



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

**RANGER'S APPRENTICE 8:**  
**THE KINGS OF CLONMEL**

by John Flanagan

**Format: Paperback**  
**ISBN: 9781741663013**  
**Imprint: Random House Australia**  
**Released: November 2008**



It was Tug, of course, who first sensed the presence of the other horse and rider. His ears twitched upwards and Will felt, rather than heard, the low rumble that vibrated through the little horse's barrel-like body. It was not an alarm signal, so Will knew that whoever Tug had sensed, it was someone known to him. He leaned forward and patted the shaggy mane.

'Good boy,' he said softly. 'Now where are they?'

He already had a fair idea who it would be. And even as he spoke, his guess was confirmed as a bay horse and a tall rider trotted out of the trees some hundred metres ahead of him to wait at the crossroads there. Tug snorted again, tossing his head.

'All right. I can see them.'

He touched Tug lightly with his heels and the horse responded instantly, moving to a canter to close the distance to the horse and rider. The bay whinnied a greeting, to which Tug responded.

'Gilan!' Will shouted cheerfully as they came within easy earshot. The tall Ranger waved a hand in reply, grinning as Will and Tug clattered to a stop beside him. The two Rangers leaned over in their saddles to clasp right hands.

'It's good to see you,' Gilan said.

'You too. I thought it would be you. Tug let me know there were friends nearby a few minutes ago.'

'Not much gets by that shaggy little beast of yours, does it?' Gilan said easily. 'I suppose that's what's kept you alive these past years.'

'Little?' Will replied. 'I don't notice that Blaze is exactly a battlehorse.'

In truth, Blaze was a little longer in the leg than the average Ranger horse, and had slightly finer lines. But like all of the breed, Gilan's bay mare was still considerably smaller than the massive battlehorses that carried the Kingdom's knights into battle.

While the two young Rangers chaffed each other, the horses seemed to be carrying on a similar conversation, with a lot of snorting and head tossing to punctuate the good-natured horsey insults they were undoubtedly swapping. Ranger horses definitely seemed to communicate with each other and Gilan regarded the two of them curiously.

'Wonder what the devil they're saying?' he mused.

'I think Tug just commented on how uncomfortable Blaze must be, carrying a spindle-shanked bag of bones like yourself,' Will told him. Gilan opened his mouth to reply in kind but oddly, at that very moment, Tug nodded his head violently several times, and both horses turned their

**Extract from RANGER'S APPRENTICE 8: THE KINGS OF CLONMEL by John Flanagan**

Available from all good bookstores

ISBN: 9781741663013 | Imprint: Random House Australia | Publisher: Random House Australia



## RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

heads to study Gilan. It was a coincidence, the tall Ranger told himself. And yet it was uncanny how they chose that very moment to do it.

'You know,' he said, 'I have a strange feeling that you might be right.'

Will looked back along the road he had just travelled, then down the crossroad, in the opposite direction to the one from which Gilan had emerged.

'Any sign of Halt so far?'

Gilan shook his head. 'I've been waiting for the best part of two hours, and I haven't seen him yet. Odd, because he has the shortest distance to travel.'

It was the time of the annual Ranger Gathering and it had become the custom for the three friends to meet at these crossroads, a few kilometres short of the Gathering Ground, and ride the remaining distance together. When Will had been apprenticed to Halt, he had grown used to meeting Gilan here. That was after Will's first Gathering, when Gilan had attempted to ambush his old teacher and Will had spoiled the attempt. Since Will had taken over Seacliff Fief and Gilan had been posted to Norgate, they had continued the practice whenever possible.

'Should we wait?' Will said.

Gilan shrugged. 'If he's not here yet, something must have held him up. We might as well ride in and set up camp.' He urged his horse forward with the lightest touch of his heel. Will did likewise and they rode on side by side.

Sometime later, they arrived at the Gathering Ground. It was a relatively open forest area where the undergrowth had been cleared away. The tall trees had been left, to provide sheltered spots where the Rangers could pitch their low, one-man tents.

They rode towards their usual spot, calling greetings to other Rangers as they passed. The Corps was a close-knit unit and most Rangers knew one another by name. Arriving at their spot, the two dismounted and unsaddled their horses, rubbing them down after their long ride. Will took two folding leather buckets and fetched water from the small stream that wandered through the Gathering Ground while Gilan measured out oats for Blaze and Tug. For the next few days, the horses could graze on the lush grass that grew underfoot, but they deserved a treat after their hard work.

And Rangers never begrudged giving their horses a treat. They pitched tents and swept the area clear of fallen branches and leaves. The fireplace stones had been disturbed, possibly by some wandering animal, and Will quickly replaced them.

'I'm beginning to wonder where Halt's got to,' Gilan said, glancing to the west, where the lowering sun's light filtered through the trunks of the trees. 'He's certainly taking his time getting here.'

'Maybe he's not coming,' Will suggested.

Gilan pursed his lips. 'Halt miss a Gathering?' he said, disbelief in his tone. 'He loves coming to the Gathering each year. And he wouldn't miss a chance to catch up with you.'

Like Will, Gilan was a former apprentice of Halt's. But he knew that there was a very special relationship between the grizzled senior Ranger and his young friend – one that went way past the master and apprentice relationship that he shared with Halt. Will was more of a son to Halt, he knew.

**Extract from RANGER'S APPRENTICE 8: THE KINGS OF CLONMEL by John Flanagan**

Available from all good bookstores

ISBN: 9781741663013 | Imprint: Random House Australia | Publisher: Random House Australia



## RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

'No,' he continued, 'I can't think of anything that would keep him away.'

'Well, apparently something has,' a familiar voice behind them interrupted.

Will and Gilan turned quickly to find Crowley standing behind them. The Ranger Commandant was a master of silent movement.

'Crowley!' Gilan said. 'Where did you spring from? And how is it I never hear you coming?'

Crowley grinned. The skill was one he was proud of.

'Oh, being able to sneak up on people has its advantages in the political world of Castle Araluen,' he said. 'People are always discussing secrets and you'd be surprised how many snippets I pick up before they realise I'm there.'

The two younger Rangers stood and shook hands with their Commandant. While Gilan brewed a pot of coffee, Will asked the question that had been on his mind since Crowley's sudden appearance.

'What's this about Halt not coming to the Gathering?' he asked. 'Are you sure?'

Crowley shrugged. 'I received a message from him the day before yesterday. He's off on the West Coast, chasing down rumours about some new religious cult that's cropped up. Said he wouldn't have time to make it back here.'

'A religious cult?' Will asked. 'What sort of religious cult?'

The corners of Crowley's mouth turned down in an expression of distaste. 'The usual sort, I'm afraid.' He glanced at Gilan for confirmation. 'You know the type of thing, don't you, Gil?'

Gilan nodded. 'Only too well. "Come join our new religion," he mock quoted. "Our god is the only true god and he will protect you from the doom that is coming to the world. You will be safe and secure with us. Oh... and by the way, would you mind giving us all your valuables for the privilege of being kept safe?" Is that the sort of thing?' he asked.

Crowley sighed heavily. 'That's pretty much it in a nutshell. They warn people about impending disaster, and all the time, they're the ones who are planning to cause it.'

Gilan poured three steaming cups of coffee and passed them around. Crowley watched as the two younger Rangers spooned generous helpings of wild honey into theirs. He shook his head. 'Never could get used to the taste of honey in my coffee. Halt and I used to argue over that in our younger days.'

Will grinned. 'If you're Halt's apprentice, you don't have a choice. You learn to shoot a bow, throw a knife, move silently and put honey in your coffee.'

'He's a fine teacher,' Gilan said, sipping his coffee appreciatively. 'So did Halt say what this new cult are calling themselves? They usually come up with some portentous-sounding name,' he added, in an aside to Will.

'He didn't say,' Crowley said. He seemed to be hesitating over whether to voice his next statement. Then he came to a decision. 'He's worried this might be a new outbreak of the Outsiders.'

The name meant nothing to Will but he saw Gilan's head come up. 'The Outsiders?' Gilan said. 'I remember that name. It must have been in the second year of my apprenticeship. Didn't you and Halt go off together to see them on their way?'

**Extract from RANGER'S APPRENTICE 8: THE KINGS OF CLONMEL by John Flanagan**

Available from all good bookstores

ISBN: 9781741663013 | Imprint: Random House Australia | Publisher: Random House Australia



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

Crowley nodded. 'Along with Berrigan and several other Rangers.'

'That must have been quite a cult,' Will said, surprise in his voice. There was an old Araluan saying about 'One riot, one Ranger'. It meant that it rarely took more than a single Ranger to solve the biggest problems.

'It was,' Crowley agreed. 'They were a very unpleasant bunch of people and their poison had gone deep into the heart of the countryside. It took us some time to get the better of them. That's why Halt is so intent on finding out more about this new group. If they're a recurrence of the Outsiders, we'll have to act quickly.'

He tossed the dregs of his coffee into the fire and set his cup down. 'But let's not worry about what might be a problem until we know that it is. In the meantime, we have a Gathering to organise. Gil, I was wondering if you'd give our two final-year apprentices some extra tuition in unseen movement?'

'Of course,' Gilan said. If Crowley was an expert at moving without being heard, Gilan was the Corps' past master at moving without being seen. To a large degree, his skill was dependent upon instinct, but there were always practical tips he could pass on to others.

'And as for you, Will,' Crowley said, 'we have three first-years this season. Would you be interested in assessing their progress?'

He saw Will's attention snap back to the present. He could tell that the young man was still nursing his disappointment over the fact that his former teacher would not be coming. Just as well to give him something to take his mind off it, the older Ranger thought.

'Oh, sorry, Crowley! What was that you said?' Will said, a little guiltily. 'Would you care to help out assessing our three first-years?' Crowley repeated and Will nodded hastily. 'Yes, by all means! Sorry about that. I was just thinking about Halt. I've been looking forward to seeing him,' he explained.

'We all have,' Crowley said. 'His grumpy face brings a special light to our day. But there'll be time enough for that later.' He hesitated briefly. 'As a matter of fact...no, never mind. That'll keep.' 'What will keep?' Will's curiosity was aroused now and Crowley smiled to himself. Curiosity was the sign of a good Ranger. But so was discipline.

'Never mind. It's something I'll tell you about when the time is right. For now, I'd appreciate it if you'll coach the boys in archery and oversee a tactical exercise with them.'

'Consider it done.' Will thought for a few seconds then added, 'Do I need to set the tactical exercise?'

Crowley shook his head. 'No. We've done that. Just see them through solving it. It should amuse you,' he added cryptically. He rose and dusted off the seat of his trousers. 'Thanks for the coffee,' he said. 'See you at the feast tonight.'

Copyright © John Flanagan 2008

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

**Extract from RANGER'S APPRENTICE 8: THE KINGS OF CLONMEL by John Flanagan**

Available from all good bookstores

ISBN: 9781741663013 | Imprint: Random House Australia | Publisher: Random House Australia