

Dynasty of Rogues

by

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2007

PART ONE

Against The World

23 February 561

CHAPTER ONE—THE TROUBLEMAKER

Leading Ranger Rikako Sadiq could no longer feel her toes. Her fingers were not faring much better. The icy north wind was the problem, stealing the heat from her. The miserable weather was even less enjoyable than might normally be the case since she was standing on the most exposed spot the sergeant could find. As a lookout position it was a questionable choice. As a place anyone would pick for loafing around on a cold day, it was a complete non-starter.

Admittedly, the top of the rocks offered an impressive view. On the hillside above, fir trees swept over the contours in a blanket of green. A hundred meters away downhill, the forest ended in a straggling line, where farmers had cleared land for crops and animal pasture. The canyon holding the heretic stronghold of Ginasberg was a wide crack running along the edge of the fields.

Riki slapped her arms around her sides and yawned. The morning was dragging. Standing lookout would not be so bad if there were something to look out for. Terminal boredom had set in hours before. Her only entertainment was tapping out rhythms as she stamped life back into her feet, and even this had become too painful to be any fun.

The wind shifted, sneaking under her jacket with cold fingers, pinching at her stomach. Riki tried to seal the gap and looked down enviously at the logging camp beneath the rocks. The workers were out of the wind. They were also moving around, which would keep them warm. Best of all, they had something to do, and people to talk to while they did it. The new mine shaft needed more timber to shore it up, and a group of miners had been sent from Ginasberg to get it.

Sentry duty was supposedly in case of danger approaching, and the rocks overhanging the camp were ideal for this—as long as the danger approached by swinging through the treetops. However, if whatever it was tried walking along at ground level, it would be completely hidden

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from view. Fortunately, with winter barely over, there was no risk of Guards being so far from their Homelands.

Although nothing had been said, Riki was sure the real reason she had been made to stand on lookout was that the sergeant thought she had untied Corporal Lopez's horse so it had strayed. Nothing could be proved, so the sergeant had settled for unofficial retribution in the form of freezing Riki's tits off on pointless sentry duty. Riki grimaced as she thought about it. The reason nothing could be proved was that she had not done it. Lopez had been sloppy about taking care of her horse. If Riki had wanted to play a trick, she would have been far more imaginative.

As she stood there, Riki was studiously trying not to think about what those more imaginative things might be, in case she came up with something too tempting to be ignored. She was in enough trouble as it was.

Cheers from the miners recalled Riki's attention. A young woman was lurching into the logging camp, carrying a large metal pot that swung back and forth in an awkward off-beat to her steps. Riki frowned, recognizing the new arrival as Beth. The pot would contain lunch, brought from Ginasberg, half a kilometer away. Hot food, either soup or stew, would be very welcome, but this description did not apply to Beth, and the feeling was mutual. What chance was there that Beth would put her responsibilities as waitress before personal animosity?

Beth deposited the pot on a tree stump and shrugged a pack off her back. From it, she pulled bowls and bread. The miners left their ropes, saws, and axes and gathered around. After receiving their share, several sat on felled tree trunks to eat. Everyone appeared happy. Laughter rang out. Beth glanced up at Riki a couple of times but showed no sign of bringing her food.

Riki sighed and settled her eyes on the distance, trying to appear unconcerned. Of course, personal animosity would win every time with Beth. How silly to even pose the question. Probably Beth was hoping for Riki to call out so that she could make a point of ignoring her. Riki would not give her the satisfaction. Eventually Beth would have to bring food up to the rocks, and Riki knew there was nothing she could do to make it happen any quicker.

Fifteen minutes passed, and the miners had taken second helpings, before Beth trudged into the forest. A few minutes later, she appeared

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on the uphill side of the rocks, where they emerged from the covering of soil.

“I’ve brought you your lunch.” Beth’s manner could only be described as sneering.

“Oh, that’s really kind of you.”

Riki made sure her own tone and expression suggested nothing other than cheerful sincerity, as if Beth had done her a favor. She fixed her smile before examining what Beth had brought. As Riki had feared, the bowl was half full of cold, watery dregs. The bread was clearly the most overbaked portion Beth could find.

Beth watched her smugly. “I’m sorry, there wasn’t much left.”

Riki just nodded and chewed off a mouthful of bread, as if noticing nothing wrong, and was rewarded by seeing Beth’s smirk falter.

“I’m afraid that bit’s burnt.”

“It’s fine. I like a decent crust.”

“I gave the miners more because they’re working, and you’re just standing around up here doing nothing.” Beth was now digging, trying to provoke a reaction.

“Oh yes, sure. I wasn’t hungry anyway.”

The lies were worth it for the expression of pique that displaced the last of Beth’s taunting smile. She glowered in silence while Riki drained the bowl and handed it back.

“Thanks. That was great.”

Beth snatched the bowl and stomped away. Riki waited until the surly young woman was gone before letting her shoulders slump. Winding Beth up by refusing to rise to the bait was the most fun Riki had felt all day, but Beth was far too predictable to be a challenge. Hot food would have been better, because now, after a morning of being cold, miserable, and bored, all that lay ahead for Riki was an afternoon of being cold, miserable, bored, and hungry.

Why did Beth have to be so petty? It was six years since Riki had broken her arm, and it had been an accident, a childhood fight that had ended in a fall. Anyway, Beth had started it.

However, Riki had gotten the blame. She had always gotten the blame. Riki sighed and kicked a loose pebble. It bounced away down the rocks and into the undergrowth clinging to the hillside below. To be fair, she generally was the one responsible, but not that time. She certainly had not been a bully, as Beth claimed. Even though Riki had

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been fourteen at the time, and Beth only twelve, Beth had been the taller by a clear ten centimeters.

At one meter fifty-five, Riki was still small and lightly built, but her agility and wiry muscles meant that she could easily hold her own, although she was now far too mature for childish scuffles and similar mischief. Riki's lips set in a line. How long would it take everyone to notice that she had grown out of her adolescent troublemaking? She still got blamed for far more than she was guilty of—as with Lopez's straying horse.

Down in the camp, the miners-cum-lumberjacks returned to their work, all except for Faye, who remained by the stew pot, talking to Beth. From her vantage point, Riki considered them cynically. It was no secret that Beth had her sights set on the young miner. Even Riki had heard the gossip, and she was always last for the rumor mill.

Maybe Beth volunteered to bring the food in hope of talking to the object of her desire, and inexplicably, Faye was not running away—quite the opposite. Was Beth about to land her catch? The body language certainly suggested it was a possibility. The two were edging closer as they chatted.

Riki pursed her lips thoughtfully. Trying to be objective, she guessed that Beth was sort of pretty in a bland, brain dead, bitch from hell type of way. Perhaps that was what Faye went for. Riki's expression changed to a wry grin, with more than a touch of self-mockery. She could hardly claim any sort of expertise on the matter.

Beth pulled off her wool cap and lay it on the tree stump beside the stew pot, and then tossed her head coyly, so her hair bounced around her face. Riki snorted in derision. Beth could not even flirt imaginatively, although Faye did not seem to mind. Presumably Beth's imagination was not the source of attraction. Faye put her hand on Beth's arm and leaned forward to whisper into her ear. The pair giggled like three-year-olds, glanced at the other miners, and then, arm in arm, slipped away into the woods.

On the other side of the clearing, everyone else was busy. Riki shook her head in scornful bemusement. Why had no one complained about Faye shirking work? They certainly had noticed. Riki was too far away to hear what was said, but from the gestures passing between the group, they appeared to be mainly amused. Even the forewoman had a tolerant smile. All the irritation and discomfort of the morning returned

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to Riki in a wave of bitterness. In no way would she be allowed to get away with it.

Riki's stomach rumbled. She stared at the discarded cap, unable to keep the scowl from her face. How nice to be warm enough to take your hat off, for whatever reason. Riki's eyes turned to the stew pot beside it. Was it really empty as Beth claimed? A sudden idea bounced into Riki's head. Immediately, she tried to clamp down on it. Stamping her feet, she turned away, but the thought had taken hold.

Riki attempted to push back the knowledge that she was cold and hungry, being punished for something she had not done. She tried to forget the smug sneer on Beth's face. But then her stomach rumbled again, and she gave in. The temptation was far too strong to withstand.

The miners were all occupied with sawing and splitting a huge fir into manageable lengths of timber. Riki gave them one last look, judging their likely positions for the next few minutes, and then hopped down from the rocks. Her feet landed silently in the soft carpet of pine needles.

The light undergrowth beneath the trees was mainly snagweed and rock holly, although the first shoots of lemon vine were breaking through the soil. Riki crept down the hillside. Her small, agile build was ideal for sneaking. She had always been good at passing unnoticed, and childhood hikes with her gene mother had given her an empathy with the wilderness.

The miners' voices got louder as Riki approached. The mundane comments made it clear that her absence from lookout had not been noticed. Riki grinned as she ducked past the last few trees and reached the edge of the clearing. From the shelter of a knotted clump of snagweed, she peered out. The tree stump bearing the stew pot and Beth's hat was only two meters away. The miners were all hard at work on the opposite side of camp. Nobody was looking around, and her Ranger's green uniform should blend into the background. Keeping low, Riki scuttled to the tree stump.

As she had thought, a good two centimeters of stew remained at the bottom of the pot. The food was now congealed, but Riki could see more than three times as much meat and vegetables sitting there wasted as had been in the bowl she had received. Beth must have deliberately strained the liquid she gave to Riki.

The ladle was hanging on the side of the pot. Riki picked it up in

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one hand and Beth's hat in the other. With a cheery cook's flourish, she deposited a good dollop of cold stew in the hat, squashed it around to ensure that the wool was nicely coated, and then carefully put the hat back exactly where it had been. Riki hung the ladle over the rim and snuck back into the undergrowth.

Crouched beneath the snagweed, Riki paused to consider the scene. A niggling doubt about the wisdom of her actions surfaced, but it was too late now. And just how much trouble would she get into? Would Beth even make a complaint, since it might mean owning up to her own spite? Once she had thought about it, she would probably keep quiet, although she was going to create a bit of noise at first, when she put the hat back on.

At the thought, Riki's grin returned. Any comeback was going to be worth it. Quite apart from the anticipated amusement, the activity had warmed her up. Riki's grin got still wider as she began her stealthy return to the lookout rocks.

A scream ripped through the forest, long and high, slicing the cold air.

Riki leapt from her crouch, moving into the open. Across the clearing, some miners had instinctively ducked for cover. Others were jerking their heads left and right, trying to work out where the sound came from. The more alert were scrabbling for their axes. Riki did not wait for them. She raced around the camp, toward the source of the scream, and dived back into the forest.

Another scream sounded, quieter but more desperate than the first.

Riki sped between the trees, plowing heedlessly through the barriers of snagweed and rock holly. Her feet skidded on the soft ground. After twenty meters, Riki hurdled over a fallen tree and joined a forest trail marked by two fresh sets of footprints. Riki sprinted along the track. The path led downhill, toward the sound of water. Ahead, the undergrowth was thinning out. Riki rounded one last thicket of rock holly and burst onto the open banks of a stream.

Ten meters from where she emerged, Beth lay on the ground. Poised over her was a mountain cat, pinning her down. The animal's dappled rump was toward Riki. Its tail switched back and forth like a whip. Beth's heels were scrabbling in the mud between its rear legs in a pointless attempt to squirm away. Her arm was across her face and blood was staining the torn sleeve of her jacket.

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Riki ripped her sword from its scabbard and charged forward, shouting. The cat barely responded, just the faintest flick of its ears. Its attention was fixed on the woman under its paws. Open jaws lunged down at Beth's throat, knocking her arm aside.

Riki's sword arced through the air. She did not have the time to get in close for a clean, killing thrust. The blade only made glancing contact with the cat's tail, barely drawing blood, but that was enough to divert the animal away from Beth. The cat whirled round. Riki leapt back and brought her sword to the guard position.

For a moment, the two stared at each other. The cat snarled, but its eyes were hooded and its stance unsteady. The animal must be fresh from hibernation and still groggy. However, it would also be ravenous from the winter fast and therefore very dangerous.

The cat pounced, claws outstretched, striking for Riki's head. She ducked aside but one of the cat's paws clamped on her right shoulder. The thick reinforced leather of Riki's jacket prevented the claws from piercing deeply enough to cause serious injury, but the weight dragged her to her knees. The cat's saber fangs raked toward Riki's face, but the paw locked on her shoulder meant the cat's chest was exposed. Riki thrust her sword deep into its body. The animal spun away, yowling, almost wrenching the sword from Riki's grip.

Riki managed to keep hold of the hilt and pull her sword free, ready to strike again, but there was no need. The wound was fatal. Already the cat's rump was sagging to one side as its rear legs lost their strength. Its head flung back in a last roar, and then its shoulders crumpled. The dying animal collapsed onto Beth, who screamed again.

Riki scrambled to her feet. The cat twitched a few times and then lay still. Beth carried on screaming.

Running footsteps sounded, both ahead and behind. Looking up, Riki saw Faye splashing through the stream and scrabbling to Beth's side. Where had the miner been? There had been no sign of her when Riki arrived. Clearly Faye had found a place to run and hide, safeguarding her own skin.

The feet behind were getting closer. Riki looked over her shoulder and saw three miners arrive, hefting axes. At the sight of the dead cat they slowed and lowered their weapons. After a moment of shuffling hesitation, they went to assist Faye in extricating Beth from beneath the carcass. Riki was about to help, but she felt stinging in her shoulder. Her

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leather jacket had not fully protected her from the claws. The wound was not major, although she suspected the liquid trickling down her arm was blood.

Gingerly, Riki knelt and wiped her sword clean on a patch of grass, then resheathed it. When she stood up, the situation was getting calmer. Beth had thankfully stopped screaming and was standing, wrapped in Faye's arms. The other miners were gathered around supportively.

More footsteps and shouts announced the arrival of the remaining miners. In the lead was the forewoman. The fear on her face faded at the sight of everyone standing, limbs and life intact, but in an instant her expression changed again to one of fury. Shaking with rage, she stormed over and grabbed Riki's uninjured shoulder.

"Why the fuck weren't you on lookout?"



"How many more last chances does she get?"

"It wasn't deliberate."

"She wandered away from sentry duty by accident?" Lieutenant Aisha O'Neil's voice dripped sarcasm. She stomped into her office.

Kavita Sadiq was not about to give up so easily. She followed the commander of the Rangers at Ginasberg into the room, closed the door, and then slumped unbidden on a chair beside the desk. As a civilian, she did not need to meet military protocol. Beyond this, her on/off relationship with Ash O'Neil made any formality unnecessary. Kavita rubbed her forehead, hoping to ease her tension. How many of those offs had been due to friction over her unruly daughter?

"Faye and Beth were as much to blame. They shouldn't have wandered into the woods on their own."

Ash threw herself into her chair and glared across the desk. "The other two aren't Rangers. They're civilians who're free to wander wherever they want."

"Even if Riki had stayed on lookout, they'd have been out of her sight."

"That's not the point."

"But—"

"No buts. She was on guard duty and she left her post for no good reason. That's a court-martial offense."

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Kavita rested her head in her hands, thinking of all the other times she had been in that office, making excuses for Riki. What more could she say? What more did she need to say? Ash knew the situation, and knew Kavita's feelings of guilt that prompted her to plead Riki's case.

As a child, Riki had been a handful, as befitting the youngest in a family with three older sisters to spoil her. Maybe she had been given her own way too much, but she had never been out of control. Riki had been no worse than any other high-spirited girl, back when Kavita had lived with her partner, Eli Diaz, in their home at Highview.

But then Kavita had been denounced as heretic, and there was no time for her to think things out. Her other birth daughter, Sue, had been twenty-two and newly settled with a partner. Eli's two birth daughters, Bron and Jan, were eighteen and twenty-seven respectively. All of them were old enough to make up their own minds, and none were implicated in the heresy. Kavita had left them behind when she fled via the heretic network, into the Wildlands. Only twelve-year-old Riki had been still a child and still her responsibility.

Kavita bit her lip, thinking of her former partner, Riki's gene mother. Riki and Eli had been so close. Kavita had watched their bond strengthen as her own relationship with Eli had crumbled. In her heart, Kavita knew that Riki would have been happier with her gene mother. At the core of Kavita's guilt lay doubts about how much her action had been motivated by jealousy. Had she taken Riki as a way of hitting back at her ex-partner?

"It's my fault."

Ash snorted. "How are you to blame for your daughter deserting her post?"

"I should never have brought her here. I should have left her at Highview with Eli. When the Guards came for me. I panicked. I grabbed Riki and fled. I should have thought."

"You were her birth mother. She belonged with you." Ash sounded bored. The argument was an old one that they had long ago kicked over to the point of tedium.

"But Riki never asked to become a heretic."

"Is she? I thought she still worshiped Celaeno. That's what she keeps telling people."

"She never asked to come here," Kavita amended.

"Nor have any of the other kids brought here. But they don't go

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around like hell on legs.” Ash’s voice softened. “You’re not to blame for everything Rikako does.”

Yet Kavita knew she was responsible. When she had first heard the heretics’ claims that the Goddess Celaeno was no more than misremembered folktales of a ship that had brought people from another planet, she had been intrigued. It made sense of some things that had long puzzled her. Why had she not left it at that? Why had she felt compelled to seek out the truth and find all the answers? And if she had to indulge her curiosity, why had she not waited until Riki was grown, so the consequences would affect no one else?

Joining the heretics would never have been without pain—Kavita missed her other daughters and granddaughters desperately—but she had been able to settle in. Back in Highview, Kavita had been a building forewoman. When she and Riki arrived in the Wildlands, the township at Ginasberg was newly founded and Kavita’s experience had been put to use, constructing the town’s defenses. She now worked as the chief engineer in the mines. Kavita might even have been happy in a relationship with Ash, comforting after the turmoil with Eli, had it not been for her disruptive daughter.

Riki had reacted to the family breakup with increasingly troublesome behavior. At first she had limited herself to bouts of quarrelling, sullenness, and disobedience. Then she had started causing mayhem outside the home. The fights with other children had been followed by petty theft and vandalism. In a community as small as Ginasberg, Riki had become notorious.

Kavita’s only hope had been that as Riki got older, she would start to understand and learn to deal with her anger and pain in a mature way. The hopes had met with limited success. In the last few years, Riki’s behavior had improved, but the mother-daughter relationship was showing no sign of healing.

The general consensus in town was that Riki needed discipline, and with her reputation, job prospects were limited. There was no chance of her following Kavita into engineering. In temperament and interests, Riki took after Eli, a fur trapper. Math, geology, and mechanics bored her. She was happiest in the wilderness, using the skills she had learned from her gene mother.

In a rare moment of contrition, Riki had let herself be talked into joining the Rangers. Kavita had needed to exert even more pressure

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getting Ash to accept her, and it still had not worked out. Riki was no longer raising hell in town, but rules and regulations were never going to sit well with her. Membership in the Rangers was an invitation for trouble—one more thing for Kavita to feel guilty about.

“She’s been so much better these last few years. But people remember the fuss she caused in the past and won’t give her credit for making an effort now.”

“Fuss! Can I mark that down as understatement of the day?”

“Whatever. She’s changed, but people won’t give her a chance.”

“I’ve given her plenty of chances, as you know. She deserted her post. Now. This morning. Not some time in the past.”

“I agree she shouldn’t have done it. But everyone’s acting like she’s committed some terrible crime, and nobody’s praising her for killing the cat and saving Beth’s life.”

Ash sucked in a deep breath. “You’re right. People haven’t gotten around to being angry about this morning. They’re still angry about the five counts of theft, eleven counts of vandalism, four counts of drunk and disorderly, the first when she was only thirteen, and one count of arson. She played truant from school so much it’s amazing she can read and write.”

“The arson was an accident, so she...” Kavita’s voice died. Whether or not it was intentional was fairly irrelevant. Riki should not have been playing with fire in a hay barn.

“And that list doesn’t include all the things aimed directly at you that you hushed up.”

Kavita could feel the tears forming. “It was all aimed at me. All of it. Riki was just trying to punish me for splitting up the family.”

Ash sighed. “If you’d stayed in the Homelands, the Guards would have had you tried and executed. You weren’t to blame. You had no choice.”

“But Riki was just a child who was hurting. You can’t expect her to understand.”

“She isn’t a child anymore. She’s twenty.”

“And she isn’t getting into the same sort of trouble. That list you just gave, the theft and the vandalism and the rest. None of it happened in the last few years. But people always look for the worst in her. Leaving her post today. It was just mucking around.”

“But she was mucking around on duty. And it isn’t the first time.

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She still treats the rules as if they're an optional exercise. I will not put up with that in the Rangers."

"But she—"

Ash cut her off, sounding resigned rather than angry. "I'm responsible for the security of Ginasberg. Her actions were unacceptable. I can't afford to have someone like her under my command. It was her last chance and she's blown it."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I'm tempted to tie her up and dump her on the Homelands borders for the Guards to deal with."

"You're not serious."

Ash left her chair and walked to the window. Kavita stared at her back, waiting for Ash to give judgment. She caught her lip between her teeth, fighting back tears. She could make one last emotional appeal, playing on what remained of the affection between them. But their relationship had suffered enough because of Riki. Ash had always tried to be fair and did not deserve to be pressured by the forlorn remains of their relationship.

Three minutes passed in silence before Ash sighed and turned back. "Okay. One very last chance. She gets a fresh start, somewhere that people won't start out by hating the sight of her."



Riki marched into Lieutenant O'Neil's office and snapped to attention. "Ma'am."

O'Neil remained seated on the other side of the desk. The glare she gave Riki could have stripped paint off woodwork.

Riki kept her own eyes on the wall while she worked at keeping her expression under control. She was in trouble again. It was not fair or rational, but letting her anger show would not help.

The whole thing was a joke. If she had stayed at her post, she would not have seen the cat and she would have had farther to run when Beth screamed, which would have meant getting there too late. Instead of the pointless sentry duty, she should have been patrolling the perimeter of the camp. Then she might have spotted the cat before it attacked anyone. Yet nobody was criticizing the sergeant for giving inane orders that had put the safety of the miners at risk.

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The embroidered badges on Riki's jacket sleeves felt heavy. They carried the single bar of a leading ranger. Normally, when someone entered the Rangers, it took two years to complete probation and get the automatic promotion. Riki had taken over three, and she had the nasty feeling that she was about to go back to private again. She hoped nothing worse would follow.

O'Neil got to her feet and stalked around the desk. She stopped to one side, standing so close that Riki could feel the lieutenant's breath on her cheek.

"Okay, Ranger. This is your chance to tell me your side of it. Why you weren't at your post?"

"No reason, ma'am."

"That's not a bloody answer," O'Neil barked. "What were you doing?"

"I...ah..." Riki restrained the urge to sigh. She was sure that O'Neil was not really interested in the details, but she might as well say it. "I was pouring cold stew into Beth's hat, ma'am."

"Why?"

"I was angry about the portion of food she had given me for lunch, ma'am. I wanted to get back at her."

O'Neil turned away sharply and paced around Riki, circling like a predator sizing up its next meal. Her footsteps sounded slow, heavy, and ominous. At last, she came to a stop in front of her desk. Her eyes bored into Riki.

"Your mucking about nearly got Beth killed. Is that enough getting back at her for you? Or do you want to have a go at breaking her arm again?"

Riki clenched her jaw shut. Her mucking about was what had saved Beth's life, and O'Neil was quite experienced enough to know it.

"Answer me!" O'Neil shouted.

"No, ma'am."

"You're supposed to be a Ranger, not a kid on a frigging picnic. Do you know the difference?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Really? I'm surprised, because I'd never guess it from the way you act. In over forty years, you are the most pathetically irresponsible excuse for a soldier I've ever seen. I wouldn't trust you to watch over a dung heap. I certainly can't trust you to defend the town. You're a

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fucking liability from the moment you wake up in the morning. It's all one big game to you, isn't it?"

"No, ma'am."

"I think it is. And I'm not putting up with it anymore. You're out of my command."

The first ripples of concern awoke. Things were going worse than Riki had feared. What happened to a Ranger who was flung out of the service? Would she be allowed to stay in Ginasberg? Or would she be exiled back to the Homelands, to take her chance with the Guards and the Sisterhood?

O'Neil spun away and stormed back to her chair, although she did not sit. She leaned forward, resting her knuckles on the desk. "I ought to kick you out of the Rangers altogether, but I'm going to give you one last chance. A fresh start. I'm transferring you to Westernfort. You'll join one of the squadrons based there. And if you screw up again, it won't be me who deals with it. Captain Coppelli will be the one who works out what to damned well do with you."