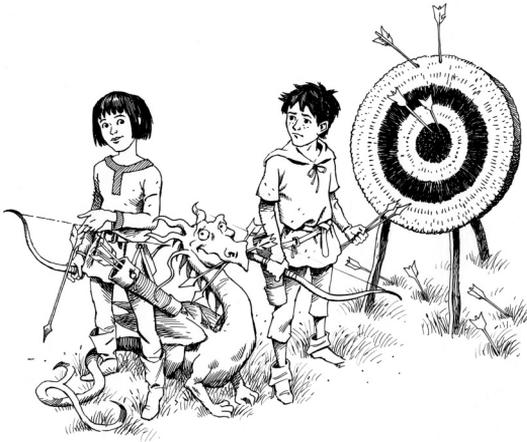


# An Enemy in the Armoury



**T**here was something lurking in the darkness at the far end of the armoury.

Max froze. His hand just inches away from his sword, he peered into the gloom, trying to see beyond the shadows. He could have sworn he'd heard a scuffle, seen a gleam of movement. But now everything was still, and the only sounds were the

distant clash of swords in the practice yard and Sir Gareth shouting at the novice squires.

Most of Camelot was out in the sunshine, enjoying a chance to get some swordplay in before the Annual Festival of Chivalry, which started in three weeks. Max had been sent in to fetch a spare target for archery practice — but they were stored right at the back of the armoury. In the shadows.

Max started to move forward slowly and carefully, his hand on his sword, trying to look like he was ready to fight. In reality, his sword skills were not renowned, and he was pretty sure he'd come off worse against anything except a stray chicken. Or possibly a frog.

“Wh— who’s there?” he called into the darkness, trying to keep his voice level but not really succeeding. He could see a darker shape within the grey of the shadows — a rather tall and menacing shape. Definitely not a chicken. Max drew his sword, then took a swift step backwards as the shape rose up out of the shadows and launched itself toward him with a roar. Max toppled over a pile of armour and fell sprawling onto the ground, his

sword clattering across the room.

He looked up to see that the dark shape was actually a tall, thin boy with a dark tunic and spiky black hair, who was now standing over him and laughing.

“Well, well, Pendragon. Glad to see you’re as clumsy and pathetic as ever. Merlin might be teaching you magic, but he obviously can’t do anything about the fact that you’re a hopeless loser.”

Max scrambled to his feet, but the boy had already sidestepped him and was on his way out of the armoury, still laughing.

“Eat dung, Snotty!” Max yelled after him, but if the boy heard, he made no sign. Max clenched his fists. Adrian Hogsbottom, better known as Snotty, was his worst enemy. Ever since they’d first met, they’d hated each other — and the rivalry had got worse since Snotty and his father had started plotting against King Arthur with Lady Morgana le Fay. Max shivered just thinking about Morgana — the kingdom’s most powerful sorceress. He and his sister Olivia had

helped foil two of Morgana's plots to bring down her half-brother, the king, and make herself queen in his place. Max was pretty sure it was only thanks to Merlin's protection that he was not at this moment a piece of oozy slime at the bottom of the kingdom's biggest manure heap.

Thinking of Morgana's plots made Max narrow his eyes. What exactly had Snotty been doing, lurking at the back of the armoury? As far as Max knew, there were only archery targets down here, plus a few piles of broken armour and swords waiting to be mended. There was no reason for Snotty to be anywhere near the place.

Max dragged out the target he needed, and then had a good look around, under the benches and behind the piles of rusty shields and broken lances. He even balanced on an old trestle table to see if there was anything up on the shelves that ran round the top of the room, but everything seemed undisturbed, still covered in layers of old dust. He shrugged. Whatever it was, it looked like Snotty had been interrupted

before he could do anything.

Max picked up the target and headed off into the sunlight. Behind him, the room settled back into silence. Deep in the shadows, hidden from view by an old rusty bucket, lay a small pile of glittering white powder that Max would instantly have recognized as a spell. Nestling in the centre of the pile was a small jagged chip of grey flint. It was placed carefully next to the easternmost wall of the armoury, and hence in the absolute easternmost corner of Castle Camelot.

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*Thud!*

Olivia's arrow hit the centre of the target and stayed there, quivering. It was her third bullseye.

"Hurrah! Well done! Right in the red bit!" cried Adolphus, Olivia's pet dragon, who was bouncing around the target, waving his blue-green forked tail, flapping his wings and generally making a nuisance of himself, as usual.

"Show-off," muttered Max, as he headed off to retrieve the arrows. His own were rather less

impressively scattered around the edges of the target. One was buried in the trunk of an old beech tree several feet away.

“Just a bit off target, that one,” observed Max’s pet rat, Ferocious, poking his head out of Max’s tunic and surveying the scattered arrows. “Remind me never to get within a hundred feet of anything you’re aiming at, Max.”

“Yes, yes, very funny,” said Max, wrenching the arrow out of the tree and trudging back to Olivia. “I don’t see why I still have to do stupid target practice anyway. I’m going to be a wizard, not a knight.”

“Well, you know what Father told you,” said Olivia. “You *still* have to have basic knight training. Even wizards need to use a sword sometimes.”

Max grimaced. Their father, Sir Bertram Pendragon, was every inch a knight, from the tips of his magnificent moustache to the toes of his oversized feet. He was as strong as an ox, surprisingly nifty with his sword and renowned throughout the kingdom as the Knight Who Can Quaff the Most Grog in a Single

Swallow. Max, on the other hand, was slight for his eleven years, with untidy brown hair, a singular lack of coordination and a healthy fear of horses. He was pretty sure all the knightly skills in the family had been passed on to his sister. Although she was two years younger and hadn't had much training, Olivia was already a better rider, considerably better at archery and was fast becoming better at swordplay, too.

Max threw himself down on the grass and stretched out in the sunshine.

"That's it. I've had enough of archery, I've had enough of whacking the dummy with a lance and I've definitely had enough of sword practice. My shoulder hurts."

Olivia plonked herself down next to him.

"You do realize I've only got three weeks left till the Festival of Chivalry, Max? You promised to help me train."

Max groaned. Olivia was entered for the Squire's Challenge, the most prestigious competition for novice squires in the kingdom. Normally she wouldn't even

have been allowed to enter, being a girl, but she had nagged Sir Bertram mercilessly till he gave her permission, and King Arthur had bent the rules to let her have a try. If she won, Sir Bertram had promised she could train to be a knight. He had been pretty certain he wouldn't have to keep his promise — all the best squires in the kingdom would be competing, and Olivia had only been training for a few months.

Max, however, thought she had quite a good chance. His younger sister was quite ruthless when it came to fighting, and she was a fearless rider. What she lacked in training, she more than made up for in cunning and brute force.

“Sorry,” he said, not sounding sorry at all. “Can't help. Got a lesson with Merlin.”

Just saying this made him feel six inches taller. He might not be very skilled with a sword, but Max did have quite a talent for magic — and now he had Merlin himself to teach him. Merlin was the most powerful wizard in the kingdom, but he looked like any other of King Arthur's many knights, with dark plain clothes

and a long sword buckled to his belt — until you caught a glance from his bright hawk-like eyes and felt the power behind them.

Max had been having lessons with Merlin for the past few weeks, and he was buzzing with all the magic he'd tried and the spells he'd learned.

“Are you going to tell him about Snotty?” asked Olivia. Max had told the others about his encounter with his worst enemy. All of them had experienced Snotty's plotting before, and they were all highly suspicious.

“That boy is definitely up to something, mark my words,” said Ferocious darkly. “We need to let Merlin know.”

“But I couldn't see anything,” said Max. “I think I probably disturbed him before he could do whatever it was he was planning. I don't know if it's even worth mentioning.”

Olivia grimaced. “He's a poisonous toadwart, and if he was lurking in the armoury, then odds are he was about to do something foul. Morgana's going to be

here for the Festival of Chivalry — I bet they're planning something."

Max nodded. "We need to keep an eye on Snotty. I'm sure he is up to something. But there's a week before Morgana gets here, and nothing's going to happen till then."

But Max was wrong. Something quite spectacular *was* going to happen. And when it did, it would be all his fault.