

## Prologue

Archer had a problem. Not exactly life-threatening, but not a good place to be. He had two alternatives. The trouble was, he was damned if he did and damned if he didn't. It wasn't as if he had a choice, it was a matter of honour, a duty he knew every single boy in his class would be happy to carry out.

It was all about a girl. *When wasn't it all about a girl?* He thought back to when girls were just friends; that seemed a long time ago. When you could like a girl, be friends with her and do things together, without people getting worked up about it. People like his mate Finn or the guys they hung out with. People like his foster parents. But mostly, the two people he definitely didn't want to upset: his best mate Fletch and the girl herself, Bethia.

He had a few heartbeats to choose. Either he kissed her and seriously annoyed his best friend or he didn't kiss her and she would be mortified and worse, publicly humiliated. It was not as if she wasn't kissable, exactly the opposite. Fletch had already made his feelings known and if you believed *him*, she felt the same way. Archer focussed on her pale green robe so he wouldn't have to meet her eyes. He could almost see the happy bubble of excitement that surrounded her several moments earlier beginning to evaporate as she sensed his reluctance.

*How on earth had he got himself into this predicament?* It wasn't exactly his fault, though there were many who would argue over that.

His thinking time ended as Malduc said his final chant over the rowan cross. In Bethia's eyes, Archer read the apprehension and the faintest spark of hope. His decision was made.

# 1 The Joust

‘C’mon Archer, you can do it!’

‘Go for it Finn!’

Sitting astride his stallion Apollo, Archer grinned as people in the crowd shouted encouragement. His grin widened as he spotted his friends in the crowd; they were Finn’s friends too and obviously didn’t know who to support. Some of them looked worried, but Fletch didn’t care, holding up victory fists to both of them in turn. Archer wiped away the moisture on his upper lip. He was not sure whether it was the heat of the sun or the familiar thrill of blood pumping through his veins roasting him in his armour.

‘Good luck, mate.’ Tybalt, Archer’s Second, held up his shield. ‘May the best man win.’

‘Man? Don’t you mean Junior?’ Inside, Archer was secretly punching the air at the idea, as he slipped his gauntlet through the shield straps and took the reins.

‘No, Archer. Today, you and Finn are men.’ Tybalt handed over the lance, then, with an anxious look in Finn’s direction, walked to the dais to prepare for the tributes.

Professor Niall, a senior trainer, had pronounced them the only pair ready for the joust – all the other boys settled for the rings. Looking down the tilt at his opponent, Archer’s heart surged with the warmth of brotherhood. No, Finn was more than a brother, they did not argue as siblings did.

Despite the intense heat, Archer shivered. This was not the same as an ordinary practice. The enthusiasm of the crowd made it more exciting than anything he had ever done in his life. The buzz of excitement was affecting everyone – many moons of effort had gone into the preparations for this day and people had travelled from miles around to celebrate Beltane, the Festival of the May.

The shield weighed heavily on his arm, which still ached from the hours spent waxing and polishing until the metal shone like a looking glass. Noticing how it reflected the sun, he worried that this might give an unfair advantage if it shone in Finn's eye. As the glare from his opponent's shield dazzled him, Archer realised why Niall had been so precise about the orientation of the tilt. Siting it perpendicular to the sun's path meant they would both be equally disadvantaged.

Finn won the coin toss, electing that Archer's tribute was first because he knew people always remembered the last thing they heard. The Senechal introduced the two Seconds.

Tybalt did a good job of supporting his friend. As a member of the learned Magi clan, his speech was eloquent, but a little too earnest. 'Ladies and gents, boys and girls, I present to you the splendid Archer, a true warrior of superlative courage and daring. This squire is a veritable man of the horse,' he paused at the round of applause that greeted this statement.

Archer's cheeks warmed at the exaggeration – horsemanship was the only part of his training that did not feel natural.

Tybalt concluded, 'He has remarkable skill with any and every weapon and is a dutiful son and loyal friend.'

Archer tipped his lance at Tybalt and accepted the applause, bowing at the cheers – not the easiest of things to do on horseback with thirty pounds of metal weighing you down. He frowned as Edlyn appeared on the dais with a shallow smirk and slow handclap. Finn had no choice about using that snake as a Second, his mother had insisted because of the blood ties. Finn was no mother's boy, but this event was much too important for him to disobey her wishes.

The clapping didn't quite stop. Edlyn cleared his throat noisily. 'A-hem. It is my pleasure, nay my absolute honour, to introduce to you, one of Aveburgh's best kept secrets. Squire Finnegan is truly a champion of champions.' Waving his arm in a grand gesture, he continued, 'No junior in this contest can touch

him on the back of a horse.’ He paused, obviously expecting a similar reaction to Tybalt’s ‘man of the horse’ comment. When it didn’t come, he carried on as though it didn’t matter.

‘With the staff, he has the strength of a bear and his skill with a sword would rival Hector himself. I give you, the people’s choice, Squire Finn. Join me in going wild with delight.’ Catching Archer’s eye with a smug wink, Edlyn bowed to Finn, clapping enthusiastically and whistling. After a moment’s stunned silence, the crowd did as he suggested.

Archer recognised his enemy’s mastery of rhetoric. He knew Edlyn would take great pleasure that, due to his superb oratory skills, the round of applause for Finn was louder and lasted much longer than Archer’s.

A large cloud was creeping toward the sun, and the officials were waiting for its cover even though both heralds had finished their tributes some minutes ago. As the momentum from the big build up was lost in the delay, Archer sensed that Apollo was getting restless. Finally, the Seneschal took his place on the dais and an expectant hush fell over the crowd.

‘Ladies and gents, juniors and children, please accept my apologies for the stoppage.’ He gestured at the cloud, ignoring the good-natured catcalls from the tightly-wound juniors, who were desperate for the bout and needed to voice their frustration. Raising his eyebrows until the silence returned, the Seneschal continued, ‘Contender Archer, are you set?’

Archer held up his lance, pointing to the sky.

‘Contender Finn, are you set?’

Finn echoed the move with his lance.

‘You will both begin on my horn.’ As they readied their weapons to the starting position, he raised an ivory horn to his lips and blew.

The horses exploded into action as they were trained, no touch of spurs was required from either rider. There was nothing like the thrill of the first pass – both riders had a clean score sheet, so in

theory they both had the same chance of winning. Adrenaline surged through their veins, blinding them to all other sights and smells. All except the tip of the weapon coming toward them and the pungent aroma of horse mingled with their own sweat. The sounds of the crowd became a muffled roar against the thunder of blood pounding in their ears. As they sprinted, the training took over and instinct came into play. Everything they had rehearsed became real, do-or-die action.

The two friends had practised together for several years, so they each knew the other's strengths and weaknesses. Archer knew that Finn's mastery of his steed Artemis was so complete that he could easily bring off the dangerous 'side-hang' manoeuvre to avoid the tip of an opposing weapon. Also, that he was just as likely to wait until the instant before impact before making his move. Finn wouldn't care that the high speed would affect his balance, putting him at greater risk, he thrived on danger. He also knew that Archer's legendary skill with weapons was diminished on horseback.

Although a competent rider by most people's standards, Archer was fully aware that he didn't have Finn's gift of becoming a part of the horse, attuned to every nuance of movement as though their bodies and minds were connected. Archer was not confident with the trickier techniques used by more experienced warriors to delight the crowds. His opponent would be expecting just a shoulder roll, more subtle but less effective at reducing the impact.

Archer didn't disappoint him. As their mounts were less than a couple of paces apart, he rolled his left shoulder, craftily aligning the shield so that it presented a shallower target to Finn's weapon. He had this idea in training, however he knew there was a strong possibility of facing his friend, so he kept it to himself. It worked. Finn's lance was deflected and he was so surprised by the novel strategy that he lost concentration long enough for Archer to make a direct hit on his shield. The tip shattered, giving him two points and the crowd showed their delight by clapping and stamping.

Someone started a chant; he couldn't hear the words apart from the final, victorious 'Archer'.

Finn dipped his lance in defeat as they trotted back to the judge to show the extent of the damage. The lances were designed with two stress sites to reflect the strength of the collision and so the courage of the contestants. At a normal speed, only the fragile pottery tip would shatter. If a bigger impact was produced by a faster charge or stronger thrust, the length of wood immediately behind the tip, known as the crumple, would disintegrate, earning more points.

A second wave of noisy appreciation from the crowd acknowledged Archer's marque on the scoreboard.

Tybalt was ecstatic, slapping Archer's lower leg enthusiastically. 'Well done, that was truly inspired. Did Niall teach you that trick?'

'Actually, I worked it out for myself.' Archer grinned at Tybalt's back-handed compliment, suggesting it was a strategy worthy of a champion such as their trainer. Taking the lance from his enthusiastic Second, Archer looked over at Finn who was not impressed by the first pass. The joust was Finn's best event and he needed a high score to get through to the next round.

Archer was not, however, prepared for just how unimpressed his friend was. The second pass flashed by in an instant. At the horn, Finn charged like a demon, thrusting his lance at the approaching chest plate hard enough to leave a dent. Archer rocked back in his saddle, but there was no real danger of being unhorsed. There was a collective intake of breath from the crowd who had the scent of six points for a dismount, but he raised his lance to show that he was still a viable contender. When they met at the centre, it was Archer's turn to dip his lance. Finn seemed concerned, raising the visor of his helmet as he lowered his voice. 'Are you hurt?'

‘It’ll take more than that little tickle to worry me. Is that your best effort?’ Archer raised his visor with a grin so his friend could see that he was solid.

Finn’s crumple had smashed into tiny pieces, giving him four points. Archer’s lance was intact. The crowd stood to show their appreciation as the boys returned to their stations.

This time, they took the full five minutes to recover. Their Seconds offered skins of water and checked that none of the straps or buckles had come undone in the violent collision. Finally, at the time-out signal, they presented the fresh lances. Archer took his, grateful that it was the junior version, several feet shorter and only half the weight of the full battle weapon. Although he was fit and strong, he felt the toll of the first two bouts and was glad that this was to be the last.

Then it came to him. Finn was of slighter build and never quite matched him in the strength and endurance exercises during training, especially in the strength and endurance exercises. He had probably put everything into that second pass, knowing that he would have little left for the final tilt. The third Warrior, Beorn had done well in the rings, scoring seven points, so Finn would need at least another four points to go through to the next round. His sword-work was excellent, but his accuracy on the archery range could be erratic, particularly when he was tired. As the Seneschal went through his speeches, Archer was furiously working out whether he could still go through if he allowed Finn to unhorse him.

Common sense prevailed in the end. No matter how good a friend Finn was, it would not be honourable or fair to either of them, if he deliberately conceded the pass. There was only one thing Archer could do, what his years of training had instilled. Play to win. With a silent prayer for strength and courage, he gave a light touch to Apollo’s flank and held his breath for the charge.

## 2 Final tilt

Afterwards, Niall said it was the most incredible tilt he'd ever seen from two juniors, akin to experienced warriors. *High praise indeed.* Archer realised he had completely misjudged Finn, which was evidently his friend's tactic. Shaking his head in admiration, he thought about the number of times in the past few months that he had bested Finn in training. Or rather that Finn had allowed himself to be bested in training. There was no doubt in the minds of anyone who watched, that they were the cream of the current crop of juniors. Most of those people, if asked to choose between them, would have said that Archer had the edge in all three tourney sports. *What a hoaxter!* He replayed the tilt in his mind.

The gentle touch had spurred Apollo on to a greater speed than Archer had ever known. For the first time in his life, he experienced something of what Finn must feel every time he rode. There was joy, exhilaration and an unspoken bond between him and Apollo. It was the biggest feeling he had ever experienced, as though he was invincible. The lance in his hand became an extension of who he was. Although he felt no desire to harm his friend, for a thousandth part of a second, he was no longer aware of the fact that he was racing towards another boy. All he could see in front of him was a target, like the shield on the quintain. A target he had to hit and then duck out of the way before the sandbag attached to the other end spun round and hit him in the back of the head, knocking him off his saddle.

Everything about Finn, from his posture, to the look on his face before he lowered his visor, told Archer that the opponent facing him was no weakling, beaten down by fatigue and intimidated by a stronger warrior. Just as Tybalt had said, in that fleeting instant, they were as men, and the man coming toward him at full pelt was his equal. Neither was prepared to give any quarter, spurring their horses on to faster speeds, as they lined up the figure in front of

them in their sights. As he re-lived the moment of impact in his mind, Archer realised that it wasn't just the blood lust ringing in his ears that deafened him to the crowd; a deathly hush had fallen as they recognised the ruthlessness of the spectacle before them. To anyone who did not appreciate the true solidarity of their friendship, it must have looked like a real grudge match.

The collision was a moment of perfect science; two unstoppable objects meeting with irresistible force. Both contenders had recognised the other's resolve and tightened the shield to their bodies, adding a layer of protection. Both lances hit the shields in perfect unison, singing a song of smashing earthenware and splintering timber. Both shields were slammed into chest plates, rocking the challengers back in their saddles. Both lances were wrenched out of gauntlets, curving great arcs through the sky that had the awe-struck Seconds running to recover them. Neither horse could stop until they reached the end of the tilt, and even a few paces after that. After the final halt, they turned and took a slow canter back to the centre, retrieving their lances to present to the judge.

As they waited for the judgement, Archer gritted his teeth against the grin that tried to slide onto his face. *The grin that tore his pride to shreds.* To think that he had even considered throwing the fight so Finn could remain in the contest. The impulse was too strong and he let loose a full-bodied belly laugh. *What a player!* Finn looked over and his lips twitched, then he joined in. They were both roaring with mirth as the marques went up on each side of the scoreboard. Archer now had six points, Beorn had seven and Finn eight. Only two of them however, could go through from the sporting round.

The next event was the girls' javelin. Historically, all girls had done the javelin and all boys the rings, a horseback event where rings were collected on the end of a lance. Recently, however, there had been pressure from the more progressive families and the council had been forced to take a vote on it. The result was a

choice, the boys chose between joust or rings and the girls could do rings or javelin. Malduc, the leader of the village council, had shaken his head, muttering that they wouldn't be satisfied until the girls were jousting. This year only the Warrior girls had chosen the rings so the Magi and Outil girls were lined up to show their prowess with the javelin.

Archer was keen to lend his support to Patricia and Chrisya, not just because they were friends, but because they were the least likely sporting candidates of all the juniors in their clan. He had come across them one day, practising in the woods.

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'What are you two doing out here? Haven't you heard about the Renegates?' He was teasing, he knew they would have heard the tales of the fierce bandits who lived in the woods and preyed on the villagers.

Patricia angrily pushed the hair back from her face. 'Of course we have, but we can defend ourselves.' She threw her branch in his direction, but it travelled only a few feet.

He picked it up, grinning. 'You'd be better off improving your running, it's the best weapon you girls have.'

'Not exactly. We could always beat them off.' As she spoke, Chrisya swung her stick at him. She underestimated his ability to anticipate any kind of threat. Catching it easily in one hand, he used the momentum of it to trap her against him.

'Let her go you brute.' Patricia waded in to rescue her friend.

With little exertion, he had them both captive despite their struggles. 'Do you yield? You will only wear yourselves out if you keep that up.'

'Never!' They both renewed their efforts, but he held them easily for a few moments before suddenly releasing them in a heap on the floor.

'There was no need for that.' Chrisya was annoyed.

‘Apparently there *was*.’ He grinned to take the sting out of his words, then adopted a serious tone. ‘If I could trap you that easily, what chance would you stand against half a dozen grown men?’

Chrisya was about to say more, but her friend caught her arm. ‘He is right. After that story Finn told us about the Renegades, I have spent every moment watching over my shoulder.’

‘Thank you Patricia, at least one of you has some sense. I don’t understand why you would take such a risk. Don’t you get enough training at lehren? You should take a rest in your free time.’

‘You can take a rest; it all comes easily to you.’ Chrisya’s tone was bitter as she muttered, ‘you have no idea how useless we are in sporting lessons.’

‘It might look as though it comes easily, but I practise hard to improve my skills.’

‘That is the problem. We are so useless that the trainer does not bother with us anymore. He spends his lesson time helping people who show some promise.’ Patricia’s comment worried Archer - it was not like her to criticise anything, especially not the lehren they would all attend until their eighteen birthday.

Chrisya was happy to find faults. ‘It’s as though we embarrass him because we can’t learn and it makes him look bad.’

‘Who, professor Niall? I can’t believe that.’

‘I do not think it is his fault,’ said Patricia, ‘there are too many in the non-Warrior groups and we all need a lot of help.’

Archer could not fault her logic. Since they were prepared to put in extra hours outside of the normal training to better themselves, he reasoned that it couldn’t be wrong if he helped them because the adult trainer was unavailable.

After a couple of sessions improving their basic self-defence skills, they began by throwing sticks of the right length and weight. As their techniques improved, he made several javelins – his talent for whittling proved useful.

The evenings were rapidly drawing in after the harvest festival at Herfest, and it was harder to schedule the practices. By the time

they finished helping to bring in the crops there was very little daylight left. Archer devised a solution. He persuaded the professor to allow the Warrior boys and girls to assist the non-Warriors during the Beltane preparations. Niall was happy as the other juniors received more individual instruction to improve their defence skills.

When Patricia and Chrisya got through the preliminary rounds to be named as two of the nine Worthies for Beltane, they approached Archer in a great panic. 'Please can you help us? We will not stand a chance against girls like Kayleigh and Lexie.'

'You won't have to try. The three Warrior girls compete only against each other. It's the same with the three Outils and the three Magi.'

'So we only compete against girls with similar skills.'

'Exactly. And the two with the highest scores from each group go through. It's fairer that way.'

'Except that Bethia's really good with the bow.' Chrisya frowned. 'Especially since Fletch has been giving her extra training most days.'

'And Finn.' Patricia was defensive as she explained her assertion, 'He seems to spend more time with her at practice than with everyone else put together.'

'You think so?' Archer had not noticed. 'That's a bit unfair on the rest of you.'

'And what we have been doing is not unfair?'

'True. So you won't need my help then.' There was a twinkle in Archer's eyes. He loved to bait Patricia, her responses were so rewarding. She did not disappoint him, her eyes widened and he caught a glimpse of sheer panic.

'No, I mean yes.' She took a calming breath. 'Archer, you love to torment us.' She slapped his arm so hard he almost regretted the tease.

‘Ow. I don’t help girls who hit me.’ He rubbed the site vigorously.

Chrisya moved his hand and stroked the reddening skin, mocking him with, ‘My poor babe, shall I kiss away the pain?’

‘Will you two stop flirting?’ Patricia was not impressed. ‘We have to sort out some extra training sessions.’

Chrisya pouted. ‘When? Lehren doesn’t finish until an hour before sundown and we have chores to do then.’

‘If you could find some excuse to skip your chores, we could practise for that hour.’

‘My mother will be happy with anything that might give me a chance to win.’ Patricia was obviously embarrassed. ‘She was runner up in her Beltane.’

‘My mother doesn’t think I stand any chance.’

‘How can you say that? Isn’t she proud of you for getting this far?’ Archer raised a surprised eyebrow.

‘Oh yes, it’s not that.’ Chrisya blushed as she defended her mother. ‘She thinks I’d be all right if the sporting round wasn’t first. Last time she watched me throw the javelin I was no good, but that was before all your hard work.’ She looked down at the floor and her cheeks burnt even hotter. ‘It’s good of you to help us Archer, but we’re taking up so much of your time. I think you’d rather be with Finn and Fletch.’

‘She is right, we really are grateful. Is there anything we can do for you in return?’

Archer looked at them, feeling uncomfortable under their eager scrutiny. He was about to protest that he was more than happy to help them, when a terrible thought struck him. ‘Actually girls, there is something you could do for me ...’

### 3 Glowing Arrows

‘No Chrisya, how many times must I tell you? Your feet and hips must start off perpendicular to the target. Then you turn your front foot slightly towards it.’ With a sigh of exasperation, he corrected her stance. Standing just behind the mark, he pulled her into the correct position, then bent down and turned her knee out, maybe a little less gently than the last ten times. She was giggling and he began to regret agreeing to help them. ‘Look, there’s nothing funny about this. If you can’t take it seriously, we might as well forget it.’

Chrisya looked apologetic. ‘Sorry Archer, I told you at the start, I’m rubbish at this. I need to have a verse or something to help me remember it all.’

Patricia had a go. ‘How about this? Hips to side, left foot front, left arm front, nock the arrow, right arm bent, elbow to ear, tilt the bow... I cannot remember the rest.’

Archer went through the verse step-by-step, matching his actions to the words. ‘Actually, that’s not bad. Looks like someone taught you well.’

Both girls giggled as they worked out what he meant and this time he didn’t mind as it was his jest. He relaxed; the girls were quite amusing when they were giggling with him instead of at him. They had worked hard and were making some progress. At the end of the practice they went to the librerie as usual, to help each other with their studies for the knowledge questions.

As they left the librerie, Archer asked if they still remembered the verse they’d worked out during out the earlier session. They each grabbed one of his arms and did a silly dance as they walked, in time to the words.

‘What’s this Archer? Practising for your victory dance at Beltane?’ a smooth voice sneered from behind them. They turned to see Edlyn, flanked by Melvyn and Beorn.

Straightening up, Patricia used the same haughty tone her mother used when faced with a situation that was not being handled to her satisfaction. ‘What we are doing is none of your business. Archer needs no practice; he will dance as well as he does everything else.’

Edlyn and his companions mimicked her tone and gestures, exaggerating them to the point of ridicule.

Archer closed his eyes briefly against the exasperation he felt. It was exactly the wrong thing to say to the arrogant bully. Fixing Edlyn with a bland stare, he tried to put as much civility as he could muster into his tone. ‘It’s no secret; we were studying for the Beltane knowledge. I’m sure *you* don’t need any extra practice for that.’

‘Obviously not. But these dullards,’ he nodded at his companions, ‘need all the help they can get, and who better to instruct them?’

‘I cannot think.’ With a nod, Archer turned and the girls stayed close. He was sure their deathlike grip was not out of fear, but concern at the boy’s reputation for causing trouble. Although he would have willingly fought to protect them or defend their honour, Archer was glad they did not have to witness anything ugly.

There was no sign of anyone following them during their next few sessions. Despite this, Archer made sure that they no longer met at the same time or place from that day onwards. The girls thought that he was being over cautious, but they had never experienced the lengths to which Edlyn would go in his quest for supremacy. It became easier to train as the nights grew lighter; however, they had to miss several meetings because of the preparations for Ostara. With Patricia’s little verse, they had both mastered the necessary stance and rhythm of the shoot, but no matter how he tried, he could not communicate to them the essence of the aim.

‘I don’t understand. How can you possibly just *feel* the centre of the target?’ Chrisya was perplexed.

‘You mean the gold.’ Patricia was keen to show off her knowledge.

Archer smiled at her. ‘Or the bull. I can’t explain it, that’s just what happens to me. I don’t look at it, I feel it.’

‘What do you mean you do not look at the bull? If that were true, you could do it with your eyes closed.’

‘Obviously I must glance at the target to know what direction it’s in, but after that...’ he shrugged. ‘I’m not focussing on where it is; I just imagine the tip of my arrow flying towards the gold. It takes a few moments for my body to settle down, for my muscles to adjust and know the path. Once they do, I could close my eyes. Possibly.’

They looked at him in disbelief. He sighed and tried to explain it further. ‘It’s as though I think the arrow from my bow to the target. If I don’t believe it will hit, then it will miss. Every time. If I don’t get my breathing just right, it will miss. Every time. Or at the very least, it won’t go exactly where I want it to go.’

He looked at the bow in his hand as though surprised it was there. ‘That’s it. The bow becomes like a part of my body – an extension of my mind. I’m not aiming with my body or my arm or the arrow; I’m aiming with my mind.’

It was probably the longest speech he had ever made and he was uncomfortably aware that they were staring at him, reflecting his passion with dazed expressions, as though his words had put them in a trance.

The sharp cracking of a twig broke the spell and without thinking, Archer whirled round and loosed an arrow at the sound. It was an instinctive reflex, the exact opposite of everything he had been talking about. There was no calm deliberation, no steadying of the breath or blending of the mind and target; he simply shot at the sound with pure instinct. Loading a second arrow as he ran, he cursed the distraction that had overcome his

training. How often did Niall remind them to secure the target before loosing? Now he finally understood why. It was obvious there was no danger and he was thankful to see that it wasn't a boy writhing in agony but a small grey squirrel. The second arrow went through its head and it stopped moving.

He turned, drawing the girls away from the disturbing sight. Neither girl was too delicate to withstand the death of a small creature, but he didn't want to upset the mood he had created. The next half hour saw the best shots they had ever made, both girls were inspired by his fervour and keen to try his method for themselves. He knew it was tiring, so he limited the session, finishing early.

'So if you will not let us practise with the bows, you will have to practise with the bows.' Patricia was quite proud of her jest and bent double to make it clear.

He groaned, dreading this part of the training session. 'Look, I know I asked you to teach me to dance, but I only meant the basic rules and a couple of steps for the maypole dance. I don't want to be a spirit dancer.'

'That is quite enough of that. You are giving us the best possible javelin and archery training. The least we can do is to instruct you in the vine and the box.'

One of the reasons Archer felt so uncomfortable was the amount of physical contact these dances required. They were all about holding hands, crossing arms and spinning the girl into what they delighted in calling the embrace. This was like a mother's hug, fine when you're five years old, or maybe eight, but not at his age.

'Oh come on now Archer, how many times must I tell you? Cross right, swing left, cross right. No, behind, that's it.' Chrisya was pleased to get her own back.

'You have to visualise a grapevine, twisting around itself.' Patricia was much gentler in her approach.

‘I did that, but a grapevine goes the same way each time. I’ll never get this, it’s far too complicated.’

‘Yes you will; it’s just a matter of co-ordination. Look, I’ll stand here and you do the exact opposite.’

‘Fine.’

Except that Chrisya stood behind to emphasise the moves, tapping the correct leg with her bow every time he went wrong or hesitated.

‘Ow, you didn’t have to do it that hard.’

‘Yes I did, it’s like training dogs. The pain helps your brain make the right choice.’

‘Maybe you should be beating the wrong leg then.’

‘Beating? I was hardly touching you. Stop being such a girl.’

‘Who are you calling a girl?’ He spun round and growled at her, but she knew that you didn’t bait a bear without a clear escape plan. She dodged behind the trees as he chased her. Running back, she cowered behind Patricia, squealing with laughter as she begged, ‘Save me, save me Tricia. The big bad monster’s after me.’

Patricia was not the slightest bit amused, saying coldly, ‘You made your cot, now you have to lie in it.’

Her tone sobered Archer’s mood and he looked suitably penitent. ‘I can’t see any of us learning much more tonight. It’ll be dark soon, we should be getting back.’ As they headed home, he outlined his idea for the last stage of their training; something he thought would help their accuracy with both javelin and archery. They both agreed it would be tricky to set up but possible.

They picked Wodensday for the special session as the meeting to plan the Beltane celebration would keep most people off the streets.

‘What did your parents say about you coming out after dark?’ Archer could not believe they’d both made it.

‘As soon as I said it was special training for the Worthies, they were happy to let me go.’ Patricia raised her eyes to the heavens. ‘Mother was worried about me being out so late, but I told her it would only work in the dark.’

‘And she agreed?’

‘When I mentioned you would be there, she seemed happier, but then she said people were starting to notice how much time we are spending together.’

Hiding his embarrassment, Archer turned to Chrisya. ‘You’re quiet. What did your mother say?’

She shrugged, with a defiant toss of her hair. ‘She doesn’t know. What would be the point in worrying her? She’s at the meeting with father, so I said I’d have an early night. I put a cushion in my cot so if they get back before me they’ll think I’m asleep.’

Archer wasn’t happy about her deception. It was a bad omen, so he sent up a quick prayer to protect the girls. He wasn’t expecting trouble, but it didn’t hurt to ask.

The girls sat on a log with lanterns illuminating their slates. He instructed them to sketch the motion of the arrows in order to understand the path of their flight.

After explaining, Archer walked into the darkness where he’d marked a start line. Smiling at their gasps from the first of his special arrows, he loosed the next two in quick succession while the imprint of the first was still glowing in their eyes. He was proud of his invention and as he walked over to see what they had learned, their reaction gave him great satisfaction.

‘That was wondrous. How did you do it?’ Chrisya examined a spare arrow, marvelling at the way it glowed in the dark.

‘Archer, you truly are a wizard. These make it so clear. I finally understand what you have been trying to explain.’ Patricia went on to describe how the angle affected the height of the arrow and the distance it travelled.

‘Exactly. What have you learnt from that?’

‘That I should not aim straight at the bull, but slightly above it and the arrow will fall in the edge of a circle. Is it the arch?’

‘Good.’ The girls were concentrating on their slates and did not notice the slight hesitation or his eyes narrowing while he listened to an alert from the portion of his brain on sentry duty. Gathering the remaining arrows, Archer continued smoothly, ‘Not quite the arc of a circle, but it is close enough.’

Not wanting to be left out, Chrisya said, ‘And the angle changes with how far away the target is.’ She thought for a moment. ‘Is that why you fire a practice arrow first?’

‘Yes. We call it “getting the eye in.”’ Archer’s eyes flicked over to the dark woods. He stowed the arrows in his linen shoulder bag so their glow would not be seen, trying to keep the concern from his tone. ‘When you are experienced you don’t need to do it so much, you can judge the angle and distance by instinct.’

‘So what you told us last time, about seeing the path with your mind – that was just for beginners?’

‘No, I ... Shhhh.’ There was no mistaking it this time. Something was wrong. He pinched out the wicks on the lanterns.

‘What ...?’ Patricia’s whispered question was halted by Archer’s fingers on her lips, but he withdrew them as though they had been burned. There was no time to indulge in thoughts about the softness of her lips; he had a task to do. Knowing that their eyes would still be adjusting to the darkness, he took each girl’s hand in turn and pulled her into a crouch.

He was confident that Patricia would cope well with the danger, and was pleased that Chrisya remembered enough of her training to be quiet and follow instructions. Before quenching the light, Archer had instinctively closed his eyes so they were not so affected by the rapid change and could recover more quickly. The meagre light from the waning moon showed the reason for Chrisya’s silence; her face was pale and taut, with dark shadows drowning her eyes. But the strongest evidence of her fear was the shallow, uneven breathing, punctuated by tiny gasps as her body

fought to keep her muscles supplied with oxygen, ready for the fight or flight action.

Placing a hand on her shoulder, he gave a gentle squeeze of reassurance as he stretched his other hand flat on the ground and deepened his breathing. On the third breath, his senses sharpened and he rapidly assessed the multitude of signals, discarding those which contained only harmless information. The movement of new-grown leaves in the breeze, the subtle scent of blossom, the erratic scrabbling of small animals and the beat of wings – none of these posed a threat. Underneath it all, he isolated an insidious, deliberate movement. Archer's natural defence mechanism, or sixth sense, was shouting its alert that someone was watching.

The girls recognised the signal as he positioned their arms in the direction of their escape route. As he squeezed their hands, they rose with him and began their silent retreat. Their trackers were good, but obviously did not want to risk losing their prey as they exploded from the undergrowth into a chase.

There was no further need for stealth. They had to run. Fast.

Patricia was swift, but Chrisya was less sure-footed, which slowed her down. In the training sessions, Archer had insisted on leaving everything that might hamper them, making sure their hands were empty. The girls understood the threat from the lawless Renegates who took great delight in tormenting anyone they captured. Archer was sure the tales of lone travellers being tortured in horrific ways were just rumours, spread to frighten the bolder juniors, but he was taking no chances, especially with two young girls in his care.

Chrisya stumbled. He caught her in time to stop a fall, but he could tell from the way she was panting that she didn't have much more running left in her. He knew the area – they could shelter in a nearby cave, if he could find it. Stopping to get his bearings, he heard the rustle of undergrowth as their pursuers followed the trail

and sent a prayer of thanks for the dry weather and darkness which would hinder their task.

Patricia realised that he was no longer behind her and stopped. She retraced her steps and bumped into him with a small squeak. 'What's wrong? Why did you stop?' Her whisper sounded loud.

He held onto her arms as she overbalanced and pulled her close to whisper, 'There's a small cave we can hide in until they've gone. We need to find a tree that was hit by lightning.' He steeled himself against the effects her warmth and delicate citrus scent were having on his senses.

'All black and twisted? I just passed it.' Patricia led him a few paces to the tree, then he guided them the short distance to the mouth of the cave. They would normally have been nervous about entering the dank, musty place, but their eyes were now accustomed to the low light levels. As they moved deeper into the cave, the darkness was like a solid thing, halting their progress. He pulled out one of the glowing arrows which pierced the blackness just enough for him to see. Shielding its glow with his body, he told Patricia to hold on to his tunic and she echoed the instruction to Chrisya. They reached the back, sitting on a low ledge to wait until the danger had passed.

As they made their way home after what seemed like a lifetime, Archer vowed that this time, he had truly learnt his lesson about being in the woods in the dark with a girl.