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Opening extract from
Young Knights of the Round Table

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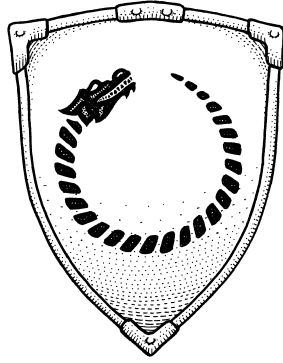
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Chapter I

Humans are the enemy.

Tightening the straps on his leather arm-guards, Rick glanced up at the motto of Dark Lore House. The words filled him with determination to overcome his human blood and be the best warrior the Fey could train.

‘All right, changelings, the sergeant is late,’ Rick called to the others. ‘Let’s do the usual patterns. One-on-one with staves. Target practice for archers. Blade drill for swords. No magic.’

His classmates groaned, but most settled into their routines as they had been taught.

Rick was proud to call himself a changeling, the name the Fey gave to abandoned children rescued

over the centuries from Earth. Taken to Avalon, as the Fey parallel world was known, they were being created into an elite band of warriors. They would eventually be sent back to Earth and get their revenge on mankind. The Fey expected them to be single-minded about their task, which explained why he and his classmates were going through their weapons drill in the indoor combat arena even though their instructor, Sergeant Rotgut, a beefy ogre with a voice like a rusty saw, was late.

Beyond late.

An hour over at least—and that was unheard of in the strict regime of Dark Lore. All the staff had been called at dawn to an emergency meeting in Commander Morgan La Faye's office. Something serious must be going on but as usual the students were the last to know.

As the oldest student, Rick was in charge but he had no illusions that he was in control. While he might feel like a big brother to the younger children, only a few of them showed any signs of appreciating his attempts to care for them.

'Edgar, go easy with that staff: it's only practice.' The stocky medieval peasant lad tapped his forehead, gesturing he understood. Ahmed, the little Arabian boy who was his partner, heaved a sigh of relief. At least those two listened to him. That left just another ninety-seven who did not.

Rick took his sword to practise strikes on the straw dummy of a human knight at the far end of the spacious wooden 'O'. Between fight patterns, he looked up at the Round Table that hung on the wall opposite the motto. Its great circular top was made of the finest oak and covered with intricate carving, each name embellished with the coat of arms of the knight's house. Unlike its glory days in Camelot, it was now marred by a split down the middle where its power had been broken. The Table was the chief trophy won by the Fey in their war against King Arthur and his warriors when the humans had attacked Avalon. The Fey had hung it there as a reminder to the changelings that, one day soon, they too should defeat their human enemies.

Below the Table were the 'most wanted' portraits of the men who used to sit around it. They stretched in a long line: Sir Galahad, Sir Gawain, Sir Lancelot—their names were legend but the people long since eliminated, a point emphasized by the great red cross Commander Morgan had scrawled over their pictures. Of the human criminals, only two remained alive: Arthur, in exile on an island here in Avalon; and Merlin, who was still on the run somewhere in the human world.

Settling into the rhythm of his sword drill, Rick chewed over what emergency could detain Sergeant Rotgut. In all Rick's thirteen years in Dark Lore, he

had not known it happen before. It could be a test. The teacher could be observing, expecting someone to break ranks. Stepping out of line meant punishment—and, as the most severe penalty was being fed to dragons in the annual Fey Games, none of them wanted to risk it. Instead, they all stuck to their routines, watching the silver dandelion clock lose its seeds until it reached the bare point that marked the end of the session.

All except one. Santiago Dulac, known as Tiago, had got bored with archery and begun juggling arrows to amuse his little black and white dog. On the short side, Tiago was one of those with mixed parentage—half human, half Dark Folk, as the various species in Avalon were known collectively. With the caramel-toned skin, and long black hair of his Aztec mother, his magical inheritance was declared most clearly by his silvery eyes, a colour only seen among the Mage Fey. The Mage were a rebellious, persecuted race, sharing a common ancestry with the dominant Fey, but they had long ago branched off to evolve a different temperament and slighter stature. With this unusual background, it was hardly surprising that Tiago was a loner, his world being just him and his dog.

The spirit of rebellion was spreading through the room. Other changelings were giving up, deciding Rotgut really wasn't going to show.

‘Hey, Tabitha, did you hear?’ called Roxy Topley, a girl with a mass of reddish-gold hair. Roxy came originally from Old Ireland, and was a year or two younger than Rick. It was no surprise to Rick that she was one of the first to chance stopping for a chat.

‘Hear what?’ Tabitha was a plainly dressed, serious child from seventeenth century America and the last person who would break rules, unless she happened to be standing next to the rebel Roxy.

Rick cleared his throat. ‘Roxy: there’re still fifteen minutes to go.’

Roxy rolled her eyes at Tabitha. ‘Ignore Mr Play-it-by-the-rules over there. There’s a new batch of changelings in the nursery—special delivery by the king’s messengers.’

Tabitha shook her head sadly. ‘I thought King Oberon had stopped rescuing the children thrown away by the humans. Doesn’t he think there are too many of us already?’

Dark Lore was home to more than a hundred rejected human children rescued over time—one year in Avalon was a century on Earth. Rick had been the first; now he had to share his room with three other boys. It was getting very crowded.

Roxy shrugged. ‘Apparently not. Seems like people on Earth are being as evil as ever—abandoning

their kids like they did us. I just don't get it: what did we ever do to them?'

Roxy's complaint stirred up unhappy memories for all of the changelings. Rick touched his neck, waking his golden snake, Aethel, from her spell of immobility. She wound her gleaming serpentine body down his arm and curved round to blink emerald eyes at him.

Rick returned the look.

With a flick of those stone-bright eyes at their surroundings, the snake realized he had woken her in time for weapons practice, her least favourite activity. She began to slip off Rick's wrist, weaving in the air in search of another perch.

'Watch it! Keep your familiar under control, Rick.' Roxy pulled Tabitha further away from him.

'Get a grip, Roxy. Aethel's not going to attack.'

Roxy followed the serpent suspiciously with her eyes. 'Tabitha's scared of snakes.'

Tabitha nudged Roxy. 'Rox, I'm not scared.'

Which meant Roxy was. Aethel swayed in the air, still undecided if she wanted to risk a bout of sweaty sword fighting. She paused, flickered her tongue at Roxy, then finally returned to coil around Rick's throat. Rick grinned, pleased by her choice—Aethel was the only family he had, even if she was a cowardly magical serpent.

He stroked her neck. 'Leave my snake out of it,

Roxy. At least I don't go round plagued by a flock of robins.'

Roxy folded her arms. Many inches shorter than him, it must bug her that she had to look up to glare. 'They are not a plague.'

'Says the girl who is never without their twigs in her hair.'

She gave a sniff and turned her back on him. Changelings were very sensitive about any criticism of the familiars, or special creatures, who adopted them.

Ten minutes to go before the next lesson: Feysyks with the pixie scientist, Doctor Purl-E. Any delay was welcome as Rick hated the subject. Action was more his thing. He flexed his palm around the hilt of his sword, going through battle readiness drill. High ground, low ground, blind spots. Yes, he had them all covered. Other than Aethel, the sword had been the one possession the Fey had brought with him when they rescued him from the late eighth century. Perhaps they knew even then that they were going to train him as a swordsman. Aethel, in necklace form, had been in his cradle and been carried away in the blanket that wrapped him. He was luckier than most changelings. They usually arrived in Avalon with nothing but the clothes they were in at the time they were sold or abandoned.

Just when he thought he had things back under control, the session went pear-shaped.

‘Stuff this. *Adios, amigos*, I’m outta here.’ Tiago waved cheerfully to the changelings going through their drill, unworried that he was cutting class early. Bob trotted behind, little tail held aloft like a flag semaphoring his good nature.

Rick was about to call Tiago back, but the words died on his tongue. The mushrooms that decorated the leaf carpet on the floor of the arena abruptly began blooming and shrivelling with unnatural speed—popping up and down like colourful umbrellas on a showery day.

‘Whoa!’ He jumped aside as a huge toadstool erupted by his left foot with a puff of purple spores. ‘Hey, Ed, look at that!’

Abandoning his staff practice, Edgar scrambled on to a bench. ‘Troll farts, Rick, that’s not right.’

‘That’s what I thought.’ Rick studied the arena in closer detail. Morgan rearranged Dark Lore periodically like someone shuffling a deck and building a new house of cards, fitting the magical illusion to her whim. This month she had made the arena into a forest clearing, walls of tightly packed trunks, ivy hangings and earthen floor. It seemed to be shivering. The changelings had always been moved out when the illusion changed—far too dangerous to be inside. Should they evacuate?

That was the moment the dragon roar fire alarm went off.

The floor tipped, separating Rick from Edgar as they tumbled down opposite sides of the divide. Rick rolled over and over, unable to stop. This was no ordinary change: the arena was collapsing. A major magic malfunction was underway.

Rick grabbed on to a trunk but it went soft in his hands and melted like chocolate on a hot plate. He could hear screams and shouts for help but now a great wall of what had been floor cut him off from the others. Bursts of magic rocketed through the arena, blasts of white light. Sliding out of an open door, he ended up in a passageway. Scrambling to his feet, he tried to run along it but it kept wriggling and writhing. He found he was at one point jogging along the ceiling until it reverted and he came crashing down to what was once more the floor. Pulling himself up, he staggered around a corner, straight into Roxy, Tiago, and Bob. He got a mouthful of Roxy's long hair as she catapulted into his arms. Bob saved himself from tipping into the new chasm that yawned before them by catching on to Rick's trouser leg with his teeth. Tiago scooped the dog up just before Bob fell into the bubbling superheated magic below.

Rick moved them all back from the crack in the floor. 'Roxy, where's Tabitha and the others?'

Roxy rubbed a skinned elbow. ‘She got through a window but it melted before I could follow. Tiago and I got stuck behind. How are we going to get out?’

Rick started back towards the arena, but Tiago pulled him in the opposite direction. ‘No exit that way, *amigo*. I’ve tried all the doors but they seem to lead into some kind of magical gunk.’

‘What about the Feysyks tower?’

Tiago started running. ‘Worth a try—if we stay here much longer we’ll be fried.’

A spray of hot magic erupted from the wall, coating everything in its path.

Shielding his face with his forearm, Rick led the way along a corridor and up a spiral stone staircase to the tower above the arena. A great circular room of the same dimensions as the arena below, its walls were lined with books, chemicals, and equipment. In order to keep the tests pure, the laboratory was sealed off from the magic that powered the illusions in the rest of the building.

‘So what the hex is going on?’ Roxy asked as she searched along the shelves for anything that would help them get out. Tiago and Bob rooted in a trunk at the far side, throwing out long forgotten apparatus and old exam papers.

‘No idea.’ Rick unbolted and pushed a shuttered window wide. His heart plummeted: they were

far too high above ground to survive jumping and soon the Feysyks tower would sink like a melting iceberg into the bubbling sea of magic that had once been the rest of Dark Lore.

‘First the instructors hide away in a special meeting,’ Roxy said, ‘and then the building explodes. Troll’s breath—I can’t find anything that I can transform into a rope!’

‘Hey, how about these instead?’ Tiago threw three ancient harnesses at their feet.

Roxy pounced on the nearest and shook it out. It looked like a very large, very damaged set of dragonfly wings. ‘What are they?’

‘My guess: sycacopter, experimental prototype.’ Tiago was already pulling on his. It was far too big—probably made for an ogre test pilot. In recent years, the Dark Folk had started using these flying harnesses modelled on seed pods and powered by magic to travel across Avalon.

Rick grabbed the final set which had only one wing. Great. ‘Do you think this will work? They aren’t as sleek as the real thing.’

‘That’s why I think they were prototypes.’

‘He means rejects,’ glossed Roxy unhelpfully.

A droplet of magic squeezed through a hairline crack in the floor, sizzling as it ate its way across the tiles to the Kemystery cupboard. Definitely time to move.

‘Only one way to find out if they fly.’ Tiago climbed on to the windowledge. ‘Pass Bob to me.’

Rick struggled with an armful of snapping, terrified terrier as Bob howled and tried to scramble free.

‘*Tranquilo, amigo,*’ crooned Tiago. ‘*Hasta la vista!*’ Then he jumped.

Roxy screamed. ‘Did they crash?’

In answer, Tiago reappeared a stone’s throw from the window, bobbing erratically up and down in the loose grip of his harness like a rabbit in the claws of a storm-battered eagle.

Bang! Frap-frap! Crash! Roxy and Rick dived for the windowledge. The seeping magic had reached the cupboard and reacted with the first potion it came across, setting off a chain of explosions. Red sparks blasted past Rick’s ear, stinging his cheek and setting Roxy’s hair smouldering.

‘Go!’ He launched her with a shove, following immediately afterwards as a roar of flame chased them off the ledge.

‘Noooo!’ His single wing whirred frantically, powered by his magic, but it spun him in the wrong direction, intent on screwing him into the side of the tower. He bounced off stone and ricocheted away. The high wrought-iron fence surrounding Dark Lore now appeared before him like a net that this shuttlecock-boy would not clear.

Just before he smashed into it, his shoulder harness was snagged by Roxy's foot. She heaved him up just enough to avoid the spikes on top of the fence, but could not prevent them both crashing in full view of the party arriving at the gate.