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Four Lights stand against the dark:
The Sword Excalibur that was
forged in Avalon,
The Lance of Truth made by the
hands of men,
The Crown of Dreams, which hides
the jewel of Annwn,
And the Grail said to hold all the
stars in heaven.



The Dark Knight Wakes



The day after he had killed King Arthur, Mordred opened his eyes to flickering candlelight and damp rock. There had been nightmares, screaming and much pain. Terrible pain such as his pampered body had never felt before. But the worst had passed. His crippled form stirred in the shadows and his remaining hand closed about cold metal. Not his axe – he'd lost that on the battlefield, along with his right hand – but a magic mirror his mother had given him before she left the world of men.

He breathed on the black glass, and her image swirled to life. Raven haired and beautiful, she looked at least twenty years younger than when she had died.

"Who commands the Grail?" he demanded.

His mother's face flickered. "The one called Pendragon."

"So it serves *me* now?" Mordred said, impatient. Even dead, his mother could be annoyingly vague.

"I'm not sure. It's unclear… I see a girl, a daughter…"

Mordred flung the mirror across the cave. "No!" he roared. "Arthur had no daughter! We would have known."

He'd won the battle. He'd killed Arthur Pendragon, high king of men and guardian of the Round Table. Even now, his spies were

looking for the Sword and the Lance. The Crown, snatched by a dragon from his uncle's corpse on the battlefield, was rightfully his. As soon as he got his hands – *hand*, curse it – on the Grail, he would be strong and handsome again, and the world would worship at his feet. But now this! Another with a claim to the throne.

Clenching his teeth against the pain, he rolled off the rocky shelf that served as his bed. He could not walk because his stupid horse had fallen on him and crushed one of his legs. He crawled across the floor, the bandaged stump of his arm leaving a trail of blood. The mirror had cracked, making a jagged line across his mother's face to match the scar Arthur's sword had left across his own.

"Where?" he hissed. "Where is she? She must die!"

The witch's face blurred, becoming old and then young again.

"Beyond our reach in Avalon. But not for much longer, I think."

"What do you mean? Speak plainly, woman!"

His mother smiled. "I mean, Mordred my beautiful son, that you need to be patient for once. Heal. Grow strong again. Be crafty like the dragon that waits in its lair. Let the girl come to you. They took the king's body through the enchanted mists. If she has a drop of Arthur's blood in her body, she will come. And then you can kill her – or enslave her, as you wish. She's only a damsel, after all. She's grown up in a crystal palace where there

is no disease or death, protected by magic. The world of men will be a shock to her. She's hardly going to lead the knights in battle, is she? How much of a threat can she be?"



1

Pendragon

A maiden lives in Avalon's hall
Her spirit the purest of them all.
Brave of heart and hair aflame,
Mortal damsel with secret name.

Rhianna crouched over her horse's neck to duck another low branch. Twigs snatched at her braid, pulling out a few copper strands and making her eyes water. All around her in the golden wood she could see pale blurs as her rivals misted to avoid the trees. Being one

of the Avalonian herd, whose coats shone like the moon, Alba could do that too, of course. But if Rhianna let the mare mist like the other horses, she would fall off and everyone would laugh at her.

She urged Alba alongside Prince Elphin's little Evenstar. "What's the matter?" she called as they galloped side by side. "Afraid you'll hit a tree?"

Her friend shouted something back that she didn't catch. She saw the air sparkle as he flicked a branch out of the way, and grinned as he dropped behind.

I can go faster, Alba said, excited by galloping with the herd.

"Go on, then!" Rhianna told the mare.

She overtook two of the Avalonian girls, scared herself by slipping sideways as Alba

swerved around another tree, and grabbed the mane to pull herself back on board. Her blood pounded with excitement as she saw the glint of water through the leaves. She'd win today, if she kept her nerve. The mist magic took time to work, and the others would not dare gallop so fast through the wood without it. The worst she'd have to worry about would be a few apples thrown at her as she passed the leaders.

She risked raising her head. The beach led to an ancient jetty that disappeared into the mist, where they'd agreed to finish the race. That was the furthest they could go without crossing the enchanted sea that kept the Isle of Avalon hidden from the world of men.

The thrill of their wild gallop faded slightly. More than anything else, Rhianna wanted to visit the world of men and look for her real

parents. But nobody would tell her who they were, or even if they were still alive, and her pleas for someone to take her through the mists fell on deaf ears. One day she might swim across the water on her own. That would show everyone—

Path blocked! Alba whinnied as a sharp twig poked her in the chest.

Rhianna hauled desperately on the reins as she saw the fallen tree, too high to jump. She flattened herself alongside Alba's neck and felt the little horse begin to mist under her. Then a branch smacked her between the eyes, and the world went dark.



A shadow stirred in the darkness. Someone was whispering. It sounded like a question:

"Who commands the Grail?" She had a terrifying glimpse of bloodstained rock.

Then she heard singing, and the light returned.

"Rhia? Rhianna?" Elphin sounded scared. "Wake up now, please!"

She opened her eyes and blinked up at the violet sky through a curtain of falling leaves. Bright autumn sunlight dappled her legs. Apples lay all around. Alba's soft muzzle nibbled her ear. *Sorry*, breathed the mare. A sweet scent surrounded her – the smell of magic. It must have been Elphin she'd heard singing in her dream.

She sat up with a groan and touched her forehead. Her fingers came away sticky with blood, and her head throbbed. She managed a grin for her friend. As the only human of her

age in Avalon, Rhianna had put up with a lot of teasing over the years. The other children made fun of her hands, with only four fingers and a thumb on each, of her red hair, of the freckles on her nose, of her loud voice that murdered the ancient songs, and – most of all – of her failure to master even a glimmer of magic despite being surrounded by it every day of her life. But Elphin never teased her like the others did. Maybe because he didn't have any brothers or sisters of his own, Lord Avallach's son had always looked after her as if she were his real sister.

"Suppose I didn't win today, then?" Her voice came out croaky.

Relief flashed in her friend's eyes, which had turned purple with concern. He ran a hand through his dark curls, and his extra fingers twitched as if they longed for his harp. "I think

the mists opened," he said. "There was a strange shadow. Then you fell off."

Rhianna shook her head – a mistake. Leaves and sky spun around her, making her feel a bit sick.

"I was knocked off," she insisted. "That's different. I haven't fallen off for ages, not since I learned how to talk to Alba." She looked at the beach, where the other mist horses were pawing at the sand while their riders crowded around the jetty, pointing at something out on the water. "Why didn't you carry on? You might have beaten me, for once."

"And leave you lying here? Don't be silly. The race isn't that important."

She grinned again. "That's why you never win."

Elphin sighed. "You're crazy, Rhia. Galloping

so fast through the woods without even any magic to clear the branches out of your way! Why do you do it? What if Alba had misted around a tree, and you'd broken your neck?"

"Then your people would just sing it better again, wouldn't they?" Rhianna said.

But she felt bad when she looked at her mare. Alba's beautiful silver head hung low. Her flanks heaved, dark with sweat. Elphin was right. She must try to think a bit more of others. What if he had been the one to get knocked off his horse while looking out for her? There would be no chance of his father letting her visit the world of men then.

"A broken neck needs more than a simple healing song," Elphin said, serious. "You'd have to sleep for many years in the crystal caverns until we got your soul back into your body,

and when you woke up I'd be an old man."

Rhianna pulled a face. "It might be worth it! At least I'd get to see your mysterious caverns, then." Despite many attempts, she'd never managed to get past the magic that protected the deeper levels of Lord Avallach's palace.

Elphin frowned. "That's not funny. Anyway, there's a boat at the jetty. It's just as well you fell off, or you and Alba would probably have galloped straight off the end and sunk it. We'd best go back to the palace and tell Father we've got visitors. Then I can get my harp and play away your headache. Can you ride, do you think?"

"Of course I can ride. Takes more than a little tap like that to bother me. And I haven't got a headache." The last part was a lie, though, because she did have. A horrid, pounding,

human one. She leaned against Alba's neck, stroking the pale mane, still a bit dizzy. There had been something about a grail, whatever that was...

Maybe you had better lead me? said the mare.

"Don't be silly. Humans are tougher than you think."

She ignored Elphin's offered hand and looked around for a log to stand on. As she climbed on it, she saw what the others on the beach were all looking at. A small boat had come out of the mist. When it reached the shallows, a man in a hooded grey robe jumped into the water. Her skin prickled. Not an Avalonian – Elphin's people hated getting their feet wet. The man was tall, even for a human, and looked familiar.

"It's Merlin!" Grinning, she jumped off the

log and led Alba towards the beach. "You go back for your harp, if you want," she called. "Something important must have happened in the world of men."

Elphin made a face. But he pulled his reins over his horse's ears and followed.

The Avalonians crowded curiously around the boat, while the old druid stowed his oars and rubbed his back. Rhianna braced herself for the others' taunts. But when she led Alba out of the trees, everyone fell silent and stepped back to let her and Elphin pass.

Merlin lowered his hood to reveal a straggly white beard braided with falcon feathers. He turned a pale blue gaze on them. "Might have known it wouldn't take you two very long to show up," he muttered.

"*Faha'ruh*, Merlin." Elphin said, raising

his hand to his forehead in the formal Avalonian greeting.

Merlin frowned. "Growing up as well, I see. Let's save the ceremonial stuff for later, shall we? There's no time to waste if my journey's not going to be in vain."

Rhianna watched the old druid warily. He often visited to check up on her, appearing unannounced out of the mists and then disappearing again just as suddenly with no explanation. Usually, he looked at her as if she were an annoying bit of dirt he'd picked up on his sandal. Today his pale eyes had pity in them. A bit embarrassed, she touched the bump on her forehead. Was it still bleeding? But Merlin was not looking at her head. He was looking into the boat, like everyone else.

Elphin let out a little hum of sadness.

Rhianna looked into the boat, too, and saw a man lying in the bottom. He had been partly covered by a battered shield with a red dragon painted on it, but she could see terrible wounds beneath. His head rested on a folded cloak, stiff with dried blood. His hair fanned out, faded chestnut streaked with grey. His hands were folded on his breast above the shield, and his boots still had mud on them. Yellow mud, a different colour from Avalon's rich dark earth.

All this she saw, before Merlin dug his gnarled fingers into her shoulder and said, "Young Mordred finally killed him! So now you're our only hope. A slip of a girl. God help us all!"

The others looked sideways at her. A few of the Avalonian girls giggled nervously. Whatever else Rhianna might be, she was no 'slip'.

Rhianna had been feeling a bit envious of the dead man in the boat, and wondered who he might be. A hero of some sort, obviously. Only great heroes were allowed through the enchanted mists to Avalon when they died. One day, when he was ready to be reborn, he would join the Wild Hunt that rode into the world of men to collect stray souls – while she would still be stuck here.

Suddenly, she was fed up with everyone laughing at her. Fed up with all of them thinking she would never be any good because she was a human with a terrible voice, the wrong number of fingers and no magic.

"I'm not a slip!" she said, drawing herself up to her full height and shrugging off the druid's hand. "I'm taller than everyone else on this beach – except you and whoever that is lying in

your boat. "I'm strong enough to swim all the way round the island, fit enough to dance all night, and I can ride faster than anybody in Avalon. Ask Elphin! I usually win our races."

I am very fast, Alba added.

Merlin glanced at her friend, who flushed and mumbled something about her not winning today. The druid looked closely at Rhianna, noticing the blood on her forehead for the first time. He frowned and spread a hand in front of her eyes. "How many fingers?"

She wasn't going to fall for that trick. "Four!" she said. Merlin might work magic like an Avalonian, but he had human hands. Inherited them from his human mother, apparently… a girl like her, but now long dead, who had grown up in Avalon never knowing her real family. She wouldn't let that happen to her.

Merlin grunted. "So we know you can ride faster than anybody else into trees. But can you fight like King Arthur here fought, brave and true to the last, even after his best friend and his own family betrayed him? Can you lead an army of knights against Prince Mordred and his barbarian allies, and hold Camelot against the dark forces of Annwn? Because unless you can do all that, Rhianna Pendragon, the world of men is doomed and the isle of Avalon will soon be lost in the mists for ever."

For the second time that day, Rhianna felt as though she had been knocked flat by a branch. She stared at the dead man in the boat. *Arthur, the greatest king men had ever known.* The Avalonians sang about him all the time. Elphin gave her a concerned look. "Oh Rhia, I'm sorry…"

She felt dizzy again and clutched Alba's mane. "What did you just call me?" she whispered.

"Pendragon! I hope you've not grown deaf as well as foolhardy in my absence." Merlin sighed and lifted the shield out of the boat. He rubbed off a smear of blood, dropped stiffly to one knee and offered the shield to Rhianna. "You, my girl, are the only surviving child of Queen Guinevere and Arthur Pendragon, which makes you heir to the throne of men and guardian of the Round Table. Go on, take the shield. It's yours now, for better or for worse."

While the others gaped at her in astonishment, the druid's lip twitched. "I'm sure there's something you can think of to do with it. Maybe you can use it to stop the tree hitting you next time?"