he was wearing was liberally daubed with patches of drying mud. Later that night, when he was asked in the local tavern what led him to stop and and turn around, he couldn't really recall. Perhaps he had heard the slight sounds of creaking leather and rope, or the rustle of a sail in the brisk wind.

Whatever it was, it was enough for Devon to halt Tom and turn to face the river behind him. When he did, the sight that met his eyes sent a sudden jolt of panic through him.

Barely forty meters away, gliding smoothly up the river, was a ship.

His first thought was that she was a wolfship, and Devon was old enough to remember when the sight of a Skandian wolfship on the river was a prelude to a sudden, savage attack. He tensed his muscles to run and spread the alarm in the nearby village. But he paused at the last second.

The days when Skandians used to raid the coastal and river villages of Araluen were well in the past now.

And besides, on second glance, this was no wolfship.

She was similar in style and shape, sure enough. She was slim waisted and had a look of speed about her.

She didn't have the broad, capacious lines of a cargo hull. But there was no large square sail such as a wolfship would use. Instead, this ship was rigged with a triangular sail that was mounted fore and aft along the line of the ship, supported by a long, gracefully curving spar that swept up high above the hull.

She was smaller than a wolfship. Also, at her bow post, there was no carved wolf's head, with raised hackles and snarling teeth. Instead, there was a carving in the shape of a bird's head. And there was a motif of a seabird in flight on the sail—a graceful bird with wings spread wide. A heron, Devon realized.

But the four circular wood-and-metal-reinforced shields arrayed down the starboard bulwark were unmistakably Skandian in design, although he noticed that a fifth shield, set level with the helmsman's position, was shaped like a triangle.

The crew, those he could see, were dressed in Skandian fashion—with leather and sheepskin vests and leggings held secure by crisscross bindings. Yet he saw none of the horned helmets for which the Skandian sea wolves were well known, the sight of which would strike fear into any honest farmer's heart. Instead, several of them wore dark woolen watch caps, rolled down to cover their ears against the cold.

As he watched, the figure at the helm raised a hand in greeting. Devon shaded his eyes to look more closely at the helmsman. He appeared to be quite young, and relatively slim for a Skandian. The person beside him was more like a typical sea wolf, Devon thought. He was bulky, with wild gray hair blowing in the wind. As Devon watched, he realized that the second man had a wooden hook in place of his right hand.

Definitely a sea wolf type, he thought. But then the man made a similar gesture of greeting. Devon returned the wave cautiously—his suspicions were still raised. Small as she might be, this was definitely a cruiser, a raiding ship. She was fast, lean hulled and potentially dangerous. And, as the shields arrayed down her bulwark attested, her crew were fighting men. He watched her closely as she sailed past, gradually pulling out into the center of the river to round the approaching bend. The helmsman and his companion lowered their hands and seemed to lose interest in the elderly farmer and his plow horse.

“That'll give him something to talk about in the tavern tonight,” Thorn said with a grin. “Probably the most exciting thing that's happened to him since his plow got stuck on a tree root five days ago.”

Hal raised an eyebrow. “Us? Exciting?”

Thorn nodded, scratching his rump with the blunt end of his wooden hook.

“He was a graybeard. He'd remember the times when the sight of a Skandian ship meant a raid. I'm surprised he didn't go pelting off to raise the alarm when he saw us.” Thorn had no idea how close the farmer had come to doing just that.

As they rounded the bend and the farmer and his horse disappeared from sight, Kloof planted her forepaws onto the starboard bulwark and gave out a single bark. Then, content that she had asserted her superiority over all things Araluen, she dropped back to the deck, slid her front feet and flumped down onto the planks. For a few seconds, she watched Hal out of one eye, then she sighed and settled back to sleep.

Hal cast his gaze over the tilled fields and green forests that lined the banks of the river. It was attractive country, he thought.

“Did you ever raid in Araluen, Thorn?” he asked.

The old sea wolf shook his head. “Erak preferred to raid the Iberian coast, and sometimes Gallica or Sonderland. And now that I've seen Gilan in action with that bow of his, I'm glad he did. Maybe Erak knew something. Imagine facing half a dozen archers with Gilan's skill and speed.”

“Facing one would be bad enough,” Hal agreed.

Stig was sitting on a coil of rope several meters away, idly putting an edge on his already razor-sharp saxe knife as he listened to their conversation.

“D’you think Gilan will be at Castle Araluen yet?” he asked.

Originally, they had planned to leave Cresthaven Bay at the same time as the Ranger, who was riding overland back to the capital. But they’d had a long, hard voyage south to Socorro and Hal wanted the Heron in tip-top shape for her first appearance at Castle Araluen. There were some sections of running rigging that had frayed and needed splicing and repairing, and there was a large, splintered gash in one of the planks on the waterline, where they had nearly run aground pursuing Tursgud’s renegade ship Nightwolf through the shoals. It took half a day to plane that smooth and repaint the timber so there was no sign of the damage.

In addition, Edvin wanted to replenish their stores and fresh food and suggested that they should do it at Cresthaven, where the village was contracted to supply their needs as part of the duty ship agreement.

“No point spending our money elsewhere when they’ll provide it for nothing here,” Edvin had said, and Hal agreed.

As a result, they sailed out of Cresthaven and headed north to the river mouth some two days after Gilan had ridden off, waving farewell as he topped the rise above the bay where they were moored.

“He should be,” Hal replied to Stig’s question. “It’s a little over a day’s ride and I’m told those Ranger horses cover ground at a prodigious rate.”

“He can have the welcome committee ready for us then,” Thorn added. “Maybe this king of theirs will come down to the jetty to greet us.”

Hal smiled sidelong at his old friend. “From what I’ve heard of kings, they don’t stand around on windy jetties waiting for roughneck sailors to arrive.”

“Do you consider yourself a roughneck?” Thorn asked. “I’ve always thought of you as quite sophisticated.”

“I may be. But you’re roughneck enough for all of us,” Hal told him and Thorn grinned contentedly.

“Yes. I’m glad to say I am.”

Farther forward, in the waist of the ship and with no responsibilities to attend to during this current long reach of the river, the twins were bickering, as they were wont to do. They had been silent for some time, much to the crew’s relief, but that was a situation too good to last.

“You know that brown-eyed girl who was sitting on your lap at the welcome-home feast?” Ulf began.

Wulf eyed him suspiciously, before replying. “Yes. What about her?”

Ulf paused, smiling quietly to himself, preparing to throw out his verbal challenge. “Well, she fancied me,” he said.

Wulf looked at him, eyebrows raised. “She fancied you?”

Ulf nodded emphatically. “So you noticed too?”

Wulf snorted in annoyance. “I wasn’t agreeing,” he said. “I was querying you. That was why I raised my voice at the end of the sentence. It signified that I was saying, What do you mean, she fancied you?”

“I mean she found me attractive—actually, very attractive. It was obvious, after all.”

Wulf paused for several seconds. “If it was so obvious that she fancied you—that she found you attractive—why was she sitting on my lap?”

Ulf waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. “That’s what makes it so obvious. She wanted to make me jealous, so she played up to you. She was playing hard to get.”

“Well, she played it very well. You certainly didn’t get her,” his brother told him, with some heat in his voice. He had noticed Ulf admiring the girl early in the evening and had swooped, successfully, before his brother could act.

Lydia, who was leaning on the bulwark several meters away, groaned audibly as the exchange continued.

Ulf laughed. “I could have if I wanted to. She was overwhelmed by my devilish good looks.”

“Devilish good looks? You’re as ugly as a mange-ridden monkey,” Wulf told him. But his brother was already shaking his head.

“It’s odd that someone as unattractive as yourself would say that,” he replied. “That was why she chose to sit with you when she planned to make me jealous. She chose the most unattractive person she could see.”

“Then obviously,” Wulf retorted, “she couldn’t see you.”

Of course, what made this discussion puzzling for the rest of the crew was that Ulf and Wulf were identical in every respect. For one of them to call the other ugly was for him to call himself ugly as well. But they never seemed to grasp that fact.

As they continued speaking, their voices, at first lowered, rose in volume so that the entire crew could listen to their meaningless drivel. Hal decided that enough was enough.

“Ingvar?” he called.

The massively built boy was sitting forward of the mast, leaning back against it, his long legs splayed out on the deck before him. He turned and peered back toward the steering position.

“Yes, Hal?”

“Would you say that sailing down a river counts the same as being at sea?”

The rules of the ship were that if the twins carried on one of their idiotic arguments at sea, Ingvar was within his rights to throw one of them overboard. In fact, some of the crew felt, he was obliged to throw one overboard. Usually, a reference to this fact was enough to stop the mindless discussions they enjoyed so much.

Ingvar shrugged. “Eh? Oh, I don’t know. I suppose so.”

His voice was distracted and flat. Lydia, a few meters away, noticed this and turned to look at him, frowning. Hal mirrored the expression. Usually Ingvar was good tempered and cheerful. Now he sounded

listless and bored. Hal wondered if something was on the big boy's mind.

Ulf and Wulf fell instantly silent. These days, they were never quite sure how much rope Hal would give them before he ordered the huge Ingvar to toss one or the other, or even both, overboard. Discretion was the better part of valor in such a case.

Hal noted that they had stopped arguing, and he nodded in Ingvar's direction. But the young giant wasn't looking his way anymore. He had resumed his seat against the mast, and Hal heard him give vent to a loud sigh. Hal looked at Stig, who was also watching Ingvar curiously.

"Have you noticed Ingvar's been acting strangely for the past few days?" Hal asked his first mate.

Stig nodded, a slightly worried look on his features. "Something definitely seems to be on his mind. I've been wondering . . ."

Whatever it was that he had been wondering was forgotten as the ship swept past a high bluff. In the near distance, set among tailored and carefully tended parkland, stood the majestic, beautiful Castle Araluen, a mass of graceful spires, soaring turrets, flying buttresses and fluttering pennants.

"Gorlog's earwax!" Jesper said. "Will you take a look at that!"

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