



BOOK I OF
THE YELLOW HOODS
ALONG CAME A WOLF

3 CHAPTER SAMPLE

AN EMERGENT STEAMPUNK SERIES
BY ADAM DREECE

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ADZO Publishing Inc.
Calgary, Alberta, Canada
www.adzopublishing.com

Edited by: Chris W. Rea, Jennifer Zouak
Printed in Canada, United States, and China

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Dreece, Adam, 1972-, author
Along came a wolf / written by Adam Dreece.

(The Yellow hoods ; bk. 1)
Issued in print and electronic formats.
ISBN 978-0-9881013-0-2 (pbk.).--ISBN 978-0-9881013-1-9 (epub)

I. Title.

PS8607.R39A84 2014 jC813'.6

C2014-901592-5
C2014-901593-3

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 2014-08-25 6,584

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CHAPTER ONE

COMING THROUGH

“Watch out!” yelled Tee.

Her gleeful voice could barely be heard over the sounds of her wooden contraption crashing down the forested mountainside.

A short distance away, Tee’s mother, Jennifer, looked up from her tomato garden. She wiped her forehead and looked at her husband, William. “What has your daughter gone and done now?” she said. Their daughter certainly kept life exciting.

“She’s *your* daughter, too,” said William. He was a tall, thin man with light brown hair, and a beard. He quickly tossed aside his axe and started hunting around the side of their cabin for the tool he’d need.

“Oh, William, love, I think she’s more yours in habits, if you ask me.”

“Watch out!” Tee gleefully yelled again. She was rapidly approaching the clearing surrounding their log

cabin home.

Jennifer stood and looked in the direction of Tee's voice. She couldn't imagine how Tee was coming down the mountainside so fast. "Will—I'm worried she's coming faster than usual."

"Faster than the time with the pony? ... Now where did I leave my—"

"Somehow, yes. I'm wondering if she's built something this time." Jennifer furrowed her brow.

"Humph—I can't find it! Where is it?"

Jennifer paused. "Oh! It's hanging inside the front door. I put it there this morning. Sorry!"

William darted to the door and grabbed his crossbow. "There we go! Do you have the bolt with the rope attached?"

Jennifer tried to track where Tee was, using the swaying bushes and trees as indicators. "It should be in the quiver—the case thing ... whatever you call it. Check by the spare saddles."

"Right! I was going to put them in the shed this morning. Why didn't I put them in the shed?" William raced across the yard and grabbed the bolt he needed.

Jennifer nervously moved from side to side. "Hurry up! I think you've got less than half a minute before she's

here.”

William fought to untangle the rope, glancing up every few seconds.

Suddenly, Tee popped into view. “*Wheee!* Hi Mom!” she said. Tee was clutching the steering wheel of her cart; a ripped bed sheet hung from its broken mast. Her yellow cloak flapped in the wind behind her.

“Got it!” said William. He loaded his crossbow and aimed at Tee’s cart as she rocketed past.

“Shoot already, Will!” said Jennifer, realizing their daughter might end up sailing right off the nearby cliff.

William took a deep breath. Just as his daughter reached the end of the clearing, he pulled the trigger. After a moment, there came a wood-splintering crash, and then silence.

Jennifer looked at her husband in horror. “Oh my—”

William waved for her to stay calm. “Tee!” he called loudly. “Can you get yourself down?” he asked, trying to sound confident. Worry started to creep across his face.

After an agonizing few seconds, there came some rustling sounds and Tee replied, “I think so, Dad. Give me a moment ... Yeah! I’m okay.”

Then, with practiced flare, Tee jumped into the clearing and yelled her trademark, “La-la!”

Jennifer turned and looked at William with a mix of relief and frustration. “How many more years until I don’t have to worry about her?”

“Forever and a day, my love,” said William, smiling. “Forever and a day.”



Tee woke up to the familiar sound of the kettle whistling and the table being set. She sat up and yawned, unaware of the adventure that lay ahead.

Her first attempt to join the family for breakfast was rebuffed. As usual, her mother informed her that she needed to brush her shoulder-length dark brown hair before sitting at the table. After huffing about it for a minute, Tee went to brush her hair.

To her mother’s surprise, Tee had even dressed herself before returning. Looking ready for the day, Tee complained, “Why do you *always* make me brush my hair before breakfast?”

Her mother got the scrambled eggs out of the cast-iron skillet, sat herself down, and turned to her daughter. “You *know* why. But, you won’t need to brush your hair anymore if—”

“Really?” Tee interrupted.

Pushing back her own dark curly hair, Jennifer continued, “*if* you find a magical way to make it unknot

itself.”

“Mo-omm! There’s no such thing as magic.” Tee plunked herself into a chair and looked at her dad, expecting him to say something.

Jennifer turned to her husband and smirked. “Am I being unreasonable, Will?”

William looked at his wife, and then his daughter, each awaiting his involvement. Having learned his lesson from this type of situation before, he quickly put a piece of toast in his mouth and looked elsewhere. The conversation eventually moved on without his input.

With the dishes collected and all signs of breakfast gone, Tee leapt for her yellow hooded cloak and backpack, both hanging by the door, when her dad stepped in the way.

“Tee, before you vanish for the day, I need you to do something for me. I have something that needs to be delivered to Grandpapa. If you could help your mother while I ...” William deliberately paused, anticipating Tee’s interruption.

Tee jumped at the opportunity. Unleashing her huge brown eyes—her best weapons of influence—she asked, “Can I take it to him?”

She loved visiting her mom’s father. Apart from being kind and patient, he was a marvelous inventor and loved

explaining things to her. He also made the best cookies, and always seemed to have some ready as she walked in. When asked how he knew she was coming, he'd always smile and change the subject.

William pretended to think over his daughter's proposal. "Well ... I *was* going to take it to his house while you helped your mother weed the garden and clean the house, but if you insist—"

"I insist!" she yelled so loudly that she startled herself. She looked around for a package to deliver.

William smiled. He loved his daughter dearly. For all the trouble she got into, there was never anything but good intentions.

"Actually, it's in the shed. There's a set of plant pots. One is turned upside down—"

"I know the one! It was turned over yesterday morning. I thought that was odd." Tee raced off.

"It's a little red box!" yelled William, shaking his head. He was surprised she knew what he was talking about. It seemed impossible to hide anything from her.

He snapped his fingers, having almost forgotten he was Tee's father. "Remember," he shouted, "to stay on the roads—and don't talk to strangers!"

"I will," shouted a little voice from the distance.

William looked at his wife as she came in carrying an

armload of firewood. "I just passed a little yellow whirlwind. What was that about?" she asked.

"The package that arrived yesterday for your father—Tee's going to deliver it."

"Couldn't he have picked it up this evening when he comes for dinner?" asked Jennifer.

William looked out the front window. "No. I figure if there's any trouble to come of it, it'll come to us today. Best that she's not here," he answered.

Jennifer frowned for a moment. "Do you think that's safe?"

William turned as if he saw something in the forest. "I just—I have a bad feeling. Hopefully this will keep her out of trouble."

Jennifer's eyes took on a steely glint. She straightened up, her posture revealing a hint of the hidden warrior within. "Do you know what's in that red box?"

"No," he replied, "but I have a good idea."

CHAPTER TWO

OF WOLVES & PIGS

Tee placed the little red box in her backpack, slipped the backpack over her shoulders, and then pulled her cloak over top. With her parcel secured, she proceeded to sing and dance down the road, as she usually did.

She loved the smell of the forest, and the look of the red and yellow leaves everywhere. It was like a duel of colors, each fighting for supremacy.

While autumn had just begun, the trees seemed a bit impatient to embrace winter. Every now and then, the morning seemed to whisper that winter wasn't far away. Tee wondered what the rush was.

"Hello. Well, what do we have here?" boomed a menacing, local-accented voice. Instinctively, Tee sprang into the bushes. After a quick look around, she realized the voice came from down the road.

The voice belonged to a tall, rough-looking, unshaven man. He was about fifty yards down the trail with two bigger, rougher-looking men, one on each side. The trio

had stopped a finely dressed man atop a brown and white horse.

Tee moved through the bushes with practiced ease, until she could clearly see the three men. “The Cochon brothers,” she muttered to herself. She’d heard of the troublemakers and had been warned many times to avoid them. There were rumors they’d recently run some guys out of town.

The stranger’s horse nervously moved back and forth, trying to get away from the brothers who flanked her. The rider was doing his best to keep her calm.

“Let me pass,” said the rider in crisp, clear words.

Tee immediately noticed his slight accent, and the way he held himself. By the way he was looking down at the ruffians, and how his words were clear and sharply pronounced, she guessed he was used to being around important people—perhaps even royalty. Her grandfather had taught her how to listen for such clues.

She wondered if the rider was from one of the two capital cities of their small kingdom, or maybe even from one of the neighboring kingdoms to the east or south.

“I have an urgent message to deliver. Remove yourselves!” he commanded, placing his hand atop the gold and silver hilt of his sword. A flintlock pistol was visible, tucked into his black belt.

Tee shook her head. "Shouldn't have said that," she muttered to herself. "Now they're going to want what you've got."

The two younger brothers looked to the eldest, who stood in front of the horse. "I'll tell you what, *messenger boy*," said the eldest Cochon. "For a small sum of money, I'll deliver the message for you. Now what is it?"

The rider closely examined the three brothers. "My name is Andre LeLoup. I am on official business. Out of my way!" he said indignantly. He seemed both relieved and disappointed that they didn't recognize his name.

"That's a funny name for a horse—*official business!*" said the middle brother, known as Squeals. The three brothers laughed.

"Right you are," said the eldest. "Right you are. Now, I'm not an unreasonable man. Am I, Bore?"

The youngest brother, Bore, was by far the largest. A wall of a man, he stood six feet, five inches tall. Like his brothers, his clothes were homemade, and badly. Worse yet, his boots were a patchwork, made by cutting up pairs of smaller boots and stitching them together.

He shook his head in an exaggerated fashion and replied in a deep, dim-witted voice, "No, Bakon, nope."

Bore's first name was actually Boris, but he had never been able to pronounce it properly. Everyone knew him as

Bore. Unfortunately, it emphasized his pig-like looks. "My brother, he's a nice man," he added, giggling like a mischievous little boy.

Meanwhile, in the bushes, Tee rifled through her backpack.

Bakon studied the messenger up and down. "So, how about you come down for a little chat then, eh?" he asked.

The messenger glared at the ruffians and started to reach for his pistol. "Now, I demand—"

Bakon interrupted, "Oh, I've had enough of him. Bring him down, boys!"

On command, the two Cochon brothers reached up and pulled the man down with ease, forcing him to his knees and holding him in place.

Squeals slapped the horse's side, yelling, "Get out of here!"

Bakon looked at Squeals in disbelief as the horse ran away. "What did you do that for? We could have sold it! Or maybe the message was on it!"

Squeals' head slumped in submission. "Oh—sorry, Bakon. Wasn't thinking."

Bore also shook his head. "No thinking, Squeals. No thinking," he said, tapping the side of his head. Squeals gave Bore a look that put him in his place.

Bakon quickly calmed himself down. "She won't go

far. Just ... *don't* do that next time." He then turned to the messenger. "So, Monsieur ..." he started, trying to remember the messenger's name.

The messenger glared up from his forced kneeling position, his arms pinned by the two huge brothers. "My name is LeLoup. This is an insult! I will have you—"

Bakon waved at the man to stop talking. "What is it you want out of this? Do you want to hand over the message? Or maybe you'd like to hand over your gold *and* the message? I couldn't blame you if you wanted to do that, now, could I?"

The two brothers nodded in agreement.

"I'd like for you to drop dead!" spat LeLoup.

Suddenly, Bakon fell over—flat on his face.

Bore and Squeals looked at each other in a panic and screamed, "Aaah! Magic!" They ran off into the forest.

Tee reloaded her slingshot and jumped out of the bushes. "La-la!" she yelled triumphantly. "Run away, little piggies!" She quickly scanned the forest for more trouble.

Once she confirmed no one else was lurking, she lowered her slingshot and approached the messenger. He was angrily talking to himself.

Tee pointed to the face-down elder Cochon brother and said, "He'll be up in a minute. The stones I use only stun for a couple of minutes at most."

The messenger finished brushing himself off. He scrutinized Tee, in her yellow hooded cloak, white blouse, and light brown pants. He wrinkled his nose at how boyishly she dressed.

“So, you are the one who knocked out the ruffian?” he asked.

“Tee, Yellow Hood of the forest, at your service,” she replied, bowing. Andre shook his head slightly at her lack of a curtsy.

“I am Andre LeLoup. A pleasure to meet you,” he said stiffly. “Thank you for your assistance. I thought I’d seen a flash of yellow in the distance. I didn’t realize it was a person. Never mind—you are my little savior, are you not?” He offered an appreciative smile. “But, if you don’t mind, I’d prefer to keep this between us. It won’t help my reputation for people to learn that I was helped by a little girl in a yellow hood.”

Tee smiled. “You know your name means *wolf*, right?”

“Of course I know that,” he replied firmly. He found his hat and dusted it off.

Tee leaned in. “And ... you were just assaulted by the *Cochon* brothers,” she said, nodding knowingly.

Andre looked about to see if any of his other belongings had fallen to the ground during the commotion. “Oh—was that their name?”

Tee giggled.

“What is it?” asked Andre, turning to her, annoyed.

Tee pulled her hood over her face. “Nothing—it’s just, you know ... never mind.” She finished her giggling and took a deep breath. “Okay—sorry. So, where are you trying to go?”

Andre put his hat on and then straightened his mustache. “I am sorry. I appreciate your assistance, but it’s official business and I can’t say. Now, do you think I have any chance of finding my horse, or should I continue into town on foot?”

Tee looked around to get her bearings. “I’m sure we can find her. She probably went over to the nearby clearing. This road leads there. It’s only about five minutes if we take the shortcut.”

Bakon started to make noises and moved a hand to rub the back of his head.

“We should go—now,” Tee whispered. She grabbed Andre by the hand and led him into the thick forest.



At the door came a familiar coded knock. An old man’s heavily accented voice happily answered, “My, my. Someone is at the door. Who is it, I wonder?”

“Me!” said the confident, high-pitched girl’s voice from outside.

The short but well-built man scratched his bald head. “Hmm, *me?* I seem to be in here, though. You must be *you*, yes? So, *who* is you?” he asked, chuckling.

“It’s *me!*” Girlish giggles followed.

The old man rubbed his short salt-and-pepper beard in pretend bewilderment. “Well, well, well ... this is quite a predicament. I seem to be both inside and outside. Hmm, I will need to think about this as I drink my coffee, yes? Goodbye, *me.*”

“But you don’t like coffee!” said the girl, laughing.

“I don’t?” he replied. He opened the brown oak door.

“You don’t! You love Tee!” A yellow blur flung itself into his strong arms. “It’s so good to see you, Grandpapa!”

The old man quickly scanned outside. Satisfied, he closed the door. He put his granddaughter down and offered to take her hooded cloak, but stopped when he noticed she looked sad.

“What is it, my angel?” he asked.

She stuck her fingers through a hole in her yellow cloak, looking disappointed. “It got another one yesterday.”

“Well, some say that there isn’t a thing Nikolas Klaus cannot fix, and what he cannot fix, he can reinvent. I’m sure I can fix it for you.” Nikolas squeezed Tee’s cheeks. “Now, you’ll have to tell me how this happened, because

I'm sure it is an exciting story, yes?"

"It is! We built a—wait, did you make cookies?"

Nikolas feigned surprise. "Oh, I forgot—I need to get my cookies out of the oven!"

"Cookies!" yelled Tee. She bounded up the six stairs of the split-level home and straight into the kitchen. "Chocolate chip?"

"I don't remember. I think that they are ..." and he lingered.

"What *are* they?"

"I think they are ... a surprise!" He poked her nose lovingly.

Even though he'd been home alone, Nikolas was dressed in fine pants and a tailor-made shirt and vest. Over top, he wore a cooking apron. He looked like a nobleman trying very hard to dress down.

The house had exposed wooden beams and a polished wooden floor. It was unlike any house in the area—if not the entire kingdom. While packed bookshelves lined almost every wall, there were also mountains of books piled on the floor. There were few places in any kingdom, outside of royal libraries, that had as many books.

Where there weren't books there were worktables, used for drawing, set up at varying angles. Each table held ideas and inventions in differing stages of completion.

Tee sat on her favorite chair. Though Nikolas had made many of the things in his house, he'd asked a friend to make the chair. The chair was made from a rare live tree and had grown as Tee had grown. Every time she visited, her grandfather would take it out its soil box on the deck, brush it off, and bring it in.

"Grandpapa, tell me again why your wooden floors are shiny like glass?" she asked, looking with amazement at her reflection, as she'd done for years.

Nikolas smiled and took the cookies out of the wood oven. "Now, I find it hard to believe that you came all the way over here to ask me about my floors. I've told you the story so many times. I am sure that you can explain it even better than I, now, yes?"

Tee thought about how many times she'd been over to his house—the sleepovers, the silly games, and the times they'd stayed up all night inventing things. "I suppose ..." Tee's gaze slowly moved upward, and she took a moment to appreciate the incredible detail in the kitchen's wood crown molding. "There are new parts!" remarked Tee, pointing.

"Hmm? Oh?" said Nikolas, looking at the wood trim lining the top part of the kitchen walls. "What? No. Nothing new," he said, baiting her. "It's been like that for years."

“Yes, there is.” Tee stood up on her chair. “Right there. Three new symbols. You’re almost out of room. I think you’ll need a new board in a month or two.”

Nikolas shook his head in amazement. She didn’t miss much. “You are right, on both counts,” he said. “But, before you ask—no.”

“No, what?” asked Tee, this time baiting him.

He looked her straight in the eyes. “No, I will not tell you what it is about.”

Tee had asked for years, and each time he had politely refused. He’d said it in different ways, but it was always the same result. She felt it wasn’t so much that he was keeping a secret, as protecting her from its consequences. She knew that one day he would tell her—when they were both ready.

She continued looking around the kitchen while waiting for the cookies to cool. Her eyes fell upon the picture hanging above the doorway.

“I wish I could have known her,” Tee said, sadness in her voice.

Nikolas turned around, holding the plate of cookies. “Who? Oh, yes, Grandmama. She would have loved you so much, my dear.” His eyes welled up a bit. “Life is cruel and unfair sometimes.”

After setting the cookies on the table, he got on all

fours, pushed aside a chair, and opened a trapdoor in the corner of the kitchen. "You want milk, yes, Tee?"

"Yes please, Grandpapa."

Nikolas climbed down into his small, refrigerated cellar, returning a moment later with a jug of cold milk. "So, what have you been up to that could make such a hole in your cloak?" He topped up the oversized teacup he'd been sipping all morning and then sat down with a sigh.

Tee remembered her wild ride. "Oh, yes. Well, yesterday Elly and I finished making the sail-cart, like you and I talked about."

Nikolas' eyes lit up. "Really? A sail-cart? You and your friend Elly made one? I didn't even get to show you any plans for making one yet. I just ... I only told you about the idea!" He laughed with pride.

"I know, but you explained it well enough, and Elly's good with a hammer and saw."

Nikolas' face wrinkled with fatherly concern. "Isn't Elly a bit young to use a hammer?"

Tee looked at him disapprovingly for having brought up age. "She's twelve, like me, and only two inches shorter. That's plenty old enough for tools! You were younger than us when you started inventing things, anyway."

"Hmm," said Nikolas, recognizing he'd better not say

anything more. His protective nature was sometimes at odds with the perhaps overly truthful stories he had shared of his own past.

“Oh, that reminds me!” Tee sprang up, bolted to the front door, went into her backpack, and returned with the red box.

“This is why I came. My dad asked me to bring you something. It arrived yesterday, and he thought you’d need it today, even though you’re coming for dinner tonight. I *didn’t* peek inside.” Tee placed the red box on the table.

Nikolas looked at the box and sighed heavily. He smiled at Tee. “This I can look at later,” he said, putting it in a kitchen drawer.

Patting her lovingly on the head, he continued, “So, tell me. What happened with your cloak and the sail-cart?”

Tee wiped her mouth on her sleeve. Her grandfather gave a disapproving look and tossed her a cloth napkin. Finished with it, she told him all about how she and Elly had spent several days making the sail-cart.

Tee continued, “Then we were going to take it up to the treehouse ...”

“The secret one, high up the mountain? Isn’t that a bit dangerous?” Nikolas accidentally replied.

Tee looked at him suspiciously. “How do *you* know

about it?"

A couple of seconds passed, and then her grandfather tapped his right temple and smiled. "You forget that some people consider me a genius. I knew it had to be a secret because you hadn't told me about it before. You tell me everything."

Tee was unsure he was telling the whole truth, but decided to continue anyway. "We were right by Elly's house which, if you remember, is up the mountain from my house, and down the road from here."

Nikolas smiled. He knew very well where Tee's best friend lived. He'd known it since the time Tee had led him down the road, reaching way up to hold his hand, because she wanted to make sure he knew where Elly lived. She'd walked the whole way, which had taken quite some time with her little legs. When they'd arrived, she'd formally introduced him to her best friend, Elly. The memory always made him smile.

"I got in the sail-cart to show Elly that everything worked and then—"

Nikolas interrupted, "A big gust of wind! Where did you go?" He collected the dishes and started washing them in the sink.

Tee smiled awkwardly. "It kind of pushed me off the road, down the side of the mountain—toward home."

All of a sudden, this seemingly innocent, fun story had taken a serious turn. “That’s when you used the brake, *yes?*” he asked, with concern.

“Well,” said Tee sheepishly, “we kind of hadn’t built that part yet. That was most *definitely* going to be next.”

After a big sigh, and reminding himself his granddaughter was clearly okay, he chuckled and shook his head. He thought to himself that the next time he’d speak to Tee about an invention, he should discuss the safety features *first*.

“What happened then?” asked Nikolas.

Tee took a sip of milk before responding. “So, then I kind of went down the mountainside, screaming. At first, I was wondering what I was going to do. I was scared of hitting a tree, but then I realized the steering worked really well! It was so much fun.”

Nikolas enjoyed her stories. He imagined Tee, in her makeshift sail-cart, going down the mountainside, heading for home. Placing the last dish in the wooden rack to dry, he turned to face Tee and leaned on the counter. With a raised left eyebrow, he said, “But the cliff ... you stopped before the cliff, *yes?*”

Tee looked at her feet. She knew he wouldn’t like this part. “Dad saved me with that crossbow bolt with the rope attached. It went through my cloak and into a tree. I was

kind of stuck there for a bit.”

Nikolas’ eyes narrowed disapprovingly. “Where, exactly?”

Tee’s head shrank into her body. “Um—in *the* tree.”

“The *same* tree?” he asked in disbelief.

“Yeah.” Tee slowly looked up at her grandfather.

Nikolas sat down. “Always the *same* tree. The one that is leaning off the cliff?” he said, gesturing with both hands.

Tee smiled uncomfortably. “Kind of. It’s leaning more, now.”

Nikolas rubbed his bald head for a moment, and then smoothed his salt-and-pepper beard. He could tell she understood this was serious and that she would’ve likely been killed if she hadn’t been lucky. Unfortunately, she always seemed to be lucky. “Hmm, I think we need to do something for that tree. We can’t have it go falling off the cliff, can we? What would save you next time?”

Tee quietly sighed in relief. “You’re right. So, anyway, that’s how I made the hole in my cloak.” Tee felt lighter for having gotten the story off her chest.

Nikolas messed with her hair lovingly and said, “Well, I wouldn’t worry about that yellow hooded cloak of yours. I—”

Suddenly, there came an unexpected, heavy-handed knocking at the door.

The three Cochon brothers walked out of the tavern, wiping the remains of lunch on their sleeves. They hadn't talked much about the morning's events. Each was embarrassed and angry.

They stopped to watch the town's people milling about. Some people were walking, some were pulling hand-carts, and some were on horses. It was like any other day. Nothing was out of the ordinary, and nothing interesting was happening—and this bothered Bakon.

Watching a pair of town guards walk by on patrol, Bakon pondered aloud, "Why would a messenger show up here? Mineau would make sense. It's a bigger town. It's easier to get to, being at the bottom of the mountain. Why come here—to Minette? We're a fraction of Mineau's size."

"Maybe he got lost?" suggested Squeals in his high-pitched, scratchy, nervous voice.

Bakon shook his head. "A man like that doesn't *get* lost. I don't think he's just a messenger, either."

Squeals asked, "Should we tell Archambault?"

Bakon shook his head again. "Not yet. We don't know anything. It's just that it doesn't make sense." He paused to watch some people load a cart before continuing. "What's so important about our town? The Magistrate isn't even back yet from wherever he went. So that means the

messenger can't be expecting to see him, and that messenger is not going to deliver a message to anyone but its intended recipient."

Bore bent down and scratched the edge of his right big toe, which poked out from a loose seam in his patchwork boots. "Maybe the man's not here for the town," he said.

Bakon and Squeals turned to look at their mountain of a younger brother.

"Go on, Bore," prompted Bakon. "What are you thinking?"

Over the years, Bore had proven that while most of what he said was simple and obvious, on occasion he saw something that everyone else missed.

He pointed to the people walking around. "No one is excited. I liked seeing him. He was fancy," said Bore, smiling. "We don't see fancy a lot."

Bakon started to laugh and slapped Bore's arm affectionately. "You're right, Bore! You are right." He smiled at the dozens of people walking around and acting like it was just an ordinary day. "People should be gossiping about him and gathering in groups. They wouldn't be like ... this," he said, gesturing. "This messenger is dressed fancier than anyone in town except for *maybe* the Magistrate himself. The people wouldn't be able to help themselves."

Squeals' eyes squinted with jealousy. It was rare that Bakon ever paid him any compliments. "Well—" said Squeals, trying to think of something to earn praise, "maybe he went to see someone else!"

Bakon, disappointed, glared at Squeals. "Well of course he went to see someone else! If he's not here for the town, then he's here to deliver a message to *someone*. The question is *who* would be deserving of an almost-royal messenger?" Bakon started to march toward the center of town.

"Wait—can we go home and get our flintlocks, first?" asked Squeals, almost eating his words with nervousness. "I hate magic. If it comes again, I want to shoot it."

Bakon shook his head angrily. "There's no such thing as magic, you dimwit. How many times do I have to say it?" His brother cowered, and Bakon calmed down. "But," he continued, "I do think you finally had a good idea."

Squeals looked at the ground, and smiled.

CHAPTER THREE

HUFF AND PUFF

“Please open the door, Monsieur Klaus. This is official business. I request that you let me in,” said the messenger. He knocked vigorously on the front door.

Hand to lips, Nikolas signaled his granddaughter to be quiet. When he started to move toward the kitchen’s back door, Tee tugged on his sleeve.

“It’s okay, Grandpapa,” she whispered. “It’s a man I helped earlier. He’s an *official* messenger. I helped him get away from the Cochon brothers and find his horse.”

Nikolas looked at Tee with surprise and concern. “I don’t think you understand, my dear.”

“No, Grandpapa, *you* don’t understand. His name is Andre LeLoup, and he’s on official business. He’s nice.”

Nikolas’ eyes narrowed. “LeLoup?” he asked uncomfortably.

Tee nodded.

The forceful knocking came again. “I know you are

inside and I require you to open the door. Now, please, let me in!" said LeLoup.

Nikolas looked at his granddaughter's pleading eyes. She didn't understand. She'd never seen him act any way except graciously toward strangers.

He knew that LeLoup's use of *official business* was his coded way of telling Nikolas that if LeLoup got what he wanted, he'd leave without anyone being harmed.

Nikolas sighed deeply, and whispered, "I need you to trust me, my dear. This is not what you think." He took her by the hand and started heading for the back door of the kitchen.

Tee slipped from his grip and ran to the front entrance. "I need my yellow cloak and backpack!" she whispered loudly.

"You have left me no choice, Monsieur Klaus!" said LeLoup angrily.

As Tee grabbed her backpack and pulled her cloak on, the door blew open with an explosive puff of smoke, knocking her against the wall and off her feet. LeLoup peered in and saw the unmoving yellow-cloaked heap on the floor.

Nikolas rushed toward LeLoup, instinctively grabbing a long plain-looking metal rod out from a hidden nook in the kitchen doorframe.

Andre LeLoup drew his flintlock pistol and pointed it at the yellow-hooded girl as she started to moan and move. He gave Nikolas a serious look that stopped him in his tracks, six feet away.

LeLoup grinned menacingly. "It is rude to keep a man waiting when he is trying to be considerate—never mind when he has been sent by Simon St. Malo."

Nikolas quickly scanned the cramped entranceway. While thinking about what to do next, he pinned the rod between his left arm and chest. He discreetly started cranking a small handle on the rod with his right hand.

"I'm surprised," said Nikolas, stalling for time, "that Simon St. Malo would send *you*."

LeLoup's face lit up. "You've heard of me?" he asked, desiring confirmation.

Nikolas nodded. "So—what does Simon want?"

LeLoup grinned again. He enjoyed playing the game of cat and mouse. "You know, you are a hard man to find. It took me weeks to track you down. I would've moved on to the next town if I hadn't encountered an extraordinary, yellow-hooded girl. I figured she might be tied to you somehow, and here we are," he said, with a hint of evil playfulness. "It would be a shame if anything were to happen to her." He gestured threateningly with his pistol.

"Congratulations, Monsieur LeLoup. You sniffed me

out. Now ride back to wherever that rat is hiding and tell him the answer is *no*. Whatever his question is, the answer is *no*," said Nikolas angrily. He finished cranking the rod's handle.

LeLoup scoffed. "St. Malo knew that you wouldn't comply willingly. He asked that I get your attention by *any* means necessary and return what is rightfully his—as all inventions are. What he wants is described in *here*." LeLoup tossed a sealed envelope at Nikolas.

Without thinking, Nikolas skillfully caught the envelope. It was a simple envelope with St. Malo's seal.

"Open it," insisted LeLoup.

Nikolas opened the letter carefully. *Give me the steam engine plans and notes*, it read. Confused, he looked up. "I assure you I don't have any such plans, Monsieur LeLoup."

LeLoup rubbed his left temple. "I wasn't *planning* on shooting a young girl today, but ... St. Malo knows that you've been working on it. He *wants* those plans."

For more than a year, Nikolas had been exchanging letters with his friend, Maxwell Watt, who lived in Inglea—an island kingdom to the north. It was Maxwell, and not Nikolas, who had invented the steam engine. Nikolas had only been helping Maxwell work out some of the more difficult questions that he'd been unable to solve on his

own.

Simon must have a spy close to Maxwell, Nikolas thought, but not close enough to have the full story. Perhaps a person delivering letters? Or an assistant? When did Simon get such influence as to reach across kingdoms? He was alarmed by the idea of St. Malo getting his hands on such an invention.

LeLoup continued, “St. Malo is offering to send you an abundance of coins—*once* I have delivered the plans safely to him.”

Tee carefully managed to make eye contact with Nikolas, while keeping her face turned away from LeLoup. Nikolas gave her an imperceptible nod and then sprang at LeLoup with the metal rod.

“Simple Simon has no coins!” yelled Nikolas.

When the rod’s end touched LeLoup’s pistol arm, electrical sparks flew everywhere. LeLoup flailed madly and fell to the ground. Throwing the rod aside, Nikolas grabbed Tee by the hand, and ran out the door.

Deep within the forest, they stopped for a moment to catch their breath. Nikolas tried to judge where they were. The strong wind was blowing leaves everywhere, making it hard to see through the trees and bushes.

“I heard something that way!” yelled an unfamiliar voice, uncomfortably nearby.

Nikolas held Tee close. “LeLoup brought other men.

We must be careful," he whispered.

Tee's eyes welled up. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I told him I was going to your house. I shouldn't have told him. I—I—I knew he was a stranger, but he seemed nice."

Nikolas was sharply reminded that there were many things about his life he hadn't explained to her yet. He smiled reassuringly. "Shh, no crying, yes? It is not your fault. He is a master at what he does. We must be smart, and fast, yes? We will talk about this at dinner with your parents, and we will laugh. Everything will be okay."

Tee wiped her tears and nodded.

Nikolas looked around. He spotted a figure nearby, but luckily it was heading away from them. He turned to Tee with an intense look in his dark brown eyes. "You are a smart girl. Promise me you will always be smart. Think. Don't panic. Find the strength inside you. It is there."

Tee looked at him, confused. She didn't know what he was talking about.

He checked his pockets, confirming they were disappointingly empty. "I wish I'd grabbed my coat. I had some useful items in the pockets," he muttered, and then looked around. "I need a moment to think."

Suddenly, three large men appeared out of the swirling leaves and dense underbrush. They were dressed in dark red leather armor, like the mercenary horsemen of the area.

"Go!" urged Nikolas as he pushed his granddaughter away.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After a serious illness, Adam decided to make some changes, including never missing a night of reading stories to his kids again because of work, and starting down that road to being an author that he always wanted.

He spent three years writing a memoir about his life up to and through that event. With that out of the way, he felt free and able to start writing fiction again. With a nudge from his daughter, he wrote *Along Came a Wolf* and created *The Yellow Hoods* series.

He lives in Calgary, Alberta, Canada with his awesome wife and amazing kids.

Adam blogs about writing and what he's up to at
AdamDreece.com

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