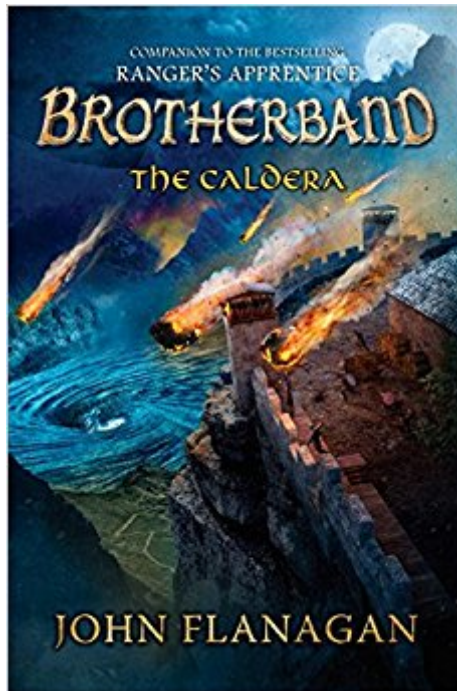




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The Caldera (The Brotherband Chronicles)



Synopsis

The Herons take to the high seas to fend off pirates and rescue the heir to an empire in the newest adventure from John Flanagan, author of the worldwide bestselling *Ranger's Apprentice*! Includes BONUS content--a brand-new *Ranger's Apprentice* short story featuring fan-favorites Will and Maddie! In Hallasholm, Stig is contesting the annual Maktig competition to decide Skandia's greatest warrior. But a late-night knock on the door brings someone Stig never expected to see again, along with a request the Herons are hard-pressed to refuse: a rescue mission of epic proportions. Across the ocean, the southern city-state of Byzantos is plagued by a crew of pirates who've kidnapped the son of Empress Justina. Slipping out of Hallasholm under the cover of darkness, the brotherband sets sail to recover the boy from his kidnappers, heading south to the island of Santorillos where a near-impenetrable fortress stands atop a cliff, surrounded by a lagoon • a caldera • formed by the crater of a volcano. In this explosive seventh book in the action-packed *Brotherband Chronicles*, the Herons battle pirates amid stormy seas as the fate of an empire rests on their shoulders.

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Age Range: 10 and up

Grade Level: 5 and up

Customer Reviews

John Flanagan (www.WorldofJohnFlanagan.com) 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. Together 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 Mosman, Australia, with his wife. In addition to their son, they have two grown daughters and four grandsons.

Chapter One The heavy-set man came at Stig with a rush. His arms were held out ahead of him as if ready for an embrace, his fingers curled and ready to grip. He was taller than Stig, and perhaps twelve kilograms heavier. His chest and upper body were thickly muscled. Stig could see a light sheen of oil covering his arms, and he had time to think that this was not quite in the spirit of the contest. He braced himself, and their two bodies came together with a solid WHUMP of flesh meeting flesh. If his attacker had hoped to drive the wind out of Stig with the impact, his aim was thwarted. The young warrior had tensed his muscles ready for the hit. He stepped back half a pace, but otherwise remained steady. Let him come to you, Thorn had told him. See what he's got before you start. What he had was not particularly skillful or unexpected. He wrapped his arms around Stig's waist in a clumsy bear hug and, beginning to lean back, attempted to lift him off the ground, so that he could apply pressure to the kidneys and lungs as Stig hung helpless in his embrace. But Stig wasn't ready to be helpless and he'd watched the man use this very tactic in a previous bout. As he felt the man's arms wrap around him, and was drawn in tight against him, Stig rammed his right hand, palm open, under the man's chin, locking his elbow tightly in a right angle and supporting his right arm with his left hand. The arm formed a rigid, unyielding barrier against the man's attempts to lift Stig's feet off the sand of the arena. In effect, as long as Stig could keep his right arm locked, the man was trying to lift himself off the ground along with his opponent. The larger man grunted with the effort, trying to twist his chin away from Stig's iron grip. But Stig maintained the pressure and his opponent was caught in a stalemate. The more he heaved and strained, the more he exhausted himself. Yet he lacked the imagination or speed of thought to change the tactic. It had always worked for him before. It should work for him now. Except, in previous bouts, his opponents hadn't been ready for the hold. And if they were, they had no effective counter to it. The man tried to gather his strength for one last, superhuman effort to lift his rock-steady opponent off the ground. As he did so, he inadvertently released the pressure

of his bear hug, expecting to resume it with even greater force. But Stig felt the momentary easing of pressure. In fact, he hadn't been expecting it. As the grip around his waist weakened, he released his hold on the other man's chin and spun in his grip so that his back was to him. He rammed his backside into the man's lower body to gain a little room, felt the hug release even further, then hurled himself backward, taking his opponent with him as they crashed to the sand, Stig on top, the force of the fall driving the breath from the bigger man's lungs with an explosive gasp. The man's grip released as he struggled for air, and Stig swiftly rolled clear and leapt to his feet, crouching, hands held out ahead of him, arms bent in a classic wrestler's pose. For a second, he considered hurling himself onto the other man to pin him. But he could see it wasn't quite time for that yet. There was one fall in these bouts and he knew he had to pick his time exactly for the ploy to be successful. If he went too early, he risked the heavier man throwing him off and pinning Stig in his turn. He had to be properly incapacitated before Stig could risk coming to close quarters on the ground. Slowly, the other man came to his feet, eyeing Stig warily. So far, this bout hadn't gone anywhere like the way he had planned it. The younger, slimmer man was virtually unscathed. He had countered his most effective move easily, then sent him crashing to the sand in a rib-bruising fall. For a few seconds, they faced each other. Then, as if by some prearranged signal, they hurled themselves at each other. Stig took a firm grip of the man's shirt around the shoulders and shoved mightily against him. Instinctively, his opponent returned the shove, and in that instant, Stig gave way before him, stepping back with his left foot and dragging the other man after him. In the same movement, he brought his right foot up into the man's stomach and rolled backward. His opponent followed him, still propelled by the momentum of his return shove against Stig. Stig, his back curved, fell smoothly to the sand, his hands gripping the other man's shirt and his right foot buried in his stomach, knee bent. As he rolled backward, Stig straightened his right knee in a violent movement, bringing his left leg up to assist the right in thrusting his opponent high into the air above him. At the same time, he maintained his grip on the shirt, so that as Stig's legs propelled his opponent through an arc overhead, his hands kept his upper body from following. At the last moment, Stig released his grip, and the other man flipped in the air, soared several meters and crashed heavily onto his back. Again, there was that explosive whump of expelled air, as the recently regained breath was driven out once more. Stig rolled onto his hands and knees and sprang to his feet like a cat. This time, he realized that the other man was totally winded, after suffering two heavy impacts in quick succession. His opponent gagged and gasped as he

struggled to fill his lungs with air, but before he could manage an inward breath, Stig pounced on him, lying across his upper body and pinning him to the ground. The bout's referee, who had been watching with keen interest, fell to his hands and knees to check the man's shoulders, saw they were flat to the sand and slammed his hand down rapidly twice. "One! Two! Pinned!" he yelled. Stig drew back, coming to his knees, then his feet, and leaned down to offer his opponent a hand. "Bad luck, Oren," he said as the other man came to his feet, still breathing heavily. Oren shook his head ruefully. "Bad luck nothing," he said. "You were too quick for me. Too quick and too smart." Stig shrugged. "Not sure about smart." Oren wiped the sand from his face with the back of his hand. "Well, you beat me fair and square," he said, not sounding overly pleased with the fact. "That puts you in the lead, doesn't it?" They were competing in the Maktig competition, the annual contest to crown the Maktig, or the Mighty One, in a series of physical contests. There were two events to go—a foot race over five kilometers, which Stig was favored to win, and a mock combat, where he was ranked second or first, depending on which wagger-master you were laying a bet with. The fact was, Stig hadn't been expected to win the final leg of the wrestling event. Oren was bigger, heavier and stronger than he was. The unexpected win put Stig in an almost unassailable position. If he won the foot race, as everyone expected, the result of the mock combat would be immaterial. He was almost certain to come in second or third in that event and that would be enough for him to maintain his lead. "I think it does," Stig agreed. Oren nodded several times. "Well, good luck. At least then I can say I was beaten by the winner. That's something." He raised a hand in farewell and turned away, limping slightly as the bruised and strained muscles in his back made themselves felt. Stig felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see the smiling face of his best friend and brotherband leader, Hal. "Well done," Hal told him. Stig grinned. He knew how important it had been that he should win the wrestling, against all expectations. "Oh, it was nothing," he said lightly, then, seeing Thorn's bearded face over Hal's shoulder, he let the grin fade. "Thanks for the tip about the rigid right elbow, Thorn," he said. "That caught him by surprise." Thorn shrugged. "It shouldn't have. He's been using that bear hug throughout the tournament. He should have guessed someone would come up with a counter to it." "Well, nobody else did. So thanks again." Thorn nodded in acknowledgment. "That throw was neatly executed," he said. "Been practicing that, have

you? "Hal answered before his friend could, rubbing the center of his back with his right hand. "He certainly has," he said in heartfelt tones. "He's been hurling me all over the field behind Mam's place. I haven't got a square centimeter that isn't bruised." Thorn made a little moue of surprise. "Is that so?" he said. "I never saw you." Stig picked up his jacket and draped it around his shoulders. Now that the contest was over and the shadows were lengthening, there was a chill in the air. "We practiced at night," he said. "Thought it might not be a good idea to let people see it in advance." Thorn rubbed the side of his nose and regarded the young warrior with new respect. "That's smart. It seems you're learning that the Maktig isn't just the strongest and fastest. There are brains involved as well." Stig looked bashful at the words. "Well, it was Hal's idea. Not mine." Thorn grinned. "That figures," he said. Then he clapped Stig on the shoulder. "Being Maktig also means having smart friends." The three of them laughed as they began to walk toward the fence enclosing the wrestling ground. "Well," said Hal, "I'd better get down to the beach to tell the crew the good news." "They didn't want to watch?" Stig said, smiling. "They thought I'd lose, didn't they?" Now that he'd won, he could afford to smile. Hal hesitated awkwardly. "It's not that. They had work to do. Heron needs repainting where that fishing boat hit us last week, so I thought they might as well repaint the entire hull." "And aside from that, they didn't think I'd win, did they?" Stig persisted. Hal allowed himself a small grin. "No. They didn't. But they'll be glad to hear they were wrong." "Will you come by my house later?" Stig asked. "We should celebrate." Hal gave a disappointed shrug. "We'll celebrate tomorrow. I have to appear before the Navigators Guild this evening. They want to discuss our last voyage." Stig's cheerful look faded. "Should I come along? After all, I'm your first mate." But Hal was already shaking his head. "Best if you keep clear of it," he said. "If things turn nasty, I don't want you involved." "Nasty? Why should things turn nasty?" Stig asked. Hal made an indefinite gesture with his hands. "There are some old-fashioned thinkers in the guild. They think I should have kept better notes on the voyage. Or any notes at all, come to that," he added. He grinned as he said it, but Stig noticed that the grin didn't reach his eyes. "Don't concern

yourself about it, Stig," Thorn interjected. "I'm going with him, and if necessary I'll straighten out some of those fuddy-duddies." He brandished the heavy, polished wooden hook on the end of his right arm. "I'll crack a few skulls if I have to." Hal put a hand on Thorn's forearm, restraining the threatening hook. "I'm sure it won't be necessary." Thorn grunted. "More's the pity," he replied.

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