

This is a preview excerpt of

RUINS *of* CAMELOT

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The next day, Gabriella finally found Coalroot.

She had spent the morning (not that she could tell if it truly was morning or not) descending a long, straight shaft ever deeper into the earth. The walls of the tunnel had grown increasingly taller and narrower as she walked, so that she felt like a mouse crawling within the walls of a cottage. The air had become warmer as she progressed and was now quite hot. Sweat trickled into her eyes, and she swiped it away with the inside of her wrist.

There was light as well. Unlike every other glow that she had encountered in the caverns, however, this light was neither blue nor cold. It was a burnished red, growing gradually brighter as she progressed. The sparks of her torch streaked ahead, following the course of the tunnel as if in the teeth of a hard wind despite the perfect stillness of the air.

"Whatever you do," Gabriella repeated under her breath, "do not talk about treasure. That's the only rule. Do not so much as say the word. Can we do that, Featherbolt?"

Featherbolt stood on her shoulder, his feathers fluffed out in an effort to cool himself. His wing felt hot against her cheek.

"Get off," she whispered, flapping a hand at him. "You're making me even hotter."

The bird launched into the air and squawked in irritation. He circled her, apparently unwilling to get too far ahead.

A vertical bar of deep red became visible between the walls of the tunnel some unknown distance away. There was subtle motion within its depths, as though from a slowly shifting cloud.

"I think we are very nearly there," Gabriella said, swallowing. "According to Helena and Goodrik, Coalroot will tell us what we need to know. So long as we do not say the wrong thing."

The air had developed a whiff of sulphur. The goblinfire rippled and flared, leaping towards the reddish light ahead. The rift grew as they neared it.

There was a noise. Gabriella heard it and realised that it had been going on for some time just below the level of audibility. It was a dull rumble, a sort of groan, as if the earth itself were shifting very subtly around her.

Featherbolt landed upon her shoulder again. He clicked his beak and shivered his head violently, raising the tiny feathers of his forehead into hackles.

"I know," Gabriella replied nervously.

Finally, after what seemed like far too long a time, they reached the end of the tunnel. Beyond its high walls, red depths stirred massively, like storm clouds at sunset. The stench of sulphur was overwhelming. Gabriella stopped and drew a deep breath through her mouth. Then, steeling her nerve, she stepped out into the red light.

The cavern was monumental. Its floor was a shattered valley, broken and jagged, strewn with boulders. Smoke poured from the cracks, dimming the air, and yet red light filled the space, reaching even to the ragged cone of the ceiling hundreds of feet up.

In the centre of the space, dominating it, was a shape that Gabriella simply could not comprehend. It was something like a twisted tree, so enormous that it would have dwarfed the entire castle of Camelot. It was black as coal, wrinkled with deep crags, cracks, and fissures. Its branches jutted up and out in all directions, thick as highways and driven deep into the cavern's ceiling. Far below this, the tree's roots spread like rocky tentacles, laced with cracks. The cracks glowed orange, as if the core of each root was pure fire. Worst of all, the centre of the tree's trunk bore a gaping maw, burning bright red, as if lined with live coals. This was the source of the ruddy light that filled the cavern.

Featherbolt clung to Gabriella's shoulder, his talons scratching tightly on the edge of her armour. Slowly, staring wide-eyed up at the incredible shape, Gabriella walked out onto the broken plane of the floor.

GABRIELLA XAVIER.

The voice that spoke her name was not human. It was hardly even a voice. It seemed to be formed of the guttural rumblings of the earth itself, vibrating deep into her ears and thrumming in her bowels. It was simultaneously almost silent and massively deafening.

"Yes," she replied. Her own voice came out as a dry croak, but she could not seem to bring herself to speak any louder.

Gabriella Xavier... Xavier... Gabriella... avier... ella...

The voice rumbled onwards, breaking into echoes, dozens and hundreds of them. The echoes seemed to fade into great distance, and Gabriella had the eerie sense that they were being broadcast throughout every dark depth of the Barrens underground.

"Heh hee!" a much smaller voice suddenly called out. Coming on the heels of the diminishing monstrous echoes, this new voice was tiny and merry, like a jingle bell in the disastrous expanse of the cavern. Gabriella glanced around, seeking its source.

A small man was seated amongst the snaking roots of the tree shape. His back was bowed with age, and his bald head bobbed as he waved at her. Against all probability, he seemed to be sitting in an old rocking chair. He worked it gleefully, bobbing back and forth on its curved rails. Even through the distance, Gabriella could see that he was grinning at her merrily, beckoning her forwards.

"*What in hell...*," Gabriella muttered, her eyes still wide.

Carefully and warily, she began to move towards the wizened figure. It was slow work due to the disastrously broken floor and the rafts of noxious smoke that poured through the cracks. As she skirted these, Gabriella saw that the crevices glowed faintly in their depths, some as wide and deep as canyons. The rumble of the earth was still audible. She could feel it through the soles of her boots. Before her, the awful tree shape loomed ever larger. Waves of heat baked from its jagged surface, beating down on her. Featherbolt switched his head back and forth restlessly, still clinging to the lip of her breastplate.

"Hee hee! Come forth, Princess!" the tiny, old man called thinly, still waving. "Come and greet me. Let us speak! Oh my, yes." He cackled wheezily, gaily.

The floor around the snaking roots was shattered into sharp, uneven terraces, each one higher than the one before it. Gabriella climbed these cautiously as she neared the man. The enormous, black roots of the tree shape spread around her now, each one as charred and deeply cracked as embers. Where they sank into the ground, the rocks rippled with heat shimmers. The twisted trunk rose above her, scorched black and ribbed with deep, sharp crags.

"That's a girl," the old man laughed. His voice was nearly as cracked as the rocks around him. He smiled at her gummily, chewing his lips, but his eyes were brilliantly sharp, blue like the ice of a

winter millpond. "Come closer. Have a rest and visit awhile. Ask me your questions, Princess, and tell me your tales."

Gabriella was close enough to the old man now that he didn't have to raise his voice to speak. She neared him warily, and he simply looked up at her, his head bobbing on the stubby stalk of his neck. He wore a rough, nondescript cowl, its hood pushed back between the knobs of his shoulders. Between his clasped hands was the head of a black cane apparently made of stone. Its tip was notched into the cracks before his bare feet. He rocked energetically, watching his visitor, apparently waiting for her to speak.

Gabriella studied him, frowning with consternation. Finally, she asked, "Are you... Coalroot?"

The old man grinned suddenly, stretching his wrinkled lips and showing his toothlessness. He rocked slightly faster. This, Gabriella figured, was answer enough.

"What was that voice I heard earlier? The one that sounded like the earth itself and spoke my name?"

"Hm-*hmm!*" the old man laughed secretively, his eyes dancing. He raised one hand and touched a finger to the side of his nose. He nodded and giggled.

Gabriella's frown deepened. "I was sent here," she announced. "I was told that you could help me in my quest. Is this true?"

"Perhaps!" the old man replied, nodding. "It all depends, does it not?"

"On what does it depend?" Gabriella pressed evenly.

The old man's eyes cleared for a moment. "On whether you ask the right questions."

Gabriella drew a sigh. She didn't have time for riddles from demented, old men. She looked around the ruddy depths of the cavern.

"What is this place?" she asked, curiosity getting the better of her. "And who are you?"

"Ah-hah!" the old man brightened. "A question that I can answer! This is the restless grave of Chaorenvar, also known as Lord Vulcan, the undisputed ruler of the molten deep. These," the old man raised an arm, gesturing at the charred tree-shape overhead, "are his frozen bones!"

"Chaorenvar," Gabriella repeated slowly. "The ancient fire mountain?"

"Aye," the man rasped passionately, "ancient but never at rest. This cavern is the negative of the mountain peak that once framed him! Alas, the broken slopes of his mighty shoulders have fallen away, leaving only its shadow in this tomb of earth, but the bones of Chaorenvar's fiery core remain. Do not let his tree-like appearance fool you! His branches are the shafts that broke to the surface above, spilling rivers of rock. His roots are the conduits to the molten oceans of the earth's heart.

And his trunk is the hellish throat of his wrath, what once belched liquid fire high into the clouds, raining ashy death onto the lands above for miles in every direction."

Gabriella was dumbstruck. She looked up at the petrified bones of the mythic volcano. Its molten heart still glowed, proving that it was not dead, but only dormant. The old man rocked and muttered to himself happily. He giggled. After a minute, Gabriella lowered her eyes to his again.

"Then that must make you the spirit of the volcano," she ventured, "I have read of such things in the myths. You are not as you may appear, but change your form for whomever you meet. Is this so?"

The old man grinned up at her and shrugged his bony shoulders, not as if he didn't know the answer, but as if he had no intention of giving it. The blue of his eyes seemed to flash in the baleful dimness. He leant towards her. "You may indeed call me Coalroot," he whispered harshly, as if sharing a delicious secret.

Gabriella went on, "What do you know of me besides my name?"

Coalroot tilted his head back and forth thoughtfully. "I know your past and future but not your present. It is the nature of my being. Time is to us exactly the reverse of what it is to you, for you know the present but never the future and barely the past. Oh yes. Heh hee! Many have come to me over the eons, and I always sense their approach. I know as well the nature of their leaving. If, of course," here, his eyes switched towards her and grew sharp, "they are *allowed* to leave. Heh hee!"

He sighed with amusement and then became more subdued. "But alas, I never know what anyone might do or say during the moments that they are with me. Perhaps they come to seek their futures. Or perhaps, instead, they come to steal from my hoard! *Many* come with that very intent, you know, for I have collected much treasure from the forgotten depths of the earth! More than most can imagine. It amuses me!" He cackled again, wheezing almost silently, and then asked with a conspiratorial leer, "Do *you* know of my hoard, Gabriella Xavier?"

Gabriella shook her head carefully. "I have come for knowledge," she answered. "That is all."

Coalroot chewed his lips as he considered this, nodding his head speculatively. His fingers squeezed and gripped the head of his cane, making balls of knuckles. "I have very *much* treasure," he acknowledged, winking one eye up at her. "It is right behind me, buried in a vast hollow. The gold shines like the sun in the light of my fires. You wish to see it, do you not?"

"No," Gabriella replied warily, fear uncoiling in her belly like a snake. "I am here to ask questions. The only thing I seek is knowledge."

Coalroot's eyes narrowed, and his smile snapped shut like a trap. He stopped rocking and glared at her. After a very long pause, he began to rock again, more slowly now.

"I remember why it is that you have come to me," he admitted.

Gabriella exhaled with relief. "You know what I seek? And what is my mission?"

Coalroot shrugged slowly, his eyes still narrowed. She was going to have to ask of course. Creatures such as this never gave willingly. She straightened her back and drew a deep breath.

"I seek the one called Merodach," she stated clearly. "I must find him and confront him. I am given to understand that you know where he is."

Coalroot's lips stretched into a sly smile. "I know where he was yesterday, and I know where he shall be on the morrow; thus, I can offer a satisfactory guess of where he is at this moment. But you must know, Gabriella Xavier, that such knowledge does not come without a price."

Gabriella looked at him. The heat of the cavern baked over her, drying the sweat on her brow even as it appeared. "I have little to offer," she replied. "What do you require of me?"

"Oh, it is not that sort of price," Coalroot grinned, his rocking speeding up again. "The cost of knowledge, Princess, is *more* knowledge. You cannot leave here learning only that which you *wish* to know. You must take with you the burden of full clarity. It is the only way."

Gabriella's brow furrowed uncertainly. "You mean," she said, "that you will tell me more than I ask for? That is all?"

Coalroot's cackle filled the hot air, rising like bats into the darkness. On Gabriella's shoulder, Featherbolt ruffled his feathers violently and clicked his beak.

"Yes!" Coalroot wheezed gleefully. "Yes, that is all! But beware, Princess! It is indeed a price that many do not wish to pay! Full clarity can destroy a human as surely as any sword! Many have chosen to lie down and die beneath the weight of knowledge! Heh hee! Their bones are scattered amongst the rocks below, along with the skeletons of those who came in search of my treasure! Indeed, many more have come to see me than have left again!" He laughed shrilly, delighted.

Gabriella stood stoically in the face of the old man's mad glee. She tried to imagine what sort of knowledge could possibly lead to her mortal despair but could think of nothing. When Coalroot's cackles finally subsided, she faced him stolidly.

"Tell me what I wish to know," she declared, "and I will accept the burden of whatever else you give me."

Coalroot still tittered to himself, even as his eyes locked on hers, narrowing. "As you wish, Princess," he agreed. "The man Merodach is not himself on the march as you have supposed. He shall be in the same place tomorrow as he was yesterday. He awaits at the Theatre of the Broken Crown, just beyond the northernmost edge of the Tempest Barrens. There, the man has established his fortress."

Gabriella absorbed this with growing confusion. "He awaits...?" she asked faintly, worriedly. "For what?"

The old man giggled through closed lips, leaning forwards in his chair even as he continued rocking. "For something," he allowed, "but not for you."

Gabriella frowned in disbelief. "Then he is not on the march?"

"*He* is not," Coalroot winked cagily. "But his armies are, and they are many! Oh my yes! Many indeed! They are further than you have guessed, very nearly upon their prey! Heh hee!"

Gabriella's heart grew heavy as lead inside her. She nodded slowly, clenching her jaw. "I will go to him nonetheless. The beast must die. Vengeance will visit him, and his armies will scatter."

Coalroot did not laugh at this. Instead, he ceased rocking in his chair and leant even further forwards, his eyes turning icy as he commanded her gaze. "*Will* you?" he asked meaningfully. "And *shall* they?"

Gabriella stared into his cold eyes. A shiver coursed over her despite the heat of the cavern. She began to sense just how steep the price of her information might be. She took a step back from the old man's piercing stare.

"Yes," he breathed. "You begin to see, do you not? Everyone does at the very last, even with their dying breath. Even your mother, *she* knew the truth as she lay on her chamber floor bleeding out her last, her eyes glazing over, feeling the life force ebb slowly from her body. You have been granted a great gift, Gabriella Xavier. You will know that which others only learn when it is too late to matter. You will know the cords of fate, and see just how small you are in comparison to them..."

Gabriella wished to shrink back, but her feet remained locked to the stone. In the face of that mad glare, she regretted her choice. She wished she could take back her questions. Suddenly, the knowledge she had gained felt small and paltry compared to what might be about to come. Coalroot's eyes seemed to grow larger, expanding to icy pits, deep as the cavern lake she had encountered on her journey. The rumbling earth spoke his words along with him, forming a cataclysmic unison.

"You will go to the man Merodach in his fortress, and you will face him. It is your destiny," the voices rang, filling the cavern, their words falling like weights. "But... you shall fail in your quest. Your father's kingdom is already in ruins. Camelot will be no more. Its name shall be swallowed into oblivion, reduced to myth, dismissed as legend. All those that you love... shall die. They will pass unto Sheol. And soon, Gabriella Xavier, *you shall join them.*"

The echo of Coalroot's words rang through the darkness, no longer wheezing and shrill but clanging like iron, shaking the very cavern walls. He continued to stare at her, to glare straight into her, measuring the collapse of her will and seeming to delight in it. His smile was razor thin, sharp as flint.

Finally, after what seemed like several minutes, the echoes of his proclamation faded away, diminishing into the hidden depths of the Barrens underground. Gabriella stood there in the heat, the ruddy light glinting from her armour.

Slowly, she nodded.

"*So be it,*" she whispered to herself.

Coalroot stared up at the young woman, his smile fading, and did something that he had not done for centuries, perhaps even millennia.

He blinked.

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