

**YOUNG  
KNIGHTS  
OF THE  
ROUND TABLE**



**Also by Julia Golding**

**The Companions Quartet**

*Secret of the Sirens*  
*The Gorgon's Gaze*  
*Mines of the Minotaur*  
*The Chimera's Curse*

\*

*The Ship Between the Worlds*  
*Dragonfly*  
*The Glass Swallow*  
*Wolf Cry*

# YOUNG KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND TABLE



Julia Golding

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

# OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,  
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi

Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi

New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece

Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore

South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press  
in the UK and in certain other countries

© Julia Golding 2013

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

Database right Oxford University Press (maker)

First published 2013

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press,  
or as expressly permitted by law, or under terms agreed with the appropriate  
reprographics rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction  
outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department,  
Oxford University Press, at the address above

You must not circulate this book in any other binding or cover  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN: 978-0-19-273222-4

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in Great Britain

Paper used in the production of this book is a natural,  
recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

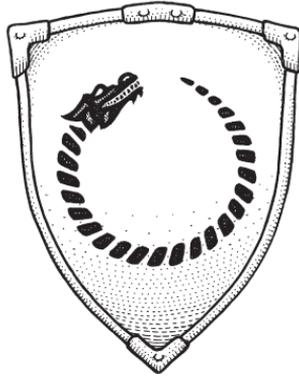
The manufacturing process conforms to the environmental  
regulations of the country of origin.



### *For Toby and Edward*

With thanks to Andrew Briggs, the real Professor of Nanomaterials at Oxford University, for his fascinating insights into the wilder end of science. I would hazard you did not know, Andrew, that Feys were behind it all. Also my thanks to Professor Ulrike Tillmann of the Mathematical Institute, Oxford University, for telling me about her work on extra dimensions while we shared a school run. I dedicate dimension number seven—the home of all lost things—to you! And a special thank you to Natalia and Tomislav for waiting so long.





## Chapter I

**H**umans are the enemy.

Tightening the straps on his leather armguards, 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 torc, 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?’

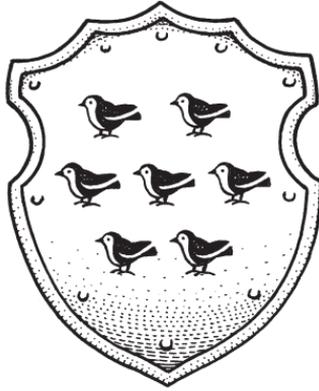
In answer, Tiago reappeared a stone’s throw from the window, bobbing erratically up and down in the loose grip of his harness like a rabbit in the claws of a storm-battered eagle.

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.



## Chapter 2

**T**hanks, Roxy,' Rick panted. Aethel was quivering with terror on his wrist. 'I'm sorry to put you through that, Legless. We're safe now. Go back to sleep.'

'Rick?' muttered Roxy, staring at something just behind him. 'I wouldn't say we were safe.'

'*Maldito!*' Tiago landed heavily beside them, clutching Bob to his chest.

'What are you doing here?'

Rick went still, his wing flapping feebly against the dirt. He had to be hallucinating. He could have sworn he heard the voice of the commander of Dark Lore.

Morgan La Faye spoke again—but not to the changelings. 'I apologize, your majesty, I do not

normally let them run wild like this. It won't happen again.'

'The breakdown in your control over the humans merely proves the urgency of the situation, commander.' The voice that replied was deep, like the toll of a warning bell.

There was no sound from Roxy and Tiago. Bracing himself, Rick rolled on to his back and found himself staring up at a male Fey with dusky bronze skin and startling white hair. Mesmerizing almond-shaped blue eyes returned his gaze. Rick didn't need to see the ice-diamond crown and silver robes to know he was looking at Oberon, the Fey King, the most beautiful and powerful being in Avalon. They had crashed by the Dew Track station, where the king and his entourage had just alighted from their carriage, a beautiful craft made of a bubble of silvery magic. The king must have come to inspect the disaster site. Rick was pinned to the ground by icicles of dread, so cold was the atmosphere surrounding his sovereign.

They were in so much trouble.

The king turned away. 'I see from the state of your camp, Morgan, that the power has been restored as mysteriously and suddenly as it was cut. Our enemies only managed to half-destroy it. What is going on? The shocks have been felt throughout my realm, but the centre of the trouble is here. Nowhere else has the damage been as extreme.'

Struggling against his paralysing awe, Rick pulled himself to his feet and turned to look back at Dark Lore. The tower they had escaped from in the middle of the training centre resembled a half-melted candle—turrets slumping down the white stone walls, a new moat of bubbling magic surrounding what was left. He could see the Fey-syks instructor, Doctor Purl-E, visible thanks to his crop of silver-green hair, dancing at the margin of the gunk, reversing the spell-damage. The other changelings had made it as far as the parade ground and were being marshalled by the troll guards so a head count could be made. Pixie nurses were erecting a shelter for the very youngest charges, the new arrivals Roxy had mentioned. As far as he could tell, it looked as if all of them had survived.

Oberon frowned. 'I will not stand for this!' Droplets of magic ran from his fingertips to the ground with a hiss of power. The grass blackened in the cold bite of his potency. 'Send a team to the Other Side immediately, Morgan.'

Morgan bowed. 'Of course, sire. Whom do you wish me to send?'

'The humans—it is what you have trained them for. Or are you telling me you have not performed your task adequately and none of them are ready?'

Morgan's lips thinned into a bitter line. 'Of course not, sire. All my warriors are well trained.'

Oberon's gaze swept over Rick as if he were a piece of dubious dirt picked up on the royal shoe. 'Then these three should suffice. If they have learned to infiltrate and be accepted among their own people as well as they have absorbed their combat skills, then they are our best hope that we can extract the truth from the human world. I want answers—and I want them today.'

Morgan bowed. 'Yes, your majesty.'

'But you know what I feel about the change-lings. They must have people we can trust with them to watch them.'

'I have two handlers in mind already, sir, two of your own feygents.'

'Good. I expect regular reports.' The king turned back to Rick, Roxy, and Tiago. 'Name those responsible for this attack on the power supply to my realm and you will be rewarded; fail and you will be removed. From existence.' He dismissed them with a flick of his silky grey robes and stalked off to inspect the damage. His ogre bodyguards pounded by, a squeak of leather, rattle of weapons, and stench of sweat. Finely clad, perfumed advisers hurried on their heels.

‘Report to my office,’ Morgan ordered, then quickly followed the king.

Rick, Roxy, and Tiago waited anxiously in Morgan’s temporary headquarters set up in a pavilion next to the melted building.

‘I don’t like this,’ muttered Roxy, prowling between two tent posts like a golden tiger in a too-small cage. If she had had a tail it would be whipping to and fro with anger.

‘Come on, Roxy!’ said Rick. ‘It’s our big chance. The humans on the Other Side have to be stopped. If they are attacking Avalon, like the knights of the Round Table did before, then it’s our right to defend ourselves. Just think what damage the humans did in, what? *half an hour*, by choking off our power supply!’

Roxy wrinkled her nose. ‘I’ve no problem with that, Rick. It’s just that now we’ve got to go and live among humans over in the other world. Oberon said “infiltrate”, not fight. We all know how vicious people over there are.’

Rick now understood her pacing. ‘Troll spit, I hadn’t thought what it would mean. He did say that, didn’t he?’ They had been allowed access to some human books and moving images called ‘television’ to pick up the modern way of speaking but

only after the most shocking bits had been censored by the Fey. The ideas in a few of the story books Rick had read hadn't sounded too bad: he liked the concept of love, loyalty, friendship; but one look at human history had shown him that these were ideals that never made it beyond the page. Like Roxy, he was expecting to be appalled by his first exposure to unedited human behaviour.

The flaps to the tent were thrust open and Morgan swept into the room.

The changelings stood to attention.

'You may sit.' Morgan gestured to a bench in the middle of the tent.

Rick sank on to his low seat between Tiago and Roxy, feeling at even greater disadvantage on the floor at the commander's feet. Not that she needed anything to reinforce her authority. At seven feet tall, with a gleaming fall of ebony hair and milk-white skin, Morgan was striking in any company. Her face was a perfect oval, her lips blood red, her eyes a vivid green. Her high-collared black jacket was embroidered with lightning bolts on the lapel, a reminder that she was capable of zapping you with the real thing when she was angry. She looked somewhere between twenty and thirty in human years, but she was centuries older. Dark Folk could live to at least three thousand, longer for some very ancient species.

Morgan took out three files from her desk drawer; they had been written on iridescent paper made of butterfly wings, a different colour for each of them. She flicked through the pages of the scarlet folder. 'Elfric Halfdane. You are one of our older warriors—our first. You were taken, when was it?'

'AD 790, sir.' Morgan insisted on being called 'sir'; anyone calling her 'mistress' or 'my lady' did not last long in her training camp.

She nodded. 'Exactly. Thirteen of our years ago in Avalon but over a millennium for the humans. You were a noble son of the royal family of Mercia when you were thrown out. What has become of your royal house now, Elfric?'

Rick's throat tightened painfully, anger at the humans choking him. 'I don't know, sir. No doubt they got what they deserved.'

Morgan studied him closely, sensing his distress, but human feelings were incomprehensible to the Dark Folk. 'I will tell you. Your royal hall is under a car park. Your blood descendants—the family of your brothers and sisters who were left on Earth—are now scattered across the globe. None of them remember you. None of them cared what happened to you.'

'Your trainers say that you are one of their most gifted warriors. You have been here long enough

to have gained the capacity to manage a huge amount of magical power.' That was true: when Rick looked inside himself he could feel the magic pulsing in his chest like a second heart, hot and potent. 'But they mention also that you are stubborn and at times disobedient.'

Rick swallowed his protest that he'd always tried to obey unless he thought he would harm another student. There were no excuses in Avalon.

Morgan closed the file. 'Obstinacy is bred in your bones so you will be watched for any sign of slacking in your duty to King Oberon.'

'Yes, sir.'

She gave him a chilling smile. 'You remind me of Arthur Pendragon.'

Revolted to be compared to one of the human terrorists he despised, Rick shot to his feet. 'I am nothing like him, sir!'

'Sit down, soldier. See, he was exactly like you: proud, certain he could defeat his enemies. But I showed him, did I not?'

King Arthur was currently imprisoned on an island in a far-flung corner of Avalon, thinking he would one day be released and summoned back to the human world in its hour of greatest need. All the Dark Folk and the changelings knew that would never happen as his jail was too secure, but Arthur persisted in his hope, polishing his armour

daily to be ready. Morgan was the Fey who had put him there.

‘But I’m not the same as him—really I’m not. Please, I want my chance. I was thrown away by my family and you saved me. I can do this.’

‘Hmm. We shall see.’ Morgan focused on her next recruit, flicking open an emerald green folder. ‘Roxy Topley. Brought here as an infant but raised for years out of my control by a band of wandering pixies.’

It was Roxy’s turn to look worried. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘We know they taught you unusual skills so I will overlook this blot on your record. Prove my trust in your abilities is justified.’

Roxy nodded, a very subdued response for her. Rick guessed she wasn’t as eager to go on a mission as he was. She had not trained for as many years as he had so maybe she did not feel ready.

The last file was silver-blue.

‘Santiago Dulac, half-human, half-Mage Fey. That is a dangerous combination, Master Dulac.’

Bob whined somewhere in the tent. Rick spotted him hiding under a tapestry, paws peeping out of the bottom edge. The little canine familiar had infiltrated the pavilion through the daring but rather direct method of excavating a socking great big hole.

Intent on her task, Morgan paid no attention to the noise. ‘Mage Fey have been suspect ever since King Oberon defeated Malduc of Misty Lake and took control of Avalon from him. The Mage were crushed but those sharing their blood will never be trusted. Still, you have skills that complement those of your team mates so I will allow you to try them out on this quest. You already know what will happen if you fail.’

Tiago’s expression was blank. Whatever he was thinking, he was keeping it to himself.

Rick glanced at his companions but none of them looked as if they were about to ask the necessary questions. It was up to him as usual. ‘What exactly is the problem you want us to sort out, sir? We understand that the power supply to Dark Lore was cut, but what’s that got to do with the human world?’

Morgan flicked her wrist and one side of the pavilion rose up like a curtain, revealing the woods that surrounded Dark Lore and a view of the distant white-capped mountains, edges sharp against the cobalt blue sky. That was as much of Avalon as Rick had ever seen. He had heard tales of this world’s incredible beauty and advanced organic technology; seen pictures of Oberon’s huge palace of white towers spreading like a coral reef at the centre of his kingdom; the pale sandy beaches

of the Land Under the Sea, with its pink starfish basking on crystal rocks; the endless forests of Deepdene where the leaves were copper, bronze, and gold in summer, making a burnished carpet in winter. The land was criss-crossed with soaring Dew Track, a network linking all the key places in the realm. The station for Dark Lore lay just beyond the gates, bubbles of magic sitting on silver rails, ready to carry Fey messengers at high speed to their destination like glass balls in an enormous marble run. Sycicopters (the final model—not prototypes) buzzed in the sky transporting those who preferred air to the rollercoaster ride of the Dew Track. Rick wished he had their freedom.

Morgan gestured to the view. ‘The wonders of Avalon exist thanks to the power we draw from the human world. The humans have been attacking the power exchange between Avalon and Earth, putting all this at risk. The worst has been felt here but other sites have experienced disruption. If it carries on, we will have to declare open war on humanity.’

Rick felt a surge of excitement, a hunger for battle. If the humans cut off the energy drawn from the living and growing things of Earth, Fey magic would cease to work. The Dark Folk would be doomed. He’d fight to stop that with everything in his power.

‘The task given to you is to prevent such a costly war,’ continued Morgan. ‘You must identify those responsible so we can deal with them in secret.’

‘Who’s doing it, sir, and why?’ asked Roxy, deciding to join the discussion.

‘If we knew the answer, we would not send you but a Fey elimination squad. No, we need you to go undercover as ordinary humans and discover the culprits. It was what we trained you for. We know where the centre of the disturbance is—the ring that powers the magic of Dark Lore—but we do not know exactly how it was done, or who is behind the plot.’

‘A Fey power ring, sir?’

‘Yes, soldier. The ring is located in a city called Oxford in the centre of England. Created early in the days of ring technology, it sits at a junction between many other supplies—like a key fortress in a network of defences. An attack there is both clever and extremely dangerous—if you take control of that one, it gives you access to all the others.’ Morgan steepled her fingers, thinking the matter through. ‘We should have seen the threat earlier but nothing has disturbed the rings for centuries so we let down our guard. The Fey in charge of surveillance has already been sent to the dragons.’

‘Do we know who is likely to be behind it?’ asked Rick, preferring not to dwell on the unlucky Fey.

‘The last time the exchange was threatened was when Arthur was at the height of his power. You have been told in your Feysyks lessons that if his knights sat at the Round Table, they were able to disrupt the flow and take our power. They used their stolen magic to repel our counterattack. King Oberon believes we should look for someone who is trying to re-establish the Round Table in modern times.’

‘So,’ said Rick carefully. You never wanted to say too much around the commander. ‘Our job is to hunt down the new knights of the Round Table in this place, Oxford, and stop them before they destroy Avalon?’

‘Exactly. Our intelligence suggests that recruitment will begin among the youth, as Arthur Pendragon did before. I’m placing you in one of the biggest pools of raw young talent, close to the centre of the trouble.’

‘What kind of place, sir? A training camp for knights?’

‘A *school*, Elfric. Have you not been listening in your briefing sessions? Young people do not train openly as knights these days; they go to these so-called educational establishments and

are mollycoddled into useless creatures with few practical skills. We are not so lax at Dark Lore. You will infiltrate and discover who there is active in the new Round Table and use them to lead you to the chief plotters.'

'Yes, sir.' Rick's initial excitement faded as he took a more realistic view of the task. They were so doomed. Three untried warriors sent to take on dangerous knights in the world peopled by evil humans: what could possibly go wrong?

Just about everything.