

A Fight!



Travelling with Caradoc the Bard turned out to be a much more pleasant experience than flying on Adolphus's back. For a start, Caradoc actually knew the way to Gore, which took all the worry out of it. For another, he turned out to be full of amusing stories, mostly of his disastrous performances at various bardic competitions. Caradoc, it seemed, was really quite a hopeless bard,

always forgetting the end of stories or breaking his harp strings at the crucial moment. And then there was the time he'd forgotten the name of the ugly old hag in one tale and accidentally replaced it with the name of the lord of the castle's only daughter, who'd run out of the Great Hall in floods of tears.

"Yes, well, I don't recall getting paid for that one — actually, I think they threw me off the battlements . . . Lucky they were only ten feet high — and the moat was warm for the time of year . . ."

Olivia laughed. They were coming to the end of a golden afternoon, ambling gently north on Caradoc's horse, which was sturdier than it looked and quite happy to take the weight of both of them. Ahead, the road dipped down into a small copse of ancient elm trees that spread their branches right across the way, casting a deep shadow. As they passed into the cooler darkness, Olivia thought she heard a cry. The horse stopped, and twitched its ears. There!

It was definitely a shout. And the sound of clashing swords. Olivia twisted around to look at

Caradoc and was glad to find that he was not looking in the least bit afraid. He was frowning, and pulling a long knife out of his saddlebag. He urged the horse onwards, and she drew Max's second-best sword and took a deep breath as they cantered under the trees toward the sound.

Max and Sir Boris had been plodding on for what seemed like years. Max's backside felt like it would never be the same again. The only good thing was that Sir Boris had finally run out of tales to tell and was reduced to the odd cheery comment about the weather. Max was just wondering whether to eat his last hunk of bread now, or save it for later, when he realized a band of armed men was blocking the road ahead, led by a young squire on a horse.

"Halt, knights, and state your business!" came the call from the rider, as he approached them slowly. "The Warden of the Great Grimpen Mire requires all travellers to—"

Suddenly the boy stopped, peered forward and

then laughed. Max knew that laugh. He knew the tall arrogant figure on the horse, as well.

“Snotty Hogsbottom!”

“Well, if it isn’t the weed Pendragon. Of course. On your way to the Spell School.” He sneered, and then turned around and cantered back to the soldiers. “These two need to be escorted to the castle for questioning,” he shouted. “They are dangerous outlaws. If they resist, arrest them!”

Sir Boris looked bewildered. “What on earth? What does he mean? Outlaws?”

Max groaned. “He knows we’re not. But they’ll chuck us in the dungeons for a week and then claim it was all a mistake. Meanwhile I’ll miss the first week of Spell School. Slimy rotten scheming dung beetle!”

Sir Boris narrowed his eyes and contemplated the band of armed men approaching them, Snotty behind them. Boring he might be, but a coward Sir Boris most certainly was not.

“Right then, Max. There’s only five of them and

a squire. You take the boy; I'll deal with the soldiers. Swords ready!" He drew his sword and urged his horse on toward the troop. Max gulped, and drew his sword. Ferocious poked his head out of Max's tunic.

"What? Fighting? Are you mad?!"

"I have to," said Max through gritted teeth. "Snotty is going to stop us getting to Gore otherwise, and apart from missing the Spell School, I won't be much use to Merlin stuck in a dungeon for a few weeks."

"But a sword?" said Ferocious, eyebrows raised. "You'll never hit Snotty with a sword, not when you're riding a horse! Use a bit of sense, Max. Chuck a bit of frogspell at him!"

"Ferocious — you're a genius!" said Max, relieved, and reached for his saddlebags. There it was — the almost full bottle of blue gunk.

Snotty was cantering toward them, while Sir Boris wielded his sword manfully, holding off all five of the soldiers. Max raised the potion bottle and grinned.

“Ha! Want to be a frog, Hogsbottom? Like your father? He made a very fetching one!”

Snotty blinked, and pulled up his horse, but it was too late. Max hurled a blob of blue potion straight at his face. It splattered over Snotty’s forehead and trickled down into one eye, but Snotty remained very much a boy. Max gulped.

“So!” laughed Snotty. “Got it wrong this time, eh? You always were terrible at spells, Max. Must have just got lucky, the first time.”

He waved his sword in the air and then brought it crashing down, right where Max’s head would have been, if Arnold hadn’t neatly sidestepped. Unfortunately, this meant that Max fell off, with a shout of surprise, and landed, winded, on the stony road. Snotty leapt off his horse and was standing over Max in a moment, holding his sword to Max’s neck.

“Right, Pendragon. You’re coming with me.”

But at that moment a blur of blue-green came hurtling through the trees, and Snotty was knocked flying by a vision of claws, wings and forked tail.