



The Invaders: Brotherband Chronicles, Book 2 (The Brotherband Chronicles)

By John A. Flanagan

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From the author of the global phenomenon Ranger's Apprentice!

Hal and the Herons have done the impossible. This group of outsiders has beaten out the strongest, most skilled young warriors in all of Skandia to win the Brotherband competition. But their celebration comes to an abrupt end when the Skandians' most sacred artifact, the Andomal, is stolen--and the Herons are to blame.

To find redemption they must track down the thief Zavac and recover the Andomal. But that means traversing stormy seas, surviving a bitter winter, and battling a group of deadly pirates willing to protect their prize at all costs. Even Brotherband training and the help of Skandia's greatest warrior may not be enough to ensure that Hal and his friends return home with the Andomal--or their lives.

Perfect for fans of J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, T.H. White's The Sword in the Stone, Christopher Paolini's Eragon series, and George R. R. Martin's Game of Thrones/A Song of Ice and Fire series.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

John Flanagan grew up in Sydney, Australia, hoping to be a writer. John began writing Ranger's Apprentice for his son, Michael, ten years ago, and is still hard at work on the series and its spinoff, Brotherband Chronicles. He currently lives in the suburb of Manly, Australia, with his wife. In addition to their son, they have two grown daughters and four grandsons.

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Chapter one

"We can't keep this up," Stig said.

Hal looked at him, eyes red-rimmed from salt water and exhaustion. He'd been at the tiller of the Heron for the best part of ten days now. The storm winds had continued to sweep out of the southwest throughout that time, keeping them on a constant starboard tack—which was all to the good, as there had been no opportunity to repair the yardarm broken in the final brotherband race.

As first mate, Stig had tried to give Hal short breaks whenever he could. But the wind-driven waves had grown so high and steep that they were regularly breaking over the small ship and flooding her. Everyone on the crew was forced to bail continuously. They worked in teams of four, an hour on, an hour off. When a team's shift was over, the boys would fall, soaked and exhausted, to the deck, trying to snatch a few minutes' sleep, heedless of the freezing seawater constantly smashing over them. So Stig hadn't had much time to help Hal—not that Hal liked to hand over control. He felt the responsibility for the safety of his ship and crew deeply.

Stig glanced doubtfully back over the wake the Heron was carving. There was no pursuit in sight. But they'd be there somewhere.

"D'you think we're far enough away from Hallasholm now?" he asked.

In the hope of recovering the Andomal, Skandia's most sacred artifact, the boys had left the Skandian capital against the orders of the Oberjarl, Erak Starfollower. And they'd taken Hal's ship, Heron, which Erak had planned to confiscate. The boys were in no doubt that Erak would order a pursuit, and if they were caught, Stig didn't like to think what their punishment might be.

"I don't want to risk them catching us," Hal said.

Stig shrugged, and looked at the angry seas around them.

"They won't catch us if we sink," he said. "But that won't do us a lot of good."

“True,” Hal said. “They may not have even left harbor yet. This storm’s been blowing nonstop since we got away.”

Whether they were being pursued or not, it was definitely time to look for a safe anchorage. Hal sensed that the wind had increased in force in the past half hour. White spray was being blown from the top of the waves. He gestured for the bigger boy to take the tiller, then ducked under the canvas screen into the small sheltered nook in the stern of the ship where he kept his navigation equipment and notes—notes he had assiduously collected during the brotherband training period.

He studied the chart for the eastern coast of the Stormwhite Sea for some minutes before he found what he wanted. The majority of bays and coves along this coast faced south—almost directly into the wind and sea. But then he spotted a small, almost insignificant gap that cut into the coastline, with its entrance facing north and with high ground on the southwestern side to provide shelter from the wind and sea. It looked an ideal place to set up a camp until the weather improved.

He carefully wrapped the notes in their waterproof oilcloth cover and ducked out into the open again. A breaking wave drenched him and set him spluttering. Then he grabbed hold of the backstay and climbed onto the stern bulwark, balancing easily against the ship’s plunging motion, studying the coastline a few kilometers away.

There! He could make out one of the landmarks noted on the chart, a high headland, cliffs on either side, and denuded of trees. The dark granite rock was obvious against the gray-green of the pines that covered most of the coastline.

He dropped lightly to the deck and took the tiller once more. Thorn, sitting huddled in his soaked sheepskin jacket with his back to the mast, had noticed his movements. He came aft now to join the two boys.

“Thinking of putting in to shore?” he asked.

“There’s a little sheltered bay about three kilometers southwest,” Hal said. “I’m heading for that.”

Thorn nodded. Not that Hal, as skirl of the Heron, needed his approval in any way. A skirl, even a young one, had absolute authority on his own ship. But Hal was glad that Thorn agreed. It would be foolish to ignore his opinion. The old sea wolf had seen a lot more storms at sea than either Hal or Stig.

In the event, they very nearly missed the entrance to the bay. Visibility was bad, with the air full of flying spray and rain, and the small gap between the headlands guarding the entrance had a high, timbered hill directly behind it, making it look as if the coastline was uninterrupted. At the last moment, Thorn’s keen eyesight noticed a flash of sandy beach in the gap as Heron rose on a wave. He threw out his shortened right arm, pointing with the wooden hook Hal had fashioned for him.

“There it is!”

Stig and Hal exchanged a quick glance. There was no need to give Stig orders. He scrambled forward, beckoning Stefan and Jesper to join him at the ropes holding the reefed sail taut against the wind. As Hal brought the ship round to port, so that the wind was coming from astern, the three crew members eased the sail so that it stood out almost at right angles to the hull.

Heron, with the wind and sea now behind her, began to swoop over the rollers like a gull. It was an exhilarating sensation but Hal kept a watchful eye astern for rogue waves. If one came at them harder and faster than the others, the ship could easily be swamped from behind. There was no relaxing in this sort of

weather.

After several minutes, he saw Thorn glance at him in an unspoken question and he nodded. They'd come close enough to the coast now to swing back to a course that would take them into the bay. As he heaved on the tiller and brought the bow round to starboard, Stig and the other two hauled in on the sail, setting it taut to the wind. The motion of the ship changed again, going from surging and swooping ahead of the wind back to the rolling, shuddering impacts of the waves coming from the beam. Hal glanced ahead and gauged his leeway—the amount the wind was setting the ship downwind and off course. He adjusted the ship's heading until he could see that he'd clear the entrance to the bay easily.

They glided into the bay. As the high surrounding cliffs masked the wind and waves, the Heron rode more upright, cutting smoothly through the calm waters. The boys relaxed as the motion eased. They sprawled on the rowing benches, setting aside the buckets they had been using to bail the water out. Only now, looking at them, did Hal realize how close they had been to utter exhaustion. He'd decided to look for shelter not a minute too soon, he reflected.

At the bottom of the bay was a strip of sandy beach, with wooded hills rising behind it. Hal pointed the bow toward it and the Heron responded, the bow wave chuckling down the hull, audible now that the noise of the storm had abated.

“Welcome to Shelter Bay,” he said to Stig.

“Is that what it's called?”

Hal gave him a tired grin. “It is now.”

Initially, they slept aboard the beached ship, with its heavy tarpaulin cover rigged as a tent to protect them from the weather. They had spent the previous ten days bracing themselves against the wild movements of the Heron, even when they slept. It was a welcome change to be able to relax completely, without having to subconsciously guard against a sudden lurch or roll that might pitch them against the hard timbers of the hull. But by the second morning, they set to work constructing a more permanent shelter, similar to the framed tent they had built for their brotherband training.

When they had retrieved their weapons and personal belongings from their brotherband campsite, Stig had experienced a flash of inspiration. He had stripped the canvas cover they had used as a roof and bundled it up, stowing it aboard the Heron.

“Never know when it might come in handy,” he'd said.

Now Hal and the others appreciated his foresight. They cut and trimmed saplings from the forest to make wall and roof frames, then stretched the canvas tightly over the top to make a snug roof. The walls were lower than their original tent's but the pitched roof gave them ample headroom inside. Mud-daubed, woven sidewalls did a reasonable job keeping out the worst of the weather, although invariably there were chinks that let in the keening wind when it hit full power. But they were young and a few drafts weren't enough to dampen their spirits.

Thorn chose to sleep on the boat. With the others quartered in their tent, he had plenty of room to himself. The others respected his desire for privacy. He had spent many years alone and he had become accustomed to keeping his own company. Besides, even though he liked the Heron crew, they were teenage boys, with the usual tendencies of that breed to squabble, talk loudly and tell jokes they thought were brand-new, unaware that generations of boys before them had told the very same tales.

Once their sleeping quarters were organized, Hal, assisted by the ever-helpful Ingvar, built a small shelter to use as a workshop. Then he and Ingvar and Stig went into the forest to select a sapling to replace the broken yardarm. After several hours, Hal found one to his liking and gestured to Stig.

“Cut it down.”

Ingvar carried the sapling back to the camp, where they stripped off the bark and left the sapling to dry for a few days, removing the surface sap. Then Hal cut and trimmed it to shape and they attached the port sail. Only then did Hal feel a sense of relief. Being ashore with a half-crippled ship had been preying on his mind, he realized. Now the Heron was fully ready for sea in case of any emergency.

He set up a roster for camp chores, with each boy taking a turn at cooking. This didn't last long. After successive meals prepared by Stig, Ulf and Wulf, Edvin had put his foot down.

“I didn't come on this quest to die of food poisoning,” he said acerbically. “I'll do the cooking from now on.”

And since he had already demonstrated some skill in this area, the others were glad to leave the task to him. In turn, Hal relieved him of other camp duties, such as wood and water gathering. After a few days, Edvin sought Hal out with a further request.

“We've got plenty of dried foods and provisions,” he said. “But we could use fresh meat and fish.”

The bay was teeming with fish, and Stig and Stefan were both keen anglers. They undertook to keep a steady supply of bream and flounder coming. Hal and Jesper went into the woods in search of small game. Once again, Ingvar went along as Hal's faithful shadow. Unfortunately, he was a good bit noisier than a shadow, blundering through and into the trees, stepping carelessly on deadfalls. So while the two hunters saw plenty of evidence of small game—rabbits, hares and game birds—they saw none of the actual creatures themselves. Eventually, Hal had to put his hand on the huge boy's arm and stop him.

“I'm sorry, Ingvar, but you're making too much noise.”

“I'm not doing it on purpose,” Ingvar said.

The young skirl nodded. “I know. But you're scaring all the game away. I want you to sit here and wait for us, all right?”

Ingvar was disappointed. Since he had joined Hal's crew, he had felt a new sense of worth and purpose. In his short life before this, nobody had ever looked to him to contribute, or expected much of him. But as a member of the Heron brotherband, he had participated in their success and their victory over the other teams. Hal had been the first person to expect anything of Ingvar and Ingvar hated to feel that he was letting his skirl down—although, deep down, he knew Hal was right. He was too clumsy and noisy to help with the hunting. But now that all the heavy work of building was finished, he had nothing to do.

“All right, Hal. If you say so.” He lowered himself to the ground, leaning back against the bole of a tree. Hal saw the disappointment on his face.

“Ingvar, don't worry. I've got a job in mind for you. And you'll be the only one who can do it. Just be patient.”

Leaving Ingvar a little mollified, Hal and Jesper continued farther into the woods. Almost immediately, Ingvar's absence bore fruit. They hadn't gone fifty meters before they saw a plump rabbit, nibbling at the

moss on the base of a fallen log on the far side of a large clearing.

Jesper put his hand on Hal's arm and pointed. Carefully, Hal unslung his crossbow. Putting his foot in the stirrup, he drew the heavy cord back with both hands until the retaining latch clicked into place.

The rabbit looked up warily at the sound and both boys froze. The fat little animal's nose quivered as it tested the air, and its long ears swiveled back and forth, searching for any further foreign sound. By sheer chance, they had come upon it from a downwind direction. They waited, holding their breaths, until the animal satisfied itself that it was safe to continue grazing.

Hal slowly raised the crossbow to his shoulder. He flipped up the rear sight. They were less than twenty meters from the rabbit, so it would be a flat shot, with no elevation necessary. He set the bottom mark on the sight against the foresight pin, let out his breath, took in half a breath and held it.

Then squeezed the release.

There was the usual ugly crack as the bow's limbs snapped forward and the bolt streaked away across the clearing.

"I got him!" Hal said triumphantly. He dashed across the clearing, Jesper following a little more slowly.

"You certainly did," Jesper said dryly as he caught up with the triumphant shooter. "The question is, where is he?"

The heavy, iron-tipped crossbow bolt, designed to penetrate chain mail, had totally demolished the rabbit. The crossbow might be a useful weapon in a battle. But for hunting small game, it was sadly deficient.

"Maybe we should build some snares," Jesper said.

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