

BEFORE THE ROUND TABLE...BEFORE ARTHUR WAS CROWNED...
THERE WAS MERLIN.

MERLIN'S BLADE



ROBERT TRESKILLARD

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ZONDERVAN

Merlin's Blade (excerpt)

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All Scripture paraphrased by the author to approximate a fifth-century cultural context.

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PROLOGUE

THE DRAGON STAR

BOSVENNA MOOR
IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 407

The pine trees mocked his youth, their thin, green fingers fretting in the wind. If he didn't move fast, they would betray him—he just knew it—and the deer would get away ... again. Arvel wiped his brow, stole across an expanse of dead pine needles, and crouched behind a bush strangled by bindweed and its poisonous red berries.

Holding his breath, he nocked an arrow.

The three deer chewed and sniffed.

Arvel's throat tingled and his body tensed. He parted the leaves at the side of the bush with his arrow as shadows danced on its pewter tip.

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

Arvel drew back the bowstring—and winced as the wood creaked.

Instantly, hoofs jerked and legs tensed.

He sped the arrow toward its mark, and it pierced the buck deeply. Even as the does vanished into the forest, the antlered one fell.

Arvel whooped, and the sound echoed across the rock-strewn hills and faded into the deep forest. He stretched his shoulders to ease the tension as he inspected his prize. The meat would feed his family for many days. At only fourteen winters, he had downed his first deer.

A spring gurgled only a stone's throw away, and he longed to drink the pure water. But did he dare leave his kill? In answer, the wind sighed and clattered a branch behind him. He pulled out his knife as he turned to study the bushes. Thieves hid nearby, he was certain, ready to creep out and steal his meat.

With wary eyes he cleaned and skinned the buck, daring to imagine the celebration his family would hold that night. His little sister would prance and play, and his mother would stir the stew pot and praise his skill with the bow. He grinned at the thought. Ah, and they would have smoked meat all through the 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?

His grin faded. His father had been taken as a slave by raiding warriors. Arvel drove the knife deep into the buck's haunch and waited for his vision to clear. 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 edge of the pelt. Through these holes he threaded twigs to seal the meat well enough for the hike back to his borrowed boat and the long row home.

The sun reddened as Arvel axed down two saplings and roped the hide-bound bundle to them for a makeshift sled. The job done, he hefted the poles and made his way through the trees with some difficulty. Finally out on the open moor, he spied his boat—a large coracle—in the distance, tied up along the shoreline of the marsh.

He crossed the moor, struggling due to the weight of the sled, and finally reached the marsh's edge. Panting, he loaded his meat into the boat's hull, then took his seat. The wood groaned under the pull of the oars, and the boat rocked as he glided away from the shore. Arvel's stomach soured. He trusted his own booted feet more than a jumble such as this. Glancing back at his precious venison, he wondered why he had borrowed *this* boat.

From the branch of an alder that stood among 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!” Arvel 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, Arvel felt as if someone was watching him. Closing his eyes, he listened but heard nothing except the clicking jaws of insects ... the croaks of frogs ... the calls of 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 Arvel’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 the tip of Inis Avallow, the largest island in the marsh, and far down its length he spied the old, crumbling tower. As he rowed, the shadowy ruins and scattered descendants of an ancient apple orchard slid past him. But he felt no malice there.

He turned the other way and scrutinized the waters along the shore. The dark mass of a mountain, the Meneth Gellik, 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.

Arvel stared in awe. Across the southwestern sky floated a ball of blue flame with two tails, one straight and the other curving upward. Though these tails had inspired the star’s draconian name, Arvel liked to think of the shape as an arrowhead. The star had appeared near the end of summer, and, fixed there in the sky each night, the mysterious blaze 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. Was he going mad, like his grandfather?

Still, he couldn't shake the feeling. His throat closed up, and he wanted to leap out of the boat and swim for shore. But he forced himself to sit still, because a hunter mustn't give in to such panic. 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, Arvel slowly readied an arrow. When he could wait no longer, he aimed right at the Dragon Star and let the arrow fly with a satisfying zip.

As the arrow splashed into a distant part of the marsh, Arvel smiled in triumph and turned away from the star to grip the oars.

But when his gaze met the horizon, he saw something unexpected.

The marsh lit up as if the full moon had burst into flame. Bright and brighter, an orange light flickered along the boat's rim.

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 a white-hot blaze exploded outward.

He shrieked as his hair ignited and his eyebrows singed away. His clothing and skin smoldered, and within moments the boat's wood and leather caught fire like kindling.

The marsh and open water churned in liquid convulsion. The boat spun and was thrown into the air, just as a crushing wind shattered all the trees and sucked Arvel's lungs empty. The aged boat ruptured beneath him, and he fell into the watery chaos.

His hands flailed at the venison as the waves roared over his head. He saw the beloved face of his mother and the face of his missing father.

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

Arvel beheld the clans and peoples of Britain gathered together. And each one—young and old, farmer, craftsman, warrior, chieftain, and king alike—worshiped 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?