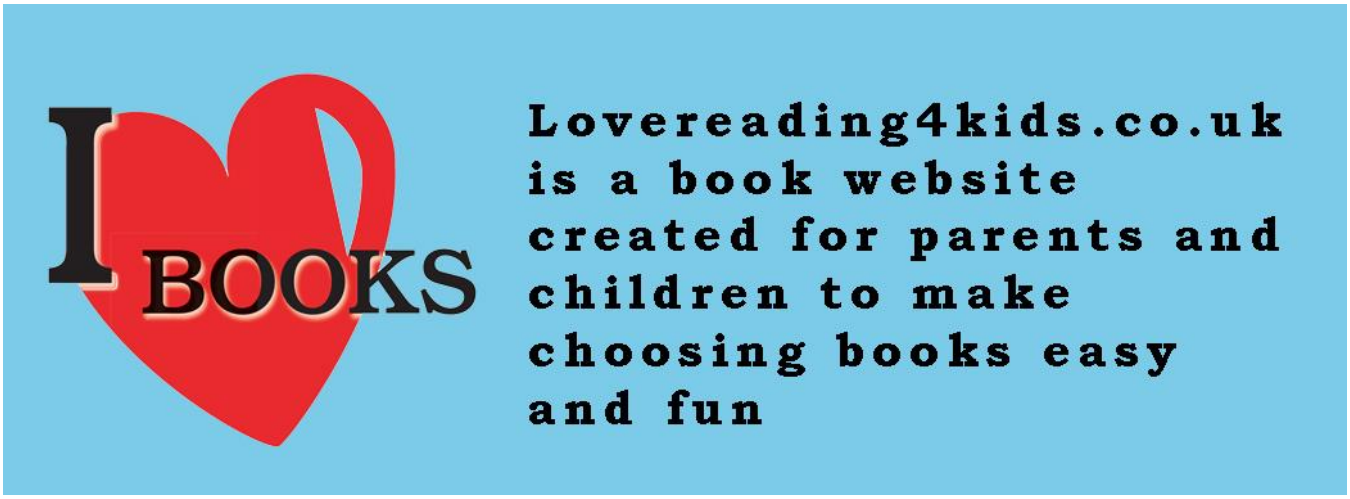


Opening extract from

Queen of the Silver Arrow

Written by

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For Robert Muchamore and Sophie McKenzie

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THE BABY ON THE SPEAR

A King ran through a forest, with a bronze spear in his right hand and a baby girl in his left.

His breath came in great gasps. His chest moved in and out like a blacksmith's bellows. There was spit on his beard and the armpits of his purple robe were dark with sweat. His scarlet cloak flapped behind him and his crown of golden leaves fell off. He did not stop for it.

The baby girl was his daughter, Princess Camilla.

She giggled, for it seemed to her that this was some game.

But it was not a game.

The King was running for his life. He was running for *her* life.

The trees in that part of the forest were cork oaks. Workers had been peeling off the bark when a sudden storm sent them looking for shelter. Curved strips of bark still lay upon the ground.

The King almost tripped on one. As he fell forward, an arrow whined over his head like an angry wasp.

Some god or goddess was protecting him.

Ahead and to his left, he heard the boom of rushing water. It was the river that ran along the border of his land. He turned and plunged into the bushes.

A dozen heartbeats later, the King came out of the bushes and skidded to a halt.

Usually he could splash across the river. But the sudden storm had made it a foamy torrent, bursting its banks.

On the other side, an ancient forest promised a thousand thickets and caves for them to hide in.

Alone, the King might have been able to swim across. But not with a baby under one arm.

The King saw a curved piece of cork bark lying at the foot of a tree, and he had an idea.

He used the bands of linen cloth that swaddled his baby girl to tie her to the strong shaft of his spear. Next he wrapped the curving curl of cork around her. When that was done, he made it all secure with his belt.

Princess Camilla looked like a larva in a cork cocoon.

The enemy was almost upon them. The King lifted the spear, heavy with the squirming baby, and shouted a prayer to the heavens.

"Diana," he cried, "Goddess of the Hunt! Show mercy to me. I am King Metabus, the father of this baby, Camilla. If you protect her as she flies to you, I vow she will serve you for ever!"

Then he hurled the spear – and with it his child – across the river.