

THE MORDRED RESURRECTION

The Mordred Resurrection is a work of fiction. Set around the Isle of Wedmore, characters and specific houses are not intended to be real. © Michael Malaghan 2013

Chapter One “The Rising”

Spring half term, 2014

‘This place’d be all right if it didn’t rain all the time,’ Nick Latham complained to his sister as they trudged down the sodden lane. The heavy blanket of rain seemed to have been constant ever since the pair of them had arrived at their Aunt Calista’s, whom Callie was named after, two days ago. The fields on either side of them were rapidly turning into lakes, ash and hazel trees forming small islands in the watery landscape. Mallard ducks, mute swans and moorhens were swimming where apparently just a week ago cows had been grazing.

Callie flicked her dark ponytail forward over her shoulder so that the rainwater would stop running down the back of her neck. Neither she nor Nick had thought to bring any serious waterproof gear to Somerset. Not so long ago they had been scorching in Egypt, while their archaeologist parents had worked on a find of ancient Egyptian ruins; now it appeared to be monsoon season in Somerset!

‘Aunt Calista reckons this is the most flooding there’s been for hundreds of years – when all those mounds round here, what do they call them, Tors, were real islands.’

‘Probably why a lot of them are still called *isle*,’ commented Callie, jumping over a large puddle, ‘like the Isle of Avalon and the Isle of Wedmore.’

Nick was no longer bothering to avoid the puddles. His trainers and the bottom of his jeans were already waterlogged anyway. Callie had got the only pair of Wellingtons, her Aunt Calista’s, which were black and white zebra striped, and were only one size too big for her.

The rain drove harder into their faces as they turned at the end of the lane to walk over a bridge. Callie pointed at the sign excitedly: ‘Hey! Camlann Bridge.’

‘So what?’ asked Nick, furrowing his brow.

‘It’s Arthurian,’ explained Callie. ‘You know – King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table...? When I was talking to Mum on *Skype* last night–’ (their parents had been delayed in London for a few days, cataloguing new finds from Egypt) ‘–she she said there are loads of connections to King Arthur in this area. And King Arthur was taken by barge to Glastonbury Tor, or the Isle of Avalon as it’s sometimes called, after he was fatally wounded.’ Callie nodded over her shoulder. There was a brooding mound-shape dominating the horizon, even through the curtain of grey rain, Glastonbury Tor looked impressive. A single stone tower stood proudly on the summit.

‘So who was Camlann?’ asked Nick. ‘I don’t remember a Sir Camlann.’

‘Camlann wasn’t a knight. Camlann was a battle,’ said Callie. ‘In fact it was Arthur’s last battle, where he was killed by his own nephew, Mordred.’

Nick now regarded the Camlann Bridge sign with renewed interest. ‘And that happened here?’

Callie shrugged. ‘Who knows. But it’s a good story.’

‘There isn’t much evidence though is there?’ Nick was now casting looks up and down the road. Camlann Bridge wasn’t a particularly striking bridge: just a shallow stone arch at the end of the lane, with the stream underneath threatening to break its banks and join the water already in the fields either side.

‘What were you expecting?’ asked Callie ironically. ‘A round table? A sword in a stone?’

‘Dunno really,’ admitted Nick. ‘But maybe they’ve dug stuff up here – rusty swords or armour. We could ask at the museum in Wedmore.’ It was where they were going anyway, for something to do on a rainy afternoon in the country.

‘Okay...’ agreed Callie.

Wedmore was only more five minutes further on: a pretty village with three picturesque inns, a charming main road featuring a few smart shops, two cafes and a dentist’s; and a high street which wound upwards towards an imposing stone church called St Mary’s. Unsurprisingly, the town wasn’t very busy in the lashing rain and, those souls who had braved the deluge, were dashing along beneath umbrellas and dodging the running water coursing down the high street.

Callie and Nick found the small museum, located in a Georgian townhouse opposite the church. Two bay windows: painted in a sort of old-fashioned mustard colour, jutting out across the shallow pavement, leaving little room between themselves and the parked cars.

‘You’re kidding me!’ groaned Nick, rattling the locked door. ‘We’ve got soaked to the skin for nothing.’

‘It’s *supposed* to be open,’ said Callie, staring at the opening-times displayed on the panelled door. ‘Maybe they’ve closed it early because of the weather...?’ She peered in at the first of the bay windows. A display was dedicated to historic methods of agriculture in the area, which seemed to include dairy farming in a big way (right up to the present day there were plenty of herds of black and white cows in the fields), sheep farming, and the production of fine apples for making cider. There was a wooden barrel in the window labelled: “1800’s cider press”. But it was the other window which turned out to be the most interesting. Beneath a colourful poster which read: “King Arthur: Fact or Fiction?” stood a modelled relief map of the immediate area. The map was obviously to scale, with all the various mounds and wooded areas modelled in detail. Coloured pins were stuck into the green landscape with gold string tied to each pin and leading to small printed cards around the edges of the map: “Glastonbury Tor (Isle of Avalon. Legendary resting place of King Arthur)” “Camlann Bridge (site of King Arthur’s final battle)” “Blood Tor (burial site of Mordred, King Arthur’s nephew and killer)”.

Nick traced the lane from the Camlann Bridge model back to where their aunt’s cottage stood on the banks of the River Axe. ‘Aunt Calista’s cottage isn’t there,’ he said, sounding mildly offended.

‘Aunt Calista’s cottage obviously doesn’t feature in the King Arthur legend,’ replied Callie. This must be significant though,’ she went on, pointing at a small ring of 13 black stones, marked on the model. Gold twine led from the circle to another card: “Arthur’s Circle.”

‘You don’t reckon that’s the *actual* Round Table do you?’ said Nick, suddenly wide-eyed.

‘Maybe...’ Callie was doubtful. ‘Though surely it would call it the Round Table if it was.’

‘I suppose... I wouldn’t mind looking at it though, especially as it’s not that far from Aunt Calista’s.’

‘Well, we can’t get any wetter can we?’ said Callie...

It didn’t take them long to backtrack to Aunt Calista’s pretty, pink cottage with its terracota tiled roof, but instead of going in at the rose arch, they continued on down the waterlogged lane.

‘If she sees us walking straight past, she’ll think we’ve gone loopy,’ said Callie.

‘Nah, she’ll be busy feeding her cats at this time of the afternoon,’ said Nick. Aunt Calista was a big fan of cats: she had five of them, all of different types and colours; and although Nick maintained that they all smelled, he could often be found with one or more of them sitting on his lap while he tickled them behind the ears.

They reached a wooden stile built into a thick, green hawthorn hedge after another five minutes. A rusting iron signpost with barely legible letters indicated that “Arthur’s Circle” was somewhere on the other side of the hedge. Callie climbed through first. ‘I don’t think we can get all the way to it,’ she said, jumping down on the other side to a squelching sound. Arthur’s Circle appeared to be half drowned in a lake of floodwater at the lower end of the field. The tips of the 13 stones had the appearance of burnt posts, and under the dark, wet clouds, they had a brooding, almost creepy look about them.

‘Let’s get as far as we can,’ said Nick, joining his sister on the other side of the stile.

It was a lot harder walking across the field than it had been down the lane. The soft, black peat sucked at Callie’s Wellingtons and Nick’s trainers. Their jeans were soon caked with the slimy black mud right up to the knees.

‘That’s why it’s flooded,’ said Callie worriedly. ‘Look at the river!’ The stones were laid almost at the edge of the ribbon of water as it curved around the field. In parts, water was lapping over the river bank. They could hear the rushing water from half way across the field.

‘Just a bit further,’ said Nick determinedly. ‘There might be names carved on the stones.’

‘All right, but keep an eye on that river. If it breaks its bank we’ll be in trouble.’

They were panting with the effort by the time they reached the edge of the pool of floodwater.

‘Well, no signs of any name,’ said Callie, staring disappointedly at the nearest stone. ‘Though something could be written lower down – under the water.’

‘Do you think it feels a bit weird?’ asked Nick, after they’d been standing looking at the stones for a few minutes.

Callie considered. ‘Now you mention it, I feel as if the stones are staring at me, not the other way around,’ she said with an involuntary shudder. ‘Is that what you mean?’

‘Yeah. That’s exactly what I mean.’

‘Then let’s go... I want to get dry anyway.’ Callie tried to turn around, but realised with horror that she was stuck. She must have been slowly sinking, because the sodden earth was now holding her where she stood. Black slime was starting to ooze over the top of her Wellingtons. Nick was similarly trapped, a look of panic on his face. ‘Callie!’

‘I know!’

‘No you don’t! Look behind you!’

Callie spun round. Nick was staring at the river. A ring of water had broken over the crumbling embankment and was now aiming straight for them with the force of a small tsunami. But that wasn’t all. Rising from each of the 13 stones was a tall, grim figure; black sludge coated each of the thirteen and dripped off their bodies repulsively. But even daubed in the slime, Callie could tell that they wore armour and carried raised swords menacingly above their heads.

She started to scream...

Read Callie and Nick's full-length adventures in *Greek Ransom* and *The Lost Prophecies*, both published by Andersen Press, price £5.99.

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Chapter Two “Mordred”

Callie and Nick are staying with their Aunt Calista near Wedmore, during one of the wettest February's ever recorded. Exploring a stone circle, reputed to have links to King Arthur, they become trapped in boggy ground just as the river Axe breaks its banks. Thirteen 'zombie knights', clad in rusting armour, begin to crawl out of the stone circle...

Callie screamed again, the sound piercing. The water was up to her waist already and becoming deeper, and no matter how hard she tried she couldn't drag her feet from the thick peat anchoring her to the spot. But worse than that, the 13 slimy figures who had just risen from the ground, were still moving towards her.

‘Try throwing yourself forwards,’ yelled Nick.

It wasn't a tempting prospect. Callie had been scared of drowning for years, and if her feet remained stuck, how would she get up again? But the alternative was to face the 13 menacing knights. She threw herself forward with a cry and felt the hold on her feet loosen. There was a satisfying release of pressure. She had slipped right from her Wellingtons and was immediately able to start swimming. She looked frantically round for Nick. The nearest of the zombie knights was almost upon him, wading through the rising water. Red eyed, the knight's face appeared like polished brown leather, the skin tight across his bony cheeks. It reminded her of a bog mummy, the preserved remains of long-dead iron age people found in boggy places. As the pouring rain washed the slimy peat off his body, rusty, dented armour became exposed. Nick yelled as the knight raised his sword.

‘Nick! Grab this rope.’ It wasn't Callie's voice, and she twisted round to see a sky blue boat with a buzzing outboard engine zooming across the flooded field towards them. It was piloted by a solid-looking youth whose hair was shaven down to black stubble. The rolled up sleeves of his navy blue jumper revealed a red dragon tattoo on his right forearm. ‘Grab the rope,’ he ordered again, swinging a knotted end of white rope towards Nick. Nick caught it at his first attempt.

The youth now swung the small boat around with a deft flick of the tiller. The rope tautened and Nick was swept from the midst of his attackers. Then the shaven-headed youth brought the boat around again, so that he could haul Nick aboard, before turning for Callie, who was already swimming towards them. The boat swayed as she pulled herself desperately over the side and slithered to the cold aluminium decking. While Callie and Nick were still panting, the youth skimmed the boat expertly past the ring of half-drowned standing stones and onto the river itself from whence it must have come. Callie narrowed her eyes through the pouring rain, expecting to see 13 zombie knights chasing after them, but they seemed to have sunk back into the waterlogged ground!

‘Nick, where have they gone?’

Nick had to swallow before he could make his mouth work. ‘I don't know. I'm just glad they have,’ he managed at last.

Callie threw a questioning expression at their rescuer. ‘Where did they go?’

‘Where did who go?’ the youth asked, screwing up his face.

‘The knights of course!’ Callie snapped impatiently. ‘The knights you just saved us from!’

The youth raised a quizzical eyebrow as if he was dealing with some kind of nutter. ‘The knights?’

‘There were thirteen mud-covered knights attacking us,’ insisted Callie. ‘We both saw them, didn’t we?’ She dashed a look at her terrified brother.

‘Yes, we did,’ confirmed Nick.

The youth gave an insulting snort.

‘We’re not making it up,’ shouted Callie, her ocean blue eyes flashing angrily.

This time the youth frowned thoughtfully. ‘Well, there *were* 13 knights executed and buried back there in the fifth century. But—’

‘Executed?’ Nick leaped on the emotive word.

‘They were supporters of Mordred, when he declared war on his uncle, King Arthur. After they were executed, long stones were hammered through their corpses to stop them magically returning.’

‘But they have returned,’ stated Callie, even though she could scarcely believe her own words. ‘We saw them!’

The youth was shaking his shaven head. ‘It’s getting pretty dark, and with all this rain, you probably *imagined* you saw them.’

‘I didn’t *imagine* anything!’ Callie growled through gritted teeth. ‘I saw them as clear as you!’ She turned her back on the youth, fuming. She was not lying!

‘How did you know my name?’ asked Nick suddenly. ‘You shouted “Nick”.’

‘I live next door to your aunt,’ replied the youth. ‘I’m Sean.’

‘Oh,’ said Nick. ‘I think our Aunt mentioned you. Your mum’s away for a couple of days, so our Aunt Calista’s supposed to be keeping her eye on you.’

Callie studied the youth thoughtfully without making it obvious. Aunt Calista had said he was only a year older than Callie was, but that would make him fourteen, and he looked much older. And what sort of parents allowed their son to get a tattoo? Then she noticed the slightly sorrowful look in his grey eyes, and thought she could guess the reason for that. Aunt Calista had told them that Sean’s father had been killed serving in the army – just over a year ago. Sean must still be suffering the pain of such a loss. Callie suddenly felt sorry for him, even if he didn’t believe her about the knights.

‘Where were you going in your boat?’ she asked in slightly a more friendly tone.

‘I’d been along the river. There’s a couple of places that are cut off by the flooding and I was seeing if anyone needed help.’ Sean nodded at a pile of empty supermarket bags held down by a brick. ‘I delivered a few supplies and was just on my way back when I heard screaming.’ Callie stared thoughtfully at Sean; delivering food in his boat, rescuing her and Nick – he was obviously the heroic type...

It took five minutes before Callie saw a riverside property looming through the thick sheets of rain. The house next to Aunt Calista’s pink cottage was fairly unusual looking: first of all, it had battlements. It was also built of grey stone, with a round tower in the middle. Between it and the river was a wooden boathouse. The short, plank jetty was awash because the river was running so high, but Sean still tied the boat to a post and scrambled up onto the waterlogged boards. He extended a hand to help Callie. ‘Careful, it’s slippy, especially without any shoes or Wellies...’

Callie glanced down at her muddy, pink socks and wondered how she’d explain to Aunt Calista she’d left her favourite zebra print Wellingtons stuck in the mud. She rejected Sean’s hand, and managed to alight from the boat as competently as he had. ‘Thanks for giving us a lift back.’

‘I should stick to your aunt’s tomorrow,’ advised Sean.

‘Thanks,’ replied Callie, starting for the gate between the two houses. ‘But we don’t need someone our own age telling us what to do.’ When she and Nick were out of earshot, she whispered: ‘I’m going back to that stone circle first thing tomorrow morning to prove there *was* something there.’

Nick nodded. ‘Yeah. I’m with you.’

444AD, Blood Tor, south-west of the Isle of Avalon.

The land resembled a silver sea beset with islands: the heads of the tors poking out from the flooded levels. There was a stink of blood in Mordred’s nostrils: his own blood, making crimson his golden armour; and also the blood of King Arthur, his uncle, lay upon him. He had slain the King by cunning and treachery at Camlann Bridge, but in return the King had mortally wounded him. And then to heap further misery on him, Mordred had failed to snatch the magical sword, Excalibur, which he craved so much. From Arthur’s hand he could not prise it.

Mordred had crawled away from the scene of murder, and now lay dyeing the wet grass with the last of his blood. He looked up. A cadre of Arthur’s knights had just rounded the craggy base of Blood Tor, searching for him – eager for revenge. Mordred’s own supporters all died, fled or been taken prisoner. He lurched to his feet, gasping at the intensity of his pain. His uncle’s sword, Excalibur, had bitten deep, flashed through first his flank, then his shoulder, and finally swept up through his face, parting flesh from his cheekbone and blinding one eye.

Shouts drifted across the tor towards him. ‘There he is! There is Mordred. I would know that golden armour anywhere. Do not allow him to escape!’

Mordred cursed: five days of rain and now the sun should pick this moment to shine out of the sky upon the parts of his golden armour not besmeared with blood. He staggered several more agonising steps until, reaching the water’s edge, he was able to topple forwards. There was a splash, and a clang made by his armour, accompanied by a scream of unbearable pain from his bloody lips. But he had made it. Now he would win. He was becoming fluid, melting: not just the blood which seeped from his wounds, but tissue and muscle and bone were liquefying also, oozing into the water. He was becoming part of it; not sinking, but dissolving. It was his own magic, a magic that Arthur had never troubled to learn. But Mordred had learned it, and now he poured all of his evil spirit into the water, and was gone, as King Arthur’s knights came running.

Callie awoke with a start and stared at the bedroom window. There was a stone lintel and sill, and the ancient oak frame was dotted with the holes made by woodworm. But the shutters outside must have worked loose in the rain, because they were bashing loudly against the glass pane. She pulled on her dressing gown and was halfway across to the window when a flash of lightning illuminated the scene outside her bedroom. And then she recoiled in horror. She had seen a slime-coated face glaring in at her. One of Mordred’s zombie knights had found her...!

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Chapter Three “Excalibur”

Staying with their Aunt Calista near Wedmore, Callie and Nick have narrowly escaped thirteen zombie knights, who have risen from the time of King Arthur. Callie is awoken in the early hours by a demonic face at her bedroom window...

Callie was paralysed by terror, locking stares with the red-eyed face at the window, as rainwater coursed off its rusted helmet. Was it really one of the knights executed for joining Mordred in his rebellion against King Arthur? And what did it want with her?

A second flash of lightning burst outside the window and Callie started. The face was no longer a face, but a dirty mark on the window, a particular pattern of rain. Yet it had been there. It had definitely been there.

She crept forward and peered out. The knight was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps it had gone to fetch the others. Aunt Calista’s garden was under an inch of water right down to the river at the back, which was a surging black torrent threatening to break its banks. The outdoor light was on, perhaps triggered by the thickness of the rain, or perhaps by the ghostly figure. Callie saw someone moving in the adjoining garden, but began to breathe again as soon as she realised that it was Sean, the fourteen-year old boy they’d met the day before. He was carrying red petrol cans towards the wooden boathouse at the back of his home. Shockingly, her brother was down there helping him! Callie gulped. Now she would have to go down there to warn them both that a zombie knight was roaming the garden and staring through windows, and Sean already thought she was making the whole thing up.

She dragged on her thick coat, still damp from the day before, and pushed her feet into her trainers; the Wellingtons she’d borrowed from her Aunt Calista were stuck in a boggy field, where the 13 knights had attacked her and Nick. Then she tiptoed down the stairs careful not to disturb her aunt, but apart from a couple of cats who meowed sleepily at her from the colourful, chequered sofa, the downstairs of the cottage was deserted.

Callie took a deep breath and let herself out into the pouring rain. Terrified that the knight was lying in wait for her, she sprinted splashingly across the garden and through the little gate to the neighbouring property, then continued straight into the boathouse without stopping. To her amazement, the two boys were working on some sort of hovercraft. A black rubber skirt about 12 inches deep was fitted around a lozenge-shaped aluminium base. There was a seat for a pilot mid section, with handlebars like those on a motorbike. Standing up at the back was a massive propeller housed inside a gridded drum a metre across. Nick was using a large funnel to pour pungent-smelling petrol into the hovercraft’s fuel tanks, while the shaven-headed Sean was checking the rubber skirt section by section.

It took the boys a moment to realise that Callie was standing inside the wide wooden doors catching her breath. ‘What are you doing?’ she demanded when they finally looked round.

‘Getting Sean’s hovercraft ready in case the water gets any higher and we need to get out of here fast. It was his dad’s, and it’s a lot more powerful than the little boat,’ Nick explained, gesturing at the smaller, sky blue craft with its outboard engine.

Callie was now glancing round. The white-painted walls of the boathouse were festooned with photographs of King Arthur's stone circle: the place where 13 of Mordred's knights had been executed and buried. Oddly, there were also several photographs of flooded fields. And right opposite her was a huge sheet of parchment with a list written on it in ancient script: 'The 13 zombie knights of Mordred... Balor... Vergan... Zagront...' And there were ten others. 'You told us you didn't see the knights yesterday,' said Callie accusingly, and feeling as if she had been duped, 'but you did didn't you?'

Sean returned a guilty expression. 'I didn't want to scare you any more.'

'It didn't work.'

Sean sighed, before going on. 'Do you think some legends are true?'

Callie nodded her head. Maybe when there was time, she would tell him about the three-thousand four-hundred year-old pharaoh she'd met last year.

'There's a legend,' Sean went on, 'That Mordred, the nephew who murdered King Arthur, was fatally wounded by King Arthur himself. But he managed to escape using sorcery – transferring his soul into a temporary lake so that he could come back when everywhere was flooded again. The same sorcery would bring back thirteen of his most evil knights.' Sean gestured at the sheet of parchment, and then the photos of the 13 standing stones. 'I've been watching King Arthur's Circle, and what happened yesterday proved that the legend was true. The knights have risen.'

'How did you know to watch?' asked Callie, glancing at her brother, who she guessed Sean had already told.

Sean swallowed slowly before replying. 'Because I'm King Arthur's heir,' he said simply. 'His direct descendent.'

Callie stared at the solid youth before her breathlessly. The sleeve of his jumper was rolled up, exposing the tattoo of a red dragon on his right forearm. She'd thought only yesterday that she'd never seen a tattoo on someone his age before. Sean followed her gaze.

'It means "Pendragon", the name of King Arthur's family; my family.'

Shakily, Callie said: 'You're not saying this is Camelot are you?' She pointed through the rain to Sean's house. 'That's why your house has got a tower like a castle?'

'I suppose it is Camelot,' agreed Sean. 'What's left of it anyway.'

Callie suddenly remembered why she had ventured out into the pouring rain. 'The knights are looking for you,' she said, swallowing. 'I saw one of them at my window.'

'Mordred must have sent him,' said Sean. 'They want to force me into doing something.'

'Doing what?'

'Using Excalibur.'

'You mean you've got King Arthur's sword?' blurted Callie, shocked.

Sean shook his head. 'No, it was thrown into a lake at the bottom of Blood Tor by Sir Bedivere, one of King Arthur's knights, at the request of the dying King.' Callie recognised the name Blood Tor. It was a brooding hill she'd seen on the horizon, less than a mile from her aunt's cottage. 'So that's where I've got to go – to get it back from The Lady of the Lake,' Sean finished.

'Why does Mordred want you to use Excalibur?' asked Callie. 'Can't it defeat him?'

'It can. But Mordred *wants* Excalibur for himself. Whoever *wields* Excalibur is undefeatable...'

'But then how can Mordred take it from you?'

‘Mordred defeated King Arthur by treachery. He pretended to surrender, and when Arthur put Excalibur down, Mordred produced a hidden blade and stabbed his own uncle... I bet he’s got something similar planned for me.’

‘You mean if you attempt to retrieve the sword to defeat him, he might take it from you and gain power?’ Callie concluded.

Sean gave her a stiff nod.

‘So when are we setting off for this lake?’ asked Nick, as if to remind them both that he was still there.

Sean shook his head. ‘*We’re* not. I only agreed to let you help me get the hovercraft ready. You should go back to your Aunt’s.’

‘It might be too late,’ said Callie in alarm. She was staring through the open doors of the boathouse. The exterior lights were spraying through the pouring rain towards the swollen river ten metres away. Several figures, whose flesh appeared to be rotting, and were garbed in rusting armour, were rising slowly out of the water and moving towards the boathouse.

Sean hesitated for no more than a second. ‘You better jump on.’ He was already swinging himself up into the pilot’s seat and flicking an ignition switch. A powerful jet engine began to work up slowly to a high-pitched scream. Callie and Nick threw themselves into the shallow recess inside the hovercraft as the vessel began to rise up on its skirt of air. Sean flicked a second switch and a bank of halogen headlights blasted out on the front of the vessel, blinding the wall of zombie knights as they reached the open doors. They raised rotting arms to cover their crimson eyes.

‘Hang on!’ yelled Sean.

Propellers encased inside the gridded drum were already whirling at maximum power, a whirlwind of punched air rattling the tools on the walls of the boathouse. Sean opened the throttle on the handlebars and the hovercraft sped forward, scattering the zombie knights like skittles. A battle-axe scraped against the metal hull, inches from Callie’s hand and she threw herself back in terror. Then the hovercraft was out and zooming over the waterlogged garden, across the river itself and into the flooded field beyond. Callie looked back. The knights weren’t following.

Water sprayed up as Sean wheeled the hovercraft through a giant arc and aimed over the moor towards Blood Tor. The bank of searchlights playing on the pouring rain made it seem as though they were speeding through a tunnel made of diamonds.

There was a stand of submerged trees, bare and stark against the black sky. Sean didn’t bother going all the way round but weaved through them without even slowing, the hovercraft banking from side to side.

‘How far?’ screamed Callie, guessing that Sean would know the exact spot to aim for.

‘Not very.’ He turned the handlebars and the hovercraft came slicing out of the trees, over a flooded road and into a lake not created by the flooding – but a permanent feature. Sean cut the engine and the halogen lights a few moments later, and the hovercraft began to glide darkly through the water.

‘What’s that up ahead?’ whispered Nick. ‘That thing sticking up.’

Callie strained her eyes through the returned darkness and the rain. Nick seemed to be looking at a thin, sharp reed. But then Callie realised that what she was staring at was a blade, rising slowly from the water. The sword looked newly-made, glittering silver steel with a darker pattern of ivy leaves and tendrils etched into the blade. When the hilt appeared, held by the tapering fingers of a feminine hand, Callie gasped. An emerald, the size of a bird’s-egg, was embedded into the base of the pommel handle.

Sean used a paddle to bring the hovercraft closer to the upraised arm, before taking a deep breath and reaching out. The sword was transferred to his grip, and then the hand and arm sank smoothly beneath the water...

Callie was about to speak, but screamed instead. As Sean had taken the sword, a sinew of serpent, formed from the black water itself arched over the drifting hovercraft from one side to the other. As it returned into the water with a loud splash, she was taken with it...

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Chapter Four “On Blood Tor”

Staying with their Aunt Calista near Wedmore, Callie and Nick Latham have discovered a direct descendant of King Arthur: Sean Pendragon. As the area floods in a relentless deluge of rain, Callie and Nick set off with Sean to defeat King Arthur’s mortal enemy Mordred, and his thirteen most evil knights who have risen from the grave. Racing first in a hovercraft to retrieve King Arthur’s sword Excalibur from the lake surrounding Blood Tor, Callie is captured by a water serpent magically conjured by the enemy...

The water serpent, its scales silver against the surrounding water, held Callie in its tight embrace, winding itself around her in several complete rings from head to toe. She could neither escape nor survive. The creature was dragging her to the very bottom of the lake with nothing more than its own weight. If she was released now it was already too late. She had been holding her breath for almost a minute already, and she didn’t possess the strength to swim back to the surface, nor the time in which to do it. Then suddenly she noticed a light, a circle quivering beneath her. She was being carried towards it. At the last moment the circle opened up and she flowed straight through, hitting solid rock on the other side painfully. The water serpent lost its form and splashed harmlessly onto the uneven ground. Callie’s chest heaved as she drew in a life-sustaining gasp of air; then, panting and dizzy, she realised that she could see. The tunnel was lit by a natural, green-tinged phosphorescence.

She was in a tunnel, which appeared to swim and rotate before her eyes. The circle of water through which she’d entered was beneath her, not above, the tunnel like an upturned cup in a bowl of water, trapping a supply of air. It was definitely underwater but it could not flood, and there seemed no option but to follow it.

Callie’s footsteps echoed off walls green with damp slime. Her breath rose like steam.

It was not a long way to walk. In a few minutes she was squeezing between ancient, tangled tree roots and out onto a hillside. The night sky remained a hard, charcoal grey with a descending curtain of rain. Callie felt sure that she had emerged upon Blood Tor itself, and was not surprised to find them waiting for her: Balor, Vergan, Zagrant and the ten other reanimated knights, whose names she did not know. She felt intensely cold, not from the night, or being soaked to the skin, but from the deadness generated by the small army of knights.

One figure stood apart from all the rest, contemplating the flooding moors. Red lightning was making the rain flash in crimson sheets. Callie waited until the figure turned to stare at her, a spiteful expression in his small black eyes. His state of preservation was superior to that of any of the others, the sorcery in him no doubt stronger. Whatever wounds he had suffered had long since healed. He was young, perhaps no more than 25, with both weak chin and receding hairline. The beard he had attempted to cultivate was scruffy and light red. His golden armour was well-preserved too, the paint still fresh and vibrant: a black dragon trampling upon a red one.

‘Maiden, you are a welcome sight in the castle of Mordred, the true king.’ Mordred’s voice was weak and somehow effeminate. He gestured towards the ring of knights: silhouettes surrounding them. ‘As you observe, my castle walls are formed of my most loyal knights.’

Callie swallowed and found that her voice was a frightened whisper. ‘You conjured the water serpent to get me here didn’t you?’

‘Small magic,’ replied Mordred, nodding, ‘when compared to raising my knights and myself back from death.’

‘Why did you bring me here?’ Callie challenged him, playing for time, wondering if she could outrun the zombie knights.

‘To bring *him* here of course: *Arthur’s Descendent*.’

‘Sean!’ Callie gasped, forgetting escape for a moment. ‘But you’re wasting your time. Sean Pendragon hasn’t got Excalibur. We couldn’t find The Lady of the Lake. She must have perished a long while ago. You and your knights are too late.’ Callie attempted to control her shaking, but could not. ‘You should go back to your graves...’

‘Such defiance in one so young,’ Mordred said sneeringly. His pointed teeth reminded Callie of those of a rat or other rodent. ‘But your *lies* are wasted. My knights saw Arthur’s descendent take up the weapon, and soon I shall slay him with it.’ He reached out and gripped Callie’s arm firmly between clammy fingers. ‘And you shall do me one small favour. You will take out the device you use to speak to others at distances, and you will inform Arthur’s descendent where to find you.’

Callie remembered slipping her mobile phone into her coat pocket before leaving her Aunt’s house. ‘I haven’t got it,’ she lied.

Mordred twisted her arm viciously. ‘Obey me!’

With a sob, Callie took out her mobile and found that it was already ringing. It must have been protected from all the water by the lining of her coat. She touched the screen to answer and heard the scream of the hovercraft’s jet engine through the speaker. ‘Nick, turn round. Run away,’ she yelled before Mordred could stop her. ‘You can’t help me, either of you. Save yourselves.’

‘We’re on our way, Callie,’ Nick yelled back, ignoring her instruction. ‘We can see Blood Tor now.’ Then Sean’s voice took over from Nick’s:

‘I hope you can hear me, *Mordred*... Your dead army’s just seen what my boat can do. It’s got a giant propeller on the back: steel blades spinning at thousands of revolutions per minute. Do anything to Callie, and Excalibur takes on that propeller. It’ll break the sword into a thousand pieces.’

Callie swallowed. *Was Sean bluffing? Would he really destroy Excalibur? Wasn’t the hovercraft’s propeller encased inside a protective mesh?*

But Mordred believed Sean, and that was what counted. He glared at Callie’s mobile with hatred, as if he was glaring at Sean himself. Then he reacted: ‘Do it then! Do it!’ He wound the fingers of his hand rapidly into Callie’s wet ponytail, and forced her in one movement onto her knees – ramming her face down into the sodden grass. Callie screamed.

‘Behead her, my knights,’ Mordred cried, so that Sean would hear. ‘Then hack her to pieces.’

Thirteen zombie knights came lurching forward eagerly, the tallest of them, ribs showing through his rusted breastplate, was sweeping a metre-long sword in front of him in a fluid figure-of-eight. Terrified tears coursed down Callie’s cheeks, and she yelled into the mobile phone a last time. ‘You’re too late, Sean! Turn round. Turn round! Don’t bring Nick here. Please!’

This time there was no reply, but the howl of the hovercraft's jet engine seemed to almost shatter her eardrums. Then, through the corner of her eye, she saw why it sounded so loud. The noise wasn't coming from her mobile anymore, it was from the hovercraft itself as it leaped over the crest of the tor. In mid air it struck the knight with the exposed ribs and sent pieces of him flying through the air. At the same moment Sean jumped from the hovercraft with Excalibur in his hand, and smashed the sword's emerald-stoned hilt into Mordred's face.

Released, Callie rolled aside and saw that it was Nick now piloting the hovercraft. He was flying it expertly, using it to stop Mordred's zombie knights from aiding their leader. Sean had Mordred to himself: for the moment.

Excalibur rang out, clanging against Mordred's armour. But Mordred was cunning, pretending to stumble, then twirling his own sword with his arm at full stretch in what would have been a deadly swipe at Sean's head if Sean hadn't stepped back hurriedly.

Sean dodged another sword blow. Without the protection of armour, he was much more vulnerable than Mordred was. Callie wondered if the magical power of Excalibur could really protect him. They would not know unless Sean was struck!

There was another ringing clang and Callie gasped in horror. Mordred's sword had slammed into Excalibur just above the hilt, and Sean's wet fingers had lost their grip. Excalibur was spinning up into the air, the tip of Mordred's blade already at Sean's exposed throat. Mordred delayed the final strike as he watched the spiralling Excalibur. Callie watched too, and unaccountably, Excalibur disappeared into the rain itself as if gone forever.

Mordred shrieked: 'No! NOOOOO!' A spasm of rage distorted his spiteful face further. He glared at Sean as if it was he who had made the blade vanish, then drew back fractionally to drive his own sword two-handed through Sean's throat.

There was a sickening slashing sound as sword metal sliced through flesh, muscle and bone. Sean staggered back, staring at his enemy – who was now impaled with Excalibur through his chest, pinned to the hillside. Excalibur had fallen decisively from the rain. It was done – finally. This time Mordred could not return to the water. Callie stared around her. The 13 zombie knights were disappearing into the atmosphere like rising steam.

Nick brought the hovercraft slicing up in front of Callie and Sean, and cut the noisy engine, as Callie continued to stare at Mordred, tears pooling in her eyes. Sean put his arm protectively around her shoulder. 'I'll get rid of him before it gets light.'

'There's a tunnel in the side of the tor,' Callie told him. 'You could seal him in there using rocks.'

Sean nodded, looking satisfied, and slowly extracted Excalibur from the skewered Mordred. The silver blade was perfectly unmarked, without a trace of blood on it. 'Then you can help me return *this* to the Lady of the Lake.' He held Excalibur aloft.

'Don't you want to keep it?' asked Nick in disbelief. 'I'd keep it if I was you. It might come in useful – for something. And if not you could probably sell it.'

Sean shook his shaven head. 'It would go back to the Lady of the Lake of its own accord if I tried to do either.'

Callie was looking up at the dawn sky. 'Have you noticed anything?' she asked the others quietly.

'What?' The boys said together, following her gaze.

Callie mustered a grin. 'It's finally stopped raining.' They were supposed to be going home today...

Read Callie and Nick's full-length adventures in *Greek Ransom* and *The Lost Prophecies*, both published by Andersen Press, price £5.99.