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Opening extract from

Longbow Girl

Written by

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Longbow Girl

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To my father, the late Professor Glyn Davies,
to my mother Grethe Davies and to my brothers,
Roy and Kenneth

Diolch yn fawr
Mange tak
Thank you

Hywl!

On the bank of the river he saw a tall tree:
from roots to crown one half was aflame
and the other green with leaves . . .

from the *Mabinogion*



1

Merry Owen saw a dark figure vault over the ancient boundary wall between her family's farm and the Black Castle. The old enemy, trespassing on her land again . . . coming her way.

She was alone but she had her longbow. An ancient weapon of war that had won battles and saved kings for a thousand years, and was still lethal today. In her hands, at least. Armed with this simple stave of wood, only just taller than her and primed by a decade of training, she always felt *more*: more powerful, alive, ready . . .

She nocked an arrow on to her string, drew back the bow to its quivering full extension, and eyed the approaching figure. Too far away to recognize, but close enough to hit. She imagined all her ancestors – the longbow men of Nanteos – lining up like ghosts behind her, willing her on . . .

She loosed the arrow.

It scythed through the air, embedding itself in the straw target with a deep thud – dead centre.

The approaching figure stopped, wary now. Merry smiled and shot another nine arrows into the coloured rings of the target.

'What are *you* doing here?' she called.

Lord James de Courcy grinned, though his face was troubled. 'Nice to see you too. Thanks for not shooting me.'

'I thought about it. Might shoot your father if he gets on the wrong side of the wall.'

James blew out a breath. 'I heard about what happened, Merry. I am so sorry.'

'Not *your* fault,' Merry replied, gripping her bow tight, as the memories rushed back. It had happened just two weeks before, but she wondered if she'd ever forget it.

Her stallion, Zulu, galloping for his life across the open land of their farm, hurtling towards the old stone wall of the boundary, the Earl de Courcy's wolfhounds closing in. Zulu launching himself, hitting unyielding stone, twisting, spinning and crashing to the ground. Thrashing hooves . . . the terrible baying of the pack . . .

'Your father's to blame,' Merry continued grimly. 'For not training his wolfhounds properly. They attacked the Joneses' sheep six months ago. Everyone knows they've gone feral, except him. Can't bear to have his pedigree dogs locked up or put down.'

James shook his head, looked miserable and guilty, even

though the guilt was not his. Merry didn't know if his father had offered any compensation, but her own da would have been too proud to accept it even if he had.

'So, why aren't you at boarding school then?' Merry asked, after an awkward pause. 'I didn't think your Easter hols had started yet?'

'Suspended.'

'*Oh* . . .' Merry could only imagine the reaction of James's parents.

'Don't ask,' said James, voice clipped. 'I just want to forget about it for a bit. Why aren't you bent over a book?'

'Homeschooling's much more efficient than normal school,' replied Merry. 'You can get a lot done in the mornings if you start early enough. I always have Friday afternoons free.'

'Lucky you,' replied James sourly. He glanced at her bow.

'No way,' said Merry, reading his mind. 'My father'd skin me if I let you have a go. And don't think you'd get off lightly either.'

'Yeah, on second thoughts . . .'

Merry's father, Caradoc Owen, was a skilled soldier who'd done eight years in the special forces, the SAS no less. No one with any sense got on the wrong side of him.

'I've got a better idea,' said Merry. 'There's a load of your footballs festering in the barn. Everyone's out,' she added.

James nodded, relieved. He got on all right with Merry's parents, but he was still a de Courcy and the latest outrage didn't exactly help.

Merry watched him jog to the old stone barn. There was

something different about him, she thought. He looked older, taller, but there was a new edge to him. They were both fifteen and their lives were changing, but he was still her best friend, her oldest friend, even though their families had been enemies for nearly seven hundred years.

Their friendship had survived their parents' enmity, his sister Lady Alicia's jealousy, survived too the accident Merry'd had at the age of twelve when her longbow had snapped at full draw, shearing back into her left eye. The air ambulance had come for her, but too late to save the eye. So she wore a patch to cover it, which gave her something of a piratical air. She'd been impossible in those early days when she'd thought the loss of her eye meant the end of her dreams. She'd shouted and yelled and tried to push everyone away, but James had stuck with her. He'd told her she looked like a true warrior princess. He'd encouraged her to take up the new longbow her father had made for her, reminded her that she was still the longbow girl, and he'd kept her company in the long cold hours when she trained like fury till she was better with one eye than she'd ever been with two.

She and James had always shared a love of the wild terrain that was their home. On foot, bike and horseback they'd explored the five hundred acres of the Owens' farm, the ten-thousand acres of the de Courcy estates, and the encircling, ice-carved mountains beyond – the Beacons. They'd played games of skill and strength and aim. Always competing, always egging each other on. The motto of their childhood: *anything is possible*.

Merry went to the target now, hauled the arrows out of the straw as James returned with his footballs in a net bag. Sparrows chirped in the greening trees, and high above, against the backdrop of the mountains, a peregrine falcon circled, eyeing up prey. James helped her to forget the stallion, but he also reminded her. He was a de Courcy: how could he not?

James dropped five footballs at her feet, and played keepie-uppie with the sixth. He made it look effortless, bouncing the ball off his feet, his knee, his head. He was still able to glance at her and smile.

'Now what?'

'You aim them at my target. Shoot for the bullseye – the gold. From fifty yards.'

He laughed. 'Nice one.'

Merry indicated the start point. James lined up a ball and sent it bulleting forward. With a bang, it thudded into the edge of the target. He grimaced, tried again. Got the other edge. He muttered under his breath, and just missed the gold with the third. But nailed it with the fourth, fifth, and sixth balls.

Merry kept her face deadpan. 'Not bad.'

'Your turn,' he said, grinning.

Merry picked up her longbow, walked back another twenty yards. Aiming from instinct rather than by sighting, she loosed twelve arrows. The bow thrummed softly, singing its song of death.

'Six bullseyes,' called James. 'That makes us equal, according to my maths . . .'

'Double or quits?' responded Merry, wrenching the arrows

from the target once more and dropping them into the forest-green leather quiver, the length of a baguette and twice as thick, that hung from an attachment to her belt.

'OK. I'm on for that. What's the bet?'

'I bet,' said Merry, head to one side, grinning evilly, 'that you can't hit the target from a hundred yards.'

'Oh come on!' James exclaimed. 'Most pro footballers wouldn't be able to do that.'

'All the more reason for you to go for it, seeing as you want to be one.'

James blew out a breath. 'All right then. I'll do that and you can try and shoot the ball mid-air with an arrow. From a safe distance,' he added hurriedly. 'Like fifty yards!' Merry opened her mouth, then closed it again. A static target was one thing. A moving one was something altogether harder. A ridiculous challenge. She'd never do it. *She had to do it*. She took her bow and arrows and counted off fifty yards forward and fifty yards to the side as James walked back to the hundred-yard point.

'One ball, one arrow,' Merry shouted out.

James sprinted forward, and with his right foot propelled the ball skyward – just as Merry drew back her bow, tracked the ball and released her arrow. She heard James shout as it thudded into the ball, punching it from the sky.

'Happy, longbow girl?' he asked with a clear mixture of admiration and irritation as he jogged back to her.

Merry shook her head. 'Not until you tell me why you got suspended.'

James gave her a pained look. 'It's a long story.'

Merry smiled. 'I'm not going anywhere. C'mon, let's go and sit down.'

They walked to the bench Merry's father had positioned perfectly to take in the hillside view and sat side by side. Merry could feel the turmoil inside James, so she waited. This view always soothed her and she knew it had the same effect on him.

Just over a mile to their left on the valley floor was the village of Nanteos. A hundred yards to their right was the Owens' cluster of stone buildings: the barn, the stables and the two-storey farmhouse where Merry lived with her parents and baby brother. Way off to the right and higher up the hill was the little whitewashed cottage of Seren Morgan, where Merry spent two hours a week in the cosy kitchen studying botany. Seren was the latest in a long line of herbalist healers who were also said to have the gift of *sight*, the ability to see into the past and the future, and, worryingly, into people's minds. From odd incidents throughout her childhood, Merry felt sure this was true.

Below them, emerald-green fields dotted with oak trees and squared off by hawthorn hedges rolled down to the valley floor, where the Nanteos river emerged from the thick forest and meandered lazily through her family's lands and on through the village. Beyond that was the boundary wall of the de Courcy estates, then the manicured parklands, which rose up to the Black Castle, James's ancestral home. With its huge castellated walls, arrow slits and moat, it dominated the hillside opposite, glowering down on the valley and across to their farm, a reminder of the bloody past of this part of Wales.

'It was football, of course,' said James at last. He turned to

face Merry. ‘There’s this Russian guy, Alexei, his father’s some oligarch, and he goes round saying things like, “If you upset me my father’ll have you taken care of.”’ James’s eyes blazed with quiet anger. ‘So anyway, we were playing this match and competing for the same ball. I got it, ran on towards goal and then he comes in again with this slide tackle, studs up—’

‘What?’ yelled Merry. ‘He could have broken your legs!’

‘Exactly!’ continued James. ‘So I told him what I thought of him, he punched me, and I punched him back.’

‘Good on you!’ exclaimed Merry. ‘I hope you punched him harder!’

James gave a rueful smile. ‘I did, actually.’ The smile faded. ‘The oligarch heard about it, made a complaint, so the school suspended me. To be fair, they suspended Alexei too.’

Merry blew out a breath. ‘For how long?’

‘Till the start of the summer term in five weeks. They let me play in the National Schools final – I scored the winning goal, by the way,’ he added, with a broad grin. ‘Then they sent me packing.’

‘And what do they say back home?’

James frowned at the dark mass of the Black Castle; then his eyes skimmed over the parkland, across to the flanking forests and up to the bleak mountains where he’d roam to escape his family. ‘They say that if this is what happens when I play football they’re going to stop me playing. And coming over here too.’

Merry gasped. ‘They can’t do that!’

‘No,’ said James quietly, turning back to Merry. ‘They can’t.’

There was a look on his face Merry hadn't seen before. It was hard, a look of sheer determination, of someone who would go his own way, whatever the cost.

Merry eyed him full on. 'What are you planning, James?'

'I'll tell you when there's something to tell,' he replied evasively.

Merry was about to say something else when she saw her mother, Elinor, striding across their land, a wellington-booted stranger following her.

'Who's that?' asked James.

Merry swore under her breath. 'A buyer, come to sniff around our best brood mare. We have to sell her to buy a new stallion.'

'You know how I feel about this,' said James.

Merry knew he desperately wanted to help but she also knew he had no funds of his own. As a means of trying to persuade him to knuckle down at school and follow the path they'd set out for him, his parents gave him hardly any cash, but even if he did have money, they both knew Merry would never have accepted it.

'Like I said, not your fault.' Merry looked away. 'But I can't stand around and watch this. I'm off for a ride.' She got up from the bench. 'See you, James.'

'See you, Merry.'

'Stay out of trouble,' she called over her shoulder.

'You too.'

Merry gave a wry laugh. 'I'll do my best!'