

MERLIN'S BLADE

Book 1 of the Merlin Spiral

By Robert Treskillard



PROLOGUE

Bosven Moor, In the year of our Lord, 407

Arvol could hear the pine trees mocking his youth, their thin, green fingers fretting in the wind. And they would betray him if he didn't move fast, he just knew it, and his deer would get away again. He wiped his brow, stole across the dead needles, and crouched behind a tree. He held his breath and notched an arrow.

The three deer chewed and sniffed.

Arvol's throat tingled and his body tensed. He parted the branches with his arrow as shadows danced on its pewter tip.

The deer twitched their ears and turned their heads in unison.

Arvol pulled the arrow back—and his bow creaked.

Their hoofs jerked and their legs tensed.

He sped the shaft—and it pierced the buck deeply. Hide parted, muscle ripped and blood spattered. Even as the does vanished into the forest, the horned one fell.

Arvol whooped, and the sound echoed across the upland rock-strewn hills and faded into the deep forests. He stretched his shoulders to ease the tension as he inspected his prize, whose meat would feed his family for many days. At only fourteen winters, this was his first deer.

A spring gurgled a stone's throw away, and he longed to wet his dry tongue.

But he dare not.

The wind sighed, and he turned to study the bushes. A branch creaked behind him and he pulled his knife out. Thieves hid nearby, he just knew, ready to creep out and steal his meat.

With wary eyes, he cleaned and skinned the deer, daring to imagine the celebration his family would have that night. His little sister would prance and play as his widowed mother would stir the stew-pot and praise his skill with the bow. Ah, and they would have smoked meat all through winter if his hunting went like this. Enough to share and hopefully boast about. After all, wouldn't he be the best hunter on the moor—just like his father had been? But his father'd been killed in the tin mine, and Arvol didn't want to think about that now.

When he finished cutting up the meat, he placed it inside the folded deer hide. Then, just as his father had taught him, he knifed holes along the hide's edge. Through these he threaded twigs to seal the meat well enough for the hike back to his borrowed boat and long row home.

The sun reddened as Arvol axed down two saplings and roped the hide-bound bundle to them for a make-shift sled he could barely pull. The job done, he hefted the poles and made his way through the trees. Finally out on the open moor, he spied in the distance his boat tied up at the shoreline of the marsh.

He arrived, panting, and loaded his meat into the boat, really just a large coracle. Unsteady in the water, its wood groaned under the oars' action as he pulled away. Arvol's stomach soured—he trusted his own booted feet more than a jumble such as this. Glancing back at his precious meat, he wondered why he had borrowed *this* boat.

From the branch of a sycamore that stood amongst the sedge-grasses, a red-legged raven swooped down and snatched up a frog. The bird flew to the prow, looked at him with menacing eyes, and then ripped the frog to pieces, gulping down its wriggling legs.

"Get away you!" He swung an oar at the bird, and it flapped away.

Twilight descended as he rowed. The stars appeared, but they refused to reflect off the turgid water. The moon raised its leprous head through the trees, casting anxious shadows on the reeds that rattled against the boat.

Lifting, dropping, and pulling the oars, Arvol felt as if someone watched him. Closing his eyes, he listened but heard nothing except the clicking jaws of insects, frogs, a few birds, and the greasy splash of the water. The impulse to turn around pressed upon him. Did

someone lurk in another boat or on an island?

Ah, foolishness—not at this time of night!

But the desire to look grew stronger.

Hairs rose on Arvol's neck and a chill slid down his tunic like a cold snake.

Someone *was* watching him.

He turned, surprised to see he'd made so much progress. On his right stood Ynys Avallow, the largest island in the marsh, and upon it the old, crumbling tower. The shadowy ruins and scattered descendants of an ancient apple orchard slid past him as he rowed—but he felt no malice there.

He turned the other way and scrutinized the waters along the shore. The dark mass of the Meneth Gellyk Mountain rose to his left. Soon he'd be at Bosventor's familiar docks and the safety of home. No need to worry.

Then he beheld the Dragon Star.

Arvol stared in awe. Across the southwestern sky floated a ball of blue flame with two tails, one straight and the other curving upwards. These tails caused most of the villagers in Bosventor to name it the Dragon Star, but Arvol liked to think it an arrowhead. It had appeared near the end of summer, and fixed there in the sky each night it slowly moved westward toward the setting sun as the season changed.

He shook his head.

It couldn't be.

And yet the instant he looked away and back again he knew the Dragon Star watched him like some bulbous blue eye. Surely not! Or was he going mad, too—like his grandfather?

Yet he couldn't shake the feeling.

Danger.

His throat closed up and he wanted to leap out and swim for shore. But he forced himself to sit still, because a hunter mustn't give in to that! Certainly not the best hunter on the moor.

As he'd trained himself to do when hunting the tusk-boar with his father, he bent his fear and strung tight his courage. Picking up his bow, Arvol set an arrow on it. He aimed right at the Dragon Star and let it fly with a satisfying zip.

Even as the arrow splashed into a distant part of the marsh, Arvol smiled in triumph and turned away from the Dragon Star to grip the oars—only to see the unexpected.

Bright and brighter, an orange light flickered on the boat. The

marsh beyond lit up as if the full moon had burst into flame.

A tremendous roaring filled the air, and a ferocious mass of living fire shot over his head. It descended with deadly power just beyond the marsh and struck a low hill. Chunks of earth and white-hot flame exploded outwards.

A wave of heat blasted into him. He shrieked as his hair ignited and his eyebrows singed away. His clothing and skin smoldered. The boat's wood and leather burst into flames like kindling.

The marsh and open water churned in liquid convulsion. The boat spun and leapt into the air—just as a wind blew down all the trees on shore and sucked Arvol's lungs empty. The aged boat ruptured beneath him and he fell into the watery chaos.

His hands flailed desperately at the venison as the waves roared over his head. He saw for a moment the beloved face of his mother—and the face of his dead father.

But they faded, and a shadowed vision arose in their place.

Arvol beheld the clans and peoples of Britain gathered together. And each one—young and old, farmer, craftsman, warrior, chieftain and king alike—worshipped the Dragon Star. Yet even as the people bowed, the Dragon Star betrayed them and blazed forth blue flames of destruction. All through the land it raged—along with swarming invaders who slaughtered, enslaved and pillaged.

Death. Death and destruction.

The souls of many wept, and above all a woman's voice called:

*Woe! Woe to Britain!
For the Dragon Star has come,
and who will save us?*

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