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Opening extract from

Grail of Stars

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Dark Tor



As the boat neared the island gateway to Avalon, Mordred's right hand tingled – the only part of him that could feel pain these days. He pulled a black gauntlet over the rotting fingers and signalled Uther Pendragon's ghostly army to surround the shore.

"Faster!" he growled to his bloodbeards. "We don't want anyone getting away."

The men glanced uneasily at the ghosts in the mist and bent over their oars. The boat crunched on the shingle near a small village. Dark wings blotted out the stars above the

Lonely Tor. Mordred grinned as screams came out of the night. The shadrake had done its work well.

Mordred seized his axe and jumped ashore. He watched the monks run out of their church and down the hill towards the village, tripping over their robes in their panic. His lip curled – unarmed followers of the Christ God, who thought they were safe on their little island under Camelot's protection.

He nodded to his men, and the bloodbeards threw flaming torches into the huts. There were more screams as the monks' families ran out towards the water, then ran back again when they saw Uther's dead warriors riding out of the mist.

Trapped between the ghosts and the flames, the people huddled together on the

beach, clutching their children and sobbing as their homes burned. Mordred ordered his bloodbeards to drag their leader to him. They flung the old man to his knees in the sand. The monk crossed himself.

Mordred laughed. "Do you know who I am?"

"N-no, sir," the monk stammered.

Mordred gave him a frustrated look. He must have made himself too handsome when he grew his new body from his decaying mortal fist. Then a lanky, dark-haired boy yelled from the crowd, "I know you… you're Prince Mordred!"

The lad looked vaguely familiar, but Mordred couldn't think where he'd seen him before until a woman said, "Hush, Gareth. I thought you told us Mordred was dead?"

Mordred chuckled as he remembered the squire who had tried to kill him at the gates of Camelot last year. The boy did not have his bow and arrows today.

"Prince Mordred!" The monk looked at him more closely. "We heard they burned your body at Camelot… Are you a ghost?" He glanced uncertainly at Uther's horsemen out in the mist.

"Is this the hand of a ghost?" Mordred clutched the old man's throat with his black gauntlet and squeezed until rotten flesh leaked out of the glove. He laughed again. "I'm the rightful heir to the throne, and I don't intend to die before I sit on it. Now tell me, wise one. How do we get from here to Avalon?"

"I d-don't know," the monk whispered.

"This is a holy place now. Lord Avallach's Wild Hunt does not ride this way any more."

Mordred sighed. "I can see we'll have to do this the hard way." He motioned with his axe, and his bloodbeards grabbed Gareth from the cowering huddle of villagers. The squire reached for his dagger, but Mordred knocked it out of his hand. "Drown the Camelot brat," he ordered.

The bloodbeards dragged the struggling boy to the water and pushed his head under. Bubbles came up as Gareth thrashed and kicked. Then his body went limp and floated face down. His mother screamed and splashed in to rescue it, sobbing, "My son… you've killed my son!"

"If I have to, I'll drown every living soul on this island. Starting with the youngest,"

Mordred said. "That means you'll be the last to die, old man. Tell me the way to Avalon now, and you'll save your people a lot of grief."

Tears sprang to the old monk's eyes. "I'm begging you, sir prince! Leave us in peace. We have nothing of value here. We're simple folk. If you want to know how to get to the fairy isle, you should ask a druid. Merlin used to come this way… he rowed his boat into the mist and vanished… that's all I know, I swear it in the name of our Lord!"

The old man was choking. Mordred let him go.

He flexed his stiff fingers thoughtfully. In this place, Uther's warriors were only faintly visible where the starlight touched them. They couldn't come to Avalon with him, because their souls belonged in Annwn now.

But they could catch anyone coming through these mists from the mainland.

He smiled. "I just might do that. My cousin Rhianna will be heading this way soon with her friends. I'm going to need somewhere to stay until she gets here."

He looked up at the Tor. The shadrake perched on the roof of the church, lashing its tail. Purple lightning crackled around the tower, reminding him of when his mother, Morgan Le Fay, had ambushed Merlin as the druid brought his cousin through the mists from Avalon.

He pointed to the church. "That'll do nicely."

The monk frowned. "But sir, that's our holy place! Queen Guinevere built it for us because the Grail was once hidden in a cave up there."

"Then it's perfect," Mordred said. "I'm sure

my aunt won't mind. My hand pains me. I'll need one of your herbal cures, and I'll need someone to serve me." His eye fell on Gareth's weeping mother. "You, woman, stop snivelling! Your boy was a squire of Camelot, which is why I had to get rid of him. I don't want news of my resurrection leaking back to Arthur's knights before I'm ready. My men will take his body back to the mainland and make it look like an accident, so he'll get a burial, if that's what you're worried about. Now, get up there and make the place ready for me."

The woman raised her tear-stained face and hissed, "Ready for you? I'll kill you first!" She snatched the bloodbeard captain's spear from the rock where he'd propped it while he drowned her son, and launched it with

unexpected accuracy at Mordred.

Mordred spread his arms wide and laughed as the spear entered the place where his heart should be. The shaft tickled as it passed through his shadow-body. He spun round to see it land, shivering, in the sand behind him.

Everyone stared at him in fear. The monk crossed himself again. The bloodbeards grinned. Gareth's mother fell to her knees, trembling.

Mordred retrieved the spear and raised his voice. "You'll find it harder to kill me than you think. King Arthur didn't manage it at Camlann, his daughter Rhianna didn't manage it when she rode out of Avalon, and his knights didn't manage it with their fire." His tone hardened and he poked the terrified

woman in the stomach. "But if any of you try something stupid like that again, I'll drown another child for every attempt on my life. And if anyone is thinking of leaving this island without my permission, Uther's army of ghosts out there will take your souls straight to Annwn. Understand?"

The islanders nodded. Only the crackle of flames broke the silence.

Mordred smiled. "Good. Then there's no need for further demonstrations. You'd better get to work if you want to save those huts. I'm sure your God won't mind if you use one of them to pray in while I'm staying in your church. Carry on as normal. And when Princess Rhianna arrives, send her up to me. Then we'll head on over to Avalon and leave you in peace. Her fairy friend will know

how to get home, if the druid won't tell me the way."



1

Secrets

Enchantments cloaked the Lonely Tor
When a squire drowned on mist-bound shore,
While a damsel searched to no avail
For secrets of the missing Grail.

The stables at Camelot were quiet after lunch, with the horses settled for the afternoon. Rhianna slipped into her mist horse's stall and patted the white mare she had ridden from Avalon two years ago. "Keep watch, Alba," she whispered. "I'm going

to wear my crown for a bit."

The little horse snorted, pleased to see her mistress but disappointed Rhianna had brought the Pendragon crown instead of an apple. *I cannot eat jewels*, she complained.

Rhianna smiled. "I know you can't, my darling. But these are magic jewels. They'll show me where to find the Grail of Stars, and then I can take you home." Taking a deep breath, she jammed the Crown over her unruly copper hair.

"Help me, Father," she whispered. "Where should I look?"

She felt a warm spot at the back of her head, where the jewel containing King Arthur's secrets had been restored to the third Light after they'd got it back from her evil cousin Mordred last year. She closed her eyes, hoping

the magic would show her something useful this time. A thick green mist surrounded her. She glimpsed shapes moving inside it and spent a frustrating time trying to follow them. Then the Crown became hot, and her spirit left her body.

She was flying over water. She heard the creak of wood as a ghostly ship appeared from the mist below. It had white sails and shone like a star. A tall, slender knight with golden hair knelt over a boy's shivering body in the stern, holding something in his hands that lit up the deck.

"Wait!" she called. "Is that the Grail…?"

But already the ship was sailing away into the mist. She tried to follow it, but the green

clouds thickened again. Flying blind, she lost all sense of time.

Then a lone hill loomed ahead with purple lightning flashing around a building with a black tower. Screams came from below, and suddenly she was falling. Her spirit spun helplessly down towards the ghostly green sea. She could not see, could not breathe. Icy water closed over her head, and she heard her cousin Mordred laughing.



"Rhia! Wake up now, Rhianna Pendragon!"

The tinkle of an Avalonian harp banished the vision. She gasped for air and struck out at the hands trying to hold her down.

"Ow!" someone muttered. "I think she's still dreaming."

"No, she's back with us." That was her friend Prince Elphin's voice, quiet but tense. "Get the Crown off her. Careful."

Something caught in her hair, and Rhianna grabbed for it. Her hand closed about an unexpectedly hot jewel. She sucked in her breath and let go.

"That's right," Elphin continued. "You take it, Arianrhod. Wrap it up in something."

Rhianna felt water drip on her leg and remembered her vision. "Mordred…!" she gasped.

The harp rippled again, and Elphin's voice filled with magic. "This is Camelot, Rhia," he sang. "You're safe now. Prince Mordred's dead, remember? He can't hurt you unless you invite his ghost in here."

A shudder went through her. *Ghosts, that's*

all I saw. Warmth returned to her body, and the icy water became a puddle of wet straw. She brushed it off with a grimace and opened her eyes.

She was lying in a corner of Alba's stall. It was dark outside. A single torch burned in the passage.

Three anxious faces peered down at her. Plump, fair-haired Cai, who was a knight now but still slept in the squires' dormitory; her maid Arianrhod, whose dark hair covered the pentacle scar Morgan Le Fay had cut into her cheek; and Prince Elphin, with his violet eyes and extra Avalonian fingers. Her mist horse's nose pushed between them.

You were making a lot of noise, Alba scolded. *And you spilled my water! I told Evenstar to bring his rider.*

It was such a relief to be safe with her friends that Rhianna laughed. She sat up and threw handfuls of wet straw at them. "Back off," she said. "I can hardly breathe with you three staring at me like that."

Cai grinned. "She's all right!" he said, sounding relieved too. "Why are you sleeping in the stables, Damsel Rhia? Aren't your rooms in the Damsel Tower good enough for the daughter of King Arthur?"

She pulled a face. "I wanted to be alone, and this is about the only place I can get any peace these days – until my horse decided to tell everyone where I am, that is." She met Elphin's whirling purple gaze. "You didn't have to wake the others. If Cai's here, the whole of Camelot will know where to find me by morning. Mordred's ghost, too, no doubt."

Her friend lowered his harp and frowned. "That's not funny, Rhia! It took me ages to call your spirit back this time. And it is morning, nearly. What were you doing wearing the Crown of Dreams in the stables anyway?"

"Using it to look for the Grail of Stars, of course," Rhianna said. "I saw a ship in the mist with a knight and a boy on board. The knight was holding something bright, but I couldn't see what. When I tried to follow the ship I saw an island in the mist, and then I heard Mordred laughing…" She frowned and rubbed her head in memory. "Is the Crown all right? Let me see." She lurched to her feet, but only managed two steps across the stall before her knees buckled. She sat down again in the puddle, dizzy

Elphin shook his head and knelt at her side. "Take it slowly, Rhia," he said. He glanced up

at Cai. "See if you can find her something to eat. She's missed supper, if Arianrhod's right."

"I thought she was having supper with her mother," Arianrhod said. The maid hung back in the shadows, keeping the third Light wrapped in her cloak.

"The queen always eats with Sir Lancelot in the evenings, you know that," Rhianna said with a scowl. "And stop treating me as if I'm sick! I'm just a bit dizzy from using the magic, that's all. I'll be fine in a moment."

Elphin's harp tinkled again, soothing her bad temper. But she caught his wrist to silence the strings. "Enough, Prince Elphin!" she said, trying to force lightness into her voice. "I don't want to fall asleep again. I've already spent most of a day and night wearing the Crown of Dreams."

She lifted his hand and examined his slender fingers for blisters. She knew what it must have cost him to play his harp in the presence of the third Light. At least there was no blood this time. She let go of his hand and smiled. "Thank you."

Elphin pressed his lips together as he bagged his harp. "You should be more careful. Don't forget that crown killed Lady Morgan and Mordred."

"It won't kill me. I'm heir to the Pendragon throne."

"What did the knight on the ship look like, Damsel Rhianna?" Cai asked, returning with a bucket of bruised apples they kept in the stables for the horses. "He might be one of the knights who died on a Grail Quest."

Rhianna tried to remember. "Young,

I think… I couldn't see his face, but he was tall and slim… and he had golden hair."

"Could be Sir Percival or Sir Galahad," Cai said doubtfully. "The boy you saw on the ship was probably his squire – none of them came back. Did you see Mordred's ghost too?"

"No," Rhianna said with a frown. "I just heard him laughing… but that was probably one of my own memories from last year. I think the shadrake was part of the vision too. That crown's as bad as Merlin – it never shows me anything useful!" She shook her head in frustration. A whole winter of wearing the third Light, with its secrets of the Pendragons stretching back to the ancient Dragonlords, and the only thing she'd seen clearly was a ghostly knight on a ship!

Elphin smiled. "Father once told me it

doesn't matter how much someone knows. You have to know what questions to ask."

"I know what questions to ask it!" Rhianna said, scowling at him. "I want to know where the Grail of Stars is so I can take the four Lights back to Avalon to wake my father, but all I've seen so far is water and mist!"

"Maybe the Grail's in the lake where you found Excalibur?" Cai suggested, munching one of the apples he'd found. "That's usually misty."

"Or across the sea?" Arianrhod ventured. "Where the Romans live? That might be why you saw a ship?"

"They don't have mist in Rome, silly," Cai said. "Too hot. If it's across the sea, it's more likely to be in Dragonland, like the Crown was."

"I hope we don't have to go back there," Arianrhod whispered, hugging the cloak-wrapped crown. "That's the gateway to Annwn!"

"You weren't even with us in Dragonland," Cai pointed out. "You were safe here at Camelot with Gareth. I was the one who had to fight dragons and rescue Damsel Rhianna from the shadrake's lair! Good thing I was carrying the Lance of Truth, that's all I can say."

"And who rescued you *and* the Lance from the shadrake?" Rhianna reminded the boy with a smile.

The very thought of Dragonland, where Mordred had tried to bury her in the shadrake's lair, made Rhianna break into a cold sweat. But if the Grail did turn out to be in Dragonland, she'd have to swallow her fears and go back. At least her cousin wouldn't be there this time,

and the roads were safe now. Gareth, the older squire who had helped them defeat Mordred last year, had even been allowed to ride out by himself to visit his family on the Lonely Tor.

But Cai's words made her think. Nimue's lake…? Could the Grail be so close to Camelot? What if someone had thrown the fourth Light into the lake as an offering to the fish-lady Nimue, as the knights had done with Excalibur after King Arthur died? That might be why nobody could find it.

Shouts from outside interrupted them, followed by an urgent pounding at the gates. The horses pricked their ears and whinnied, hoping for breakfast.

Rhianna got to her feet, more carefully this time, and fed Alba her apple core. "Something's going on out there," she said, taking the crown

from Arianrhod. "We'd better get back into the castle."

By the time they reached the courtyard, the big gates of Camelot had opened. A troop of shaggy Saxon ponies trotted through, led by a big man with yellow braids. One of the ponies had a dripping bundle tied across its back. A sentry ran into the castle, shouting for the knights. Sir Lancelot hurried out, strapping on his sword.

Rhianna's heart beat faster at the sight of the Saxons. "It's Chief Cynric!" she said, thrusting the crown back into Arianrhod's hands. "Take this up to my room and get breakfast ready. I'm going to find out what's happened."

Arianrhod shook her head. "I don't think

that's a very good idea, Lady Rhia, not with your dress all dirty like that. What if your mother sees you?"

Rhianna looked down at her skirt, which had picked up a big green stain from the stables. It smelled of horse. "Don't fuss, Arianrhod," she said. "The queen's still in bed, and the knights are used to seeing me looking scruffy."

She led her friends across the courtyard. A ring of curious squires had gathered around the ponies. The dripping bundle appeared to be a body, hanging facedown. Sir Lancelot examined it, while a bleary-eyed Sir Bedivere and Sir Bors emerged to join him and spread their arms to keep the boys away. "Stay back!" Sir Bors ordered gruffly. "Get on with your work. There's horses waiting to be fed and mucked out."

The squires reluctantly went off to the stables, casting glances over their shoulders. They seemed subdued.

"It's Gareth!" Cai said, his eyes going wide as Sir Lancelot lifted the dead boy's head. "Looks like they fished him out of the river."

Sir Lancelot let the boy's head drop. "Drowned," he muttered.

A shiver crept down Rhianna's spine as she remembered the boy she'd seen on the ghostly ship in her vision. Elphin's eyes deepened to purple, and he gave her a worried look. His hand tightened on his harp.

"Been attacked, more like, goin' by them bruises on his arms," Sir Bors growled.

Sir Lancelot was now questioning the Saxons, who shook their heads. He frowned and glanced up at the queen's window. Then

he spotted Rhianna and her friends watching and muttered something to Sir Bedivere, who came over to join them.

"The Saxons found his body under the bridge," the knight explained gently. "Must have been on his way back to Camelot when robbers jumped him then dumped his body in the river, poor lad – his dagger's gone, and there's no sign of his pony."

They stared at each other. Cai bit his lip. Arianrhod glanced nervously at the open gates.

"Bloodbeards?" Rhianna demanded.

Sir Bedivere sighed. "We don't know yet, but we'll find out. Lancelot's called a meeting of the Round Table. Damsel Rhianna, will you run up and tell your mother? And remember, young knight…" He fixed Cai with a stern look. "This is Round Table business now, so don't go

spreading it about that we think Gareth was attacked on the road. We had quite enough of that kind of thing when Prince Mordred was alive."