

The
LAST ARCHER

GREEN EMBER ARCHER

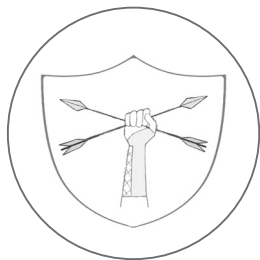
The
LAST ARCHER
S. D. SMITH



Reformation
Lightning

- ▷ Village Green
- ▼ Community Garden
- ◆ Helmer's Tree
- ▲ Village
- Caves
- Plateau
- + Maggie's Porch





CHAPTER ONE

Halfwind Citadel

Jo Shanks leapt from his bunk and darted for the door. He sped through the opening, then spun and ran back in. Shaking his head, he grabbed the bow propped against the bed frame and slipped the quiver over his shoulder. Jo buckled on his sword belt, snagged his coin purse, and headed for the door once more. It wouldn't do to show up at the muster without his weapons. He could only imagine what Captain Frye would say to that.

Jo slowed down when he reached the entrance to Leapers Hall, where a crowd had gathered around the open door. Huddled groups

of rabbits talked earnestly with one another. Jo noticed angry and worried expressions.

“What’s the word, Lund?” he asked, grabbing his friend’s arm.

“Shanks, nice of you to wake up,” Lund said with a smirk, “just in time for muster, as usual.”

“I had a late night.”

“At the targets, I assume?” Lund patted Jo’s bow. “Listen, Shanks. You know I love you and your long, goofy legs, but if you think a few extra nights at the targets are going to make you a better archer than Nate Flynn, you’re dreaming.”

“It’s been more than a few nights.”

“Still, it’s Nate Flynn. *The* Nate Flynn.”

“I can beat him,” Jo said, scowling. “I have to beat him.”

“Why do you need to beat him so badly?”

“I have to prove that I’ve got what it takes.”

“Who do you have to prove that to, those brats who used to bully you?”

“That’s one.”

“Lieutenant Drand?”

“Two.”

“That beautiful doe—uh, Misty—who rejected your invitation to the summer mingle?”

“That’s three.”

“Didn’t she say that she’d rather stay the summer single than go with you to the summer mingle?” Lund asked, smirking.

“Three!”

“Captain Frye?”

“Four,” Jo said, frowning.

“And,” Lund continued slowly, “your father’s ghost?”

“That’s five,” Jo said quietly. “A handful to start with.”

“There are more?” Lund asked, then nodded. “Of course there are more. You’re ridiculous, Jo. I don’t know why you beat yourself up. You’re an incredible archer. You don’t need to prove it to anyone.”

“I have to prove it to myself, Lund.”

“Okay, okay,” Lund said, raising his hands with a smile. “Like I always say, I’m behind you all the way. Sadly, I’ll be so far behind that it won’t help any, but I’m definitely behind you.”

Jo smiled, his scowl giving way to a laugh. “So, what’s got everyone so riled up? Surely it’s not the Archer’s Cup.”

“Yeah, no one cares about that, because everyone knows that Nate’s going to win.”

“I thought you had my back?”

“I’m just saying what *they* think. What do they know? Just because he’s won every archery competition that’s ever been held within a hundred leagues of his presence, it doesn’t mean he’ll win this one. You and I know that you definitely have a chance.”

“Thanks, Lund.”

“He might die . . . or go blind,” Lund said. “You have a chance, Shanks.”

Jo shook his head. Just then Captain Frye, a stout older buck in an impeccable uniform, appeared around the corner. “Make way, there,” he called, glowering as he marched ahead. Flanked by several grim-faced councillors, he hurried through the press of rabbits and into Leapers Hall.

The crowd quieted as they passed. When they were all inside, the noise level rose again. Jo looked up at Lund.

“Lord Rake has called for a citadel congress at Cloud Mountain,” Lund said, concern plain on his face. “They’ve known about it for a little while,” he said, nodding to Leapers Hall, “but word just got out, and they’re making a decision. They say Lord Ramnor

might go. Many of the other citadels are already there.”

“It’s probably a trap,” Jo said, shaking his head. “Isn’t Lord Rake a Longtreader dupe?”

“It gets worse,” Lund said, nodding. “They say Wilfred Longtreader is actually there.”

“At Cloud Mountain?” Jo asked, his eyes wide. “And they haven’t arrested him?”

“No,” Lund said, speaking louder to be heard above the swelling noise in the corridor. “Lantrell Baker said Wilfred Longtreader has the run of the place. They don’t even keep a guard on him. And there are two more Longtreaders with him—possibly three.”

“Unforgivable,” Jo said. “After what they did to betray the king?”

“Think of everyone who lost their loved ones when the Longtreaders betrayed the king to be murdered by Morbin.”

“My mother,” Jo whispered, teeth clenched.

“The lords wonder why we can’t unite to fight Morbin,” Lund said, “while some of them harbour the villains who gave our king and kingdom away.”

Jo felt the anger inside him fan into flame. Most rabbits at Halfwind grew up hating the

name *Longtreader*, but for Jo it was personal.
“They should pay. If the lords don’t act, the worst will happen. I hope Jupiter’s heir stays as far away from Cloud Mountain as he can.”