

CHAPTER THE FIRST



In Which I Sneeze, Wheeze, and Curse Much

IF IT WEREN'T FOR THE ARCHERS, THE PAGAN SCOTS would pour over the border and kill us all. It'd be worse than the plague that took my mother and sister eight years ago. Good Aunt says the plague should've taken me because I'm so useless. Father says I may be different but I have as much right to live as anyone. And, he says, when I find my calling, I'll prove it.

I've already found my calling. I'm an archer. I've been practicing since we lost a third of the village in that plague. Back then, I was a puny, pale, sickly boy, barely five years old. Now I'm almost thirteen . . . and still puny, sickly, and pale as milk. A few people say being tiny and white as an angel is a good omen, but far more say I'm evil, that I was the cause of that plague, and that they see the devil in my eyes. If they do, I didn't put him there. I'm no devil. Nor am I a tiny angel. Underneath my odd-looking outside I'm just me. Adrian. A boy — well, almost a man. They'll see.

I pick up my bow. The ash wood feels firm, yet flexible, in my hand. The weight is perfect. I made it myself, mostly. It's a precision weapon. It's not near as big as a longbow, of course, but I can dart in and out and reload faster than the five or six times per minute a longbow archer can handle.

I draw back my bow and aim. My left eye is weaker so I only use my right and, on a sunny day like today, I spread dirt under my eyes to cut the glare so I don't have to squint as much. I may be called Badger, but I can hit my target every time.

King Edward would be happy to have me fighting alongside him. He won the battle of Crécy last month because of expert archers like me. There hasn't been such a victory since the battle of Sluys in 1340, but I was only six then so I wouldn't have been much use. At Crécy, though, I like to imagine what I could've done. . . . Squinting, I see just where my arrow will hit the French soldier who tries to kill our king. He doesn't see me. Silently, I release my arrow and watch it fly, hitting its mark, piercing it.

I imagine the cheers from the whole army. "Adrian of Ashcroft has saved us!"

But a real voice booms in the distance. "Adrian!"

"Coming, Father!" Quickly, I pull my arrow from its target, which, in truth, is only the birch tree I use for target practice. I hide my bow and arrows in its hollow trunk.

Father still doesn't know I practice archery, but he knows what a fine shot I am. And he knows how much I want to be apprenticed to the bowyer and make bows myself. Everyone

in the village says the bowyer is a good, fair, and honest man. That's true, but he's also my father.

Oh, I know it's unusual to be apprenticed to your own father, but since he won't send me away — he's so overprotective! — what better fit is there? And I know he thinks I'm small and weak, in body as well as mind, thanks to Good Aunt, but I'm not wasting any more of my time at that stupid school!

Fleeing the woods, down the hill, I see Father standing outside our shop. I run as fast as I can, tripping on a tree root. Though I keep from falling, my arms flail as wildly as a goose's wings.

Father's shoulders droop. His head drops, too, as I speed up to show him how able I really am, although my chest squeezes and the wheezing starts.

Panting, I stumble in front of him. "Yes — Father." I bend over and clutch my knees as I gasp for air. I sound like a yelping dog. Father looks away. As always, he gives me time for the air to return to my lungs.

I try to slow my breathing as I listen to Peter the journeyman inside the shop sorting through the arrow tips, finding just the right one to attach to a shaft. Father trains Peter to make arrows, although bow making is his prime profession. When I raise my head and squint past Father, I see Peter hold up a pointed tip. The sun streams through the door and glints on the steel, and I want to be where Peter is right now, doing something useful, not like me.

I stand up as tall as possible and look at Father, eagerly, because maybe he'll let me carve an arrow or attach the

point, the true harbinger of death. And maybe he'll finally realize I'm ready to be his apprentice. He's a master bowyer, the only one for miles around. It's a kingly calling. I await his word as if he were the king himself.

"Adrian, I need you to collect goose feathers."

I hear Peter snicker and I imagine the entire village snickering.

"But, Father, that's child's work!" I realize how much like a child I sound and try to sound more like a man. "Wouldn't you rather I help you with the bow making?"

"The bow is nothing without the arrows."

"Then the shafts, Father, let me make those!"

His eyes darken at my insolence even though he knows that I can carve a stick into a great weapon — and shoot it as well as any man. Still he doesn't look at me. He dare not, lest he see Mother in my face, and that's too painful. I don't blame him. He clears his throat. "You know what Good Aunt says."

Father is a man of few words, but "Good" Aunt more than makes up for him. She has badgered him near to death with her story that I'm too sick and addlebrained to be his apprentice. But I'm only sick and clumsy around her because I want to be elsewhere — anywhere that's away from her. And I have no skill with a plow, but that doesn't mean I have no skill with a bow. Still, she has poisoned Father's brain as badly as she has poisoned Uncle's. Or maybe in Uncle's case it's the ale.

"Adrian!"

I jump. "S-sir?"

“The feathers,” he says simply, but his eyes tell me that he has been watching me and is all the more convinced that I’m a sickly simpleton.

“Father, I —”

“Whist, go now. And,” he adds quietly, “wipe the dirt from under your eyes.”

Peter hears him, though, because he starts chuckling. He thinks my poor eyesight is amusing.

Father whirls on him. “Peter!” His voice is as piercing as an arrow. He cannot stand for people to make fun of my weaknesses. Somehow, his defending me all the time only makes me feel worse, as if he believes me too weak to take care of myself.

When I’m out of earshot, I mutter, “God’s bones!” and worse curses as well, anything that won’t get me struck down by the good Lord himself. Truly, I’m not angry with Him but with Father and my aunt, the wretched woman who plants such evil thoughts in his head. I only say “Good” Aunt since Father thrashed me for the other name I called her. It was but a shortened form of her full name, Hellewyse. The first syllable describes her well enough.

I walk slowly, ready to live up to the name of ill addlepat if my only role is to be goose-feather collector. I’d rather wander the countryside. Become a juggler or a tumbler. Surely then people would respect me. But I’m more like the baited bear, tethered to a rock while folks laugh and dogs bite at me until there’s nothing left. I drag my worn boots toward the north end of the village, where the water attracts the geese and their wretched feathers. I feel useless.