

## *Ranger's Apprentice The Royal Ranger 4: The Missing Prince*

### **Chapter One**

The sickle moon had just slipped below the western horizon when the file of mounted men emerged from the trees. There were ten of them in all and they pushed forward a few paces until they crested the ridge looking down to Castle Araluen. The rider at the centre of the line held one hand in the air in the universal sign to halt, and the line of riders drew rein, watching the castle.

The horses snuffled impatiently. They sensed that the massive building meant shelter and water and feed, and they were impatient for all three. The rider to the right of the man who had signalled leaned forward attentively in his saddle, studying the open ground before them. It sloped down initially from the ridge, then began to rise again towards the castle, dotted here and there with clumps of trees and shady arbours. For the most part, the ground was open and a rider crossing it would be within full view, if anyone were watching.

And the likelihood was that someone was always watching. But now the open parkland looked deserted. Any potential watchers would be within the castle itself, and that was where the small party of armed and mail-clad riders were expected.

Most of the castle's windows were in darkness – as would be usual at this late hour. There were beacon fires in braziers set at regular intervals along the walls, and two torches flickered at either side of the gate, which was now closed and locked against intruders.

'It all looks normal, my lord,' the rider said quietly.

The man beside him nodded. 'I'd expect it to – even if it's not.'

Both men spoke in Gallic. As they hesitated, a yellow lantern was exposed on the walls above the huge gate and drawbridge, spilling its light down the granite walls of the entryway.

‘And there’s the signal,’ the leader said. He turned to a rider on his other side. ‘Jules, make the reply.’

The man he had addressed had flint and tinder ready, and a lantern hung from his saddle bow. It took him a few moments to light a handful of tinder, then to press the resulting flame to the wick of the lantern. As the tiny flame took, he closed the front of the lantern, which was made from blue glass. He held the light high, letting the blue gleam spread out over the small group.

A few seconds later, the light on the castle walls moved slowly from left to right, then back again, repeating the action three times.

‘That’s the all clear,’ the leader said, nudging his spurs into the side of the horse he rode and moving forward.

The line of riders followed him, dropping into two files as they went, with the leader and the first knight who had spoken at the front.

They moved at a slow trot, their horses’ hooves making little sound on the soft ground. As they reached the bottom of the first slope and began to climb towards the castle, the horses naturally slowed a little and the riders urged them on to greater speed. They heard the massive clanking of a large engine, and a slit of light showed at the top of the drawbridge, gradually growing wider as it opened.

The huge bridge thudded down by the time they were thirty metres away. The riders could see that the portcullis was still lowered, barring access to the castle yard. The lead riders urged their horses to the beginning of the drawbridge and halted.

A mail-clad man at arms stepped through a small gate at the side of the portcullis and crossed the bridge towards them. He was armed with a halberd and wore a long sword at his waist. His mail armour gleamed dully in the light of the beacons set either side of the drawbridge.

The leader of the group looked up at the massive, dark walls towering above him. He had no doubt that he was covered by several bowmen. This being Araluen, they would be armed with longbows, not crossbows, and they would all be expert shots.

The man at arms stopped a few metres short of the group.

‘Do you have the password?’ he asked quietly.

The lead rider shifted slightly in his saddle. ‘Pax inter reges,’ he said in the ancient tongue: peace between kings.

The foot soldier nodded and turned back to the castle, raising his right arm in a signal to the men at the portcullis.

Slowly, the massive frame began to rise into the air, the movement accompanied by a distant clanking inside the gatehouse. When it was well clear of the bridge, the foot soldier waved the group forward.

‘Go ahead,’ he said.

Their horses’ hooves clattered on the hardwood boards of the drawbridge as they trotted across in two files.

When they reached the cobbled castle yard, the sound changed. There were armed foot soldiers on either side, watching them as they made their entry. One, who wore the insignia of a sergeant, gestured towards a door in the keep, the strongly built stone tower in the centre of the castle yard. As he did so, a door opened at ground level and yellow torchlight spilled out

onto the stone  
paving.

The new arrivals rode up to the open door and dismounted. Waiting servants took their horses and led them away to feed them and rub them down. The leader of the group pressed one fist into the small of his back.

He wasn't used to riding long distances any more and they had been travelling for four hours.

The man who had opened the door descended the three steps to the level of the courtyard and bowed slightly from the waist. He was grey-haired and distinguished in appearance, dressed in expensive-looking clothes.

'Welcome to Castle Araluen. I'm Lord Anthony, the King's chamberlain,' he said. His tone was neutral, neither welcoming nor aggressive. The visitor nodded acknowledgement, but said nothing. Anthony stepped to one side and gestured for the new arrivals to mount the stairs. 'Please come this way.'

The leader of the group mounted the stairs and Anthony fell into step slightly behind and beside him. The rest of the group followed.

As they came into the well-lit great hall of the keep, Anthony studied the man leading the group. He was small, a good five centimetres shorter than Anthony, and slightly built. His well-cut jerkin, in forest green leather, couldn't conceal his unathletic build. His shoulders were narrow and he had the beginnings of a paunch. He held himself badly, slumping and allowing his shoulders to stoop. He wore an ornate-looking sword on his left hip, with a jewel-encrusted dagger to balance it on the right.

In spite of the weapons, this was no warrior, Anthony thought. But then, he had been told as much when he had been briefed about this visit.

He cast a quick glance over the rest of the group. All but one were taller than the leader, muscular and athletic looking. They were warriors, he thought. The one exception was the same height and build as the leader and there was a strong family resemblance. Anthony realised that the leader had hesitated, not sure which way to go, and he quickly gestured towards the wide staircase leading to the upper levels of the keep.

‘King Duncan’s rooms are on the first floor,’ he said, and the shorter man led the way once more.

‘The King apologises for not greeting you down here, sir,’ Anthony said. ‘His knee still troubles him and the stairs can be difficult.’

The visitor sniffed condescendingly. ‘He’s still crippled, is he?’

Lord Anthony raised an eyebrow at the insulting word and the superior tone. Stiff knee or not, Duncan was still very much a warrior. He could chew you up and spit you out, Anthony thought.

‘He’s able to ride again, and he walks with his dogs every day,’ he replied, keeping the irritation out of his voice.

‘But not down stairs, obviously,’ the other man said.

This time, Anthony allowed his irritation to show. He stopped, facing the visitor. ‘No. But if that bothers you, sir, we can always cancel this meeting.’ He met the other man’s haughty gaze and held it. You pompous prat, he thought, you’re coming here to ask a favour, so you can climb down off your high horse.

They locked gazes for a few second, then the visitor gave way with a dismissive shrug – a typically Gallic movement, Anthony thought.

‘No matter,’ the visitor said. ‘We can walk upstairs.’

He resumed climbing. Anthony, feeling a small glow of satisfaction at the way the man had backed down, followed close behind. As they reached the top of the wide stone stairway, he gestured to the left.

‘This way, please, sir.’

A set of massive wooden doors faced them. They were guarded by two men at arms, who seemed to be built on the same scale as the doors. At the sight of the armed men approaching, they came to a ready position, barring the way with the long halberds they held in front of them.

‘I’m afraid your men will have to wait, sir,’ Anthony said.

The smaller man nodded. It was only to be expected, after all.

‘One of your companions can accompany you,’ the chamberlain added.

The visitor pointed to one of the men following him, the one who resembled him.

‘My brother, Louis, will come with me,’ he said. He gestured to the others. ‘The rest of you will wait here.’

‘No need for that, sir,’ Anthony told him. ‘We have refreshments for them in an adjacent room.’ He raised his voice and called, ‘Thomas!’

Another door opened further down the corridor and a uniformed servant emerged, bowing slightly and inviting the visitors into the brightly lit room behind him.

The leader nodded and the eight warriors trooped off to the food and drink waiting for them. Anthony led the way towards the huge wooden doors. The sentries stepped aside, coming to attention as they did. Anthony knocked on the doors and a voice was heard from within.

‘Come.’

Anthony opened the double doors and led the two visitors into the King's office.

Duncan was seated behind the large table that served as his desk.

'My lord,' said Anthony, 'may I present King Philippe of Gallica, and his brother, Prince Louis.'

Duncan, the King of Araluen, rose from his seat and moved round the table to greet his visitors.

'Welcome to Araluen,' Duncan said, holding out his hand.

Philippe took it and they shook hands. 'Thank you for receiving us,' Philippe said.

Duncan shrugged the thanks aside. 'We should always be willing to help our friends.' He nodded a greeting to the second man. 'Prince Louis,' he said.

The King's brother bowed gracefully. 'Your majesty,' Louis said, then straightened.

Duncan studied the two men. They looked travel-stained and weary.

'It's late and you've travelled a long way,' he said. 'You must be tired and hungry.'

Philippe made a small moue of agreement. 'It has been a hard day,' he agreed.

'Your chambers are prepared for you. I'll have food and drink sent up, and hot water for a bath if you wish. Get a good night's sleep and we'll talk in the morning.'

For the first time, Philippe smiled. 'That would be most welcome. And we do have a great deal to discuss.'

Duncan inclined his head. 'I'm sure we do,' he said.