

A Glastonbury Tale

a short story by

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This book is the result of a competition on bbc.co.uk/somerset organised by Helen Otter and Jonathan Bennett.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either a product of the authors' imaginations or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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A Glastonbury Tale

This book is the result of a short-story competition organised by **BBC Somerset**.

It ran from September 2006 to March 2007 and gave **bbc.co.uk/somerset** contributors the chance to have their work voiced by authors and actors, broadcast on BBC radio, and published in a book.

BBC Somerset started off the first part of the story, courtesy of Lois Harbinson from the Wells Festival of Literature, and then asked contributors to the website to write their entries for the second chapter.

A winner was chosen from those entries and published on **bbc.co.uk/somerset** at which point the competition reopened for the next chapter. And so on and so on until the story reached its denouement.

You can listen to the audio version of the story by logging on to **bbc.co.uk/somerset**.

Chapter I by Lois Harbinson

The storm breaks just before midnight. Nick's face has been punched by hot, angry gusts of wind since he turned off the main road on his way back from a party and now thunder echoes round the hills. He is unfamiliar with the dark of country roads and the tiny speck of light from the torch on his key ring died ten minutes ago. The sky cracks open with a vicious light and slow, heavy rain falls, then gathers speed and weight until he feels hammered to the ground, hair plastered to his head, shirt fused to his body. He is no longer sure where he is. The next flash lights the earth for several seconds of stuttering neon and illuminates glistening roof tiles through the trees. He turns up a wide track, hoping for shelter. The track, deeply rutted and running with water, brings him to a five-

Chapter 1 by Lois Harbinson

bar gate and then to a small white one set in low railings. He pushes it and walks up a flagstone path towards a large building. The neon flares again and briefly lights the squat tower of a church, seemingly in the middle of a field. Balls of lightning ricochet round the churchyard, hovering and flickering over tilted tombstones. The porch gapes bleakly but at least offers sanctuary. Nick creeps inside and leans shivering against the wall.

A voice comes out of the blackness.

“Ah, you’ m come then.”

Nick spins round and steps quickly back into the rain. He grips the cold stone and peers into the dark.

“Allus a good place to shelter, a church porch,” the voice continues calmly. “Plenty o’ room inside.”

Nick resumes his position.

“You were caught out too,” he says, struggling to speak steadily.

“No, I got here first. I knew she were comin’.”

A match sparks at the back of the porch and Nick sees a lined, weathered face and sharp eyes glinting under the brim of a baseball cap. The match goes out.

“You want to wait awhile,” the man advises. “She’s some energy in ’er yet.”

“Right,” says Nick, “I’m not sure where I am anyway.”

“Hornblotton Church,” the man informs him. “You’re not far from home.”

Nick wonders how he knows.

“I don’t fancy going out there anyway at the moment. The lightning seems trapped between the gravestones.”

“No,” the man replies. “It’s Punkies.”

Chapter I by Lois Harbinson

“What?” Nick laughs.

“Punkies,” the man repeats. “They do say as how they’re the souls of unbaptised children, wandering till Doomsday. Mostly you’ll see them on Midsummer’s Eve, and sometimes during a storm.”

“Right,” says Nick politely, “and what do they look like?”

“Who knows? I’ve heard they’m like great white moths.”

Nick lets it go and stands silently watching the rain bounce off the graves.

At last it slackens and the rumbles of thunder fade into the distance.

“You can go now,” the man says, dismissing him. “Down to the end of the track, then left and follow yer nose. ’Tis just five minutes.”

Nick, unnerved by the man's uncanny knowledge, murmurs his thanks and dives out of the porch. He swerves to avoid the ball of light that is, apparently, a Punky, catches his foot on a knot of grass and crashes in to the sludge of a grave, his head narrowly missing the stone cross. His mobile, clutched as always in his left hand, slips from his grasp. He is immediately lifted and set on his feet. Yet the man stands no higher than Nick's shoulder, his face shadowed by the cap.

“There's a pity,” he says, wiping the mobile on the inside of his long coat and handing it back. “I think it's gone inside. You'll have to watch that. Be seeing yer.”

He walks off and vanishes behind a yew tree.

Nick wakes to thunder, this time on the bedroom door, and the thud of an object landing on his pillow.

“You left this on the kitchen table,” says Josh, with whom he rents the cottage. “Is that squawk a ring tone? It’s gross.”

Nick shuts the thing off.

“It’s probably got a cold. I dropped it on a wet grave last night.” Josh’s left eyebrow shoots up to meet the tangle of his eternally unbrushed hair.

“OK,” laughs Nick, “I got caught in that storm and lost my way.”

“Right. I’m working the morning shift today. What are you up to?” Josh spends half his time shifting goods for the local supermarket and the other half in a cramped outhouse he calls his studio, creating ceramics that he is beginning to market.

Nick remembers that he is due in Weston-super-Mare at 11am for an introductory day at the company where he is to start his first job in web design in August. He rolls out of bed and wonders if he has any clean clothes. Josh's face appears upside down round the bathroom door.

“You in tonight? Right, I'll pick up some stuff.” They save quite a bit on Josh's discount.

Before he leaves, Nick checks his calls. On the mobile's screen an alien image appears; an insect's head, beak-like mouth opening and shutting, antennae frantically waving, enormous oval eyes staring blackly. He curses Josh's sense of humour. No matter which button he punches he cannot shift it. He tries all the functions and they work, but the insect will not go away. Time is running out and he gives up in frustration, stuffs the phone in his pocket and locks the front door.

Nick leaves the office in Weston at 6pm. It has been a day packed with information and new faces, and he needs to wind down. The clear summer evening tempts him to take the long way back and explore his new surroundings. He punches a random destination in the sat-nav and sets off along the Bridgwater Road. The high-pitched, droning voice direction gets on his nerves and is not what he recalls when he installed it last week. He goes to turn it off, then remembers that the Somerset map is somewhere on his bedroom floor. He stays with it and the voice turns him off the main road and winds him through narrow roads that sometimes stand proud from flat fields with great ditches either side and sometimes seem to ripple beneath the wheels. He crosses two rivers

and threads through the tight streets of several small villages. The voice direction's whiny dirge becomes mesmerising and he loses track of time. A hard left turn takes him up a narrow track with grass sprouting through cracks of crumbling Tarmac and brings him to an abrupt halt at the bank of a river. The voice releases a long sigh and the sat-nav and engine shut down. Nick gazes unfocused through the windscreen and his stomach rumbles. He rummages hopefully through the glovebox and digs out a piece of chocolate welded to the paper and coated in fluff. He eats it, gets out of the car and leans against the bonnet. His head feels hot and fuzzy.

The sun is sinking. Nick's head slowly clears and he is aware of the intense turquoise sky and a remarkable copper light slanting across the level fields, touching the irises that fringe the river bank

and a heron motionless in the water. As he watches, a head rises from the bank and a young woman scrambles out of the undergrowth.

“Hi,” she says and wipes a muddy hand across her nose, leaving a smudge. “Are you lost?”

Nick knows he is staring. Tawny hair flows down her back and drifts about her tanned face. The wide green eyes, generous smile and agile figure in grubby shorts and T-shirt present the ‘fittest’ girl he has ever seen. He opens his mouth to reply when a familiar voice says, “That’s all right, Lena. Ee’s with me,” and he turns to see the little man from the night before with a bleached sunhat pulled over his ears.

“Hi, Dag. Wondered when I’d see you,” the girl responds.

“Well, I’ve brought ’im. Lena, this is Nick. Nick, Lena. They call me Dag, short fer Dagonet*.” They extend hands and Nick automatically shakes them. He is held by Dag’s grip and disturbed by his penetrating blue eyes.

“Well then, my purdy.” Dag stands with Lena on the bank and studies the river. “What a’ yer findings today?”

“It’s worse,” replies Lena. “More patches are appearing every day.”

“Now Nick’s ’ere, you’d better explain it all to him. I know ’ee’s’ a furriner, but I chose ’im fer ’is clear ’ead.”

Lena sits and pulls Nick down beside her.

“Somerset, land of the summer people,” she begins. “These are the Levels, drained marsh land and we’re sitting beside King’s Sedgemoor Drain.”

* Dagonet was King Arthur’s court jester

“That explains all the ditches,” interrupts Nick.

“Rhynes,” corrects Lena. “We call them rhynes. I live over there in Westonzoyland,” and she points to a cluster of roofs picked out by the setting sun. “Did you know we’re only about eight metres above sea level?”

Nick does not, but he enjoys sitting next to her.

“Is that important?” he asks.

“Yes,” Lena replies sombrely. “If the Levels were polluted by salt water then everything would die.” She is silent for a moment and then says very softly, “The herons and the marsh marigolds and the otters.”

Nick is touched by her sad face and asks more seriously, “How do you know all this? Is it likely to happen?”

“I’ve lived here all my life and yes, it could happen. What with drought and high temperatures, the clay ridge on the coast that keeps the sea out could sink. But something else is happening, something strange that no one can explain—the dead patches. They started two months ago, just the odd one, but now they are everywhere. They’re always the same, regular size and they’re beginning to join up. Everyone dismisses it as just global warming, but Dag and I are not so sure. It seems... purposeful, deliberate, as if someone’s systematically poisoning the land.”

“They do say,” Dag interrupts, “that when King Arthur died, Merlin threw away his staff in his sorrow and it stuck fast somewhere on Sedgemoor Plain. They say that if it’s ever removed the Levels will die.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Nick scorns, but Dag continues in an even tone—“Course, when the land’s dead and nothing’ll grow then you might as well build on it—houses, malls, motorways, anything concrete.”

Lena snorts. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Take yer pick,” replies Dag and they sit in silence and look across to where the sun is slipping beyond the horizon, silhouetting a flock of homing birds.

“I love this place,” Lena whispers and Nick can see what she means.

“Do you think that’s possible?” Nick turns to Dag. “Someone deliberately poisoning the land?”

“Anythin’ is possible. It’s your job to find out and do somethin’ about it.”

“Me!” Nick is on his feet.

“Why not?” Dag towers on the bank above Nick, fixes him with his piercing eyes and thunders. “You’ve got nothin’ better to do before the first week in August, have you? Must we stand about and watch destruction while good people do nothin’?” A coil of fear twists in Nick’s belly.

“We must do something,” Lena says quietly and Dag shrinks back to his usual size.

“What?” asks Nick. “Aren’t there environmental people who deal with this sort of thing?”

“I’ve tried,” says Lena. “They know what’s happening, but say it’s natural and there’s nothing they can do.”

“There are dark forces at work in the county,” adds Dag, ignoring Nick’s sceptical look. “We’ve gathered The Five. You, Nick,” he answers Nick’s unspoken question, “are a wizard—computer, that

is, and think logical. Lena knows the land and yer friend Josh is a local lad. What's more he's a sense of humour, which, by the look on yer face, we could do with. We'll search from Portishead to Marshalsea 'til we've found some answers."

"Five?" Nick disputes.

"Ah, yes, well, I must admit the fifth was a bit of a mistake when you tripped in the churchyard. I wasn't concentratin'. The Punky's in yer technology now and you won't get rid of 'er. She's a bit crousty, I'll allow, and they can be a bit mischievous if you don't treat 'em right. Still, she got you 'ere, so that's encouragin'. Just give 'er a name and don't argue. Right, that's settled then."

Nick's not sure he wants to be drawn into all this, then realises that it will mean spending time with Lena. He nods agreement.

“Now,” commands Dag, “Exchange mobile numbers, or whatever it is you do and we can get started.”

“What about you?” Nick asks him.

“Oh, I’ll be around, don’t fret.” Nick believes him.

It is now almost dark and a mist, tinted by the fading rays of the sun, rises swiftly, blurring then blotting out the landscape. Nick is certain he can hear the distant pounding of hoof beats, jingling of harness and moans of human pain. He looks at Lena to see if she hears it too. She nods.

“Sixth of July,” she whispers. “At dimmet you hear the sounds of an old battle. And look, Dag, there!” She points excitedly into the mist. “There are some of those men in dark uniforms I told you about. They’ve got dogs with them.”

Nick peers into the murk, but can see nothing.

Chapter I by Lois Harbinson

“Yeth hounds,” mutters Dag. “The hunting dogs of the devil. Be seeing yer.”

He disappears along the rhyne bank, leaving Nick and Lena to the swirling mist.

Chapter 2 by Alison Walton

Josh is looking at Nick with a mixture of pity and amusement.

“There are lots of myths and legend round these parts,” he says slowly, as if speaking to a child. “I’ve lived with Punkies, galloping ghosts and legends about Arthur all my life. But honestly mate, they aren’t real. I think you’ve got yourself mixed up with a funny lot.”

“But Lena... she’s not making up these dead patches,” Nick protests. “She’s determined to find out what’s happening.”

“Ah yes, Lena. You’ve fallen for her in a big way.” Grinning, Josh flings himself into an armchair only to leap up again as an unearthly screech emanates from Nick’s pocket.

“Guinevere!” Nick scrabbles in his pocket for his mobile phone, which is glowing with a flickering, neon light and emitting rasping whimpers.

“Guinevere?”

“She’s the Punky that’s trapped in my phone.” Nick taps at the keys urgently. “It’s a text from Lena. There’s a meeting of The Five tonight.” He looks anxiously at Josh. “You will come, won’t you?”

“You’ve got to do something about that ring tone.” Josh rubs his ears. “Well, I guess I can come... unless we go for a pint instead?”

“No, I promised Lena. Thanks.” Nick breathes a sigh of relief. He’s done what he was asked to do—it’s up to Lena and Dag now to convince Josh that it’s real. He feels a fillip of excitement—only a few hours until he sees Lena again.

They drive to the meeting in an uneasy silence, punctuated by Guinevere's brief instructions, which she issues this time in a broad Scottish accent. Nick senses that an alien insect on a mobile phone issuing directions has somewhat undermined Josh's previously implacable scepticism.

Dusk is creeping in, transforming the brightness of a summer's day to a milky glow. They wind through the country roads, passing fields dotted with sheep and cattle moving leisurely to the shelter of trees and hedgerows. At last, Guinevere tells Nick to park in the main street of a small village. They continue the journey on foot, small bursts of static accompanying them through a churchyard, dominated by vast yew

trees, to a narrow lane. At the end of the lane, they cross a bridge over a wide river. The breeze ripples the surface of the water and rustles the reeds along the bank. The footpath is overgrown and punctuated with a succession of stiles. Nick forges ahead, ignoring Josh's mutterings about going to the pub.

As they reach yet another stile, a figure emerges from a copse of trees in front of them. Nick's stomach tightens as he realises it is Lena. Her long skirt and baggy top seem to accentuate rather than mask her slender curves. Her hair is tied back in a simple pony tail, wayward tendrils escaping to frame her face.

“Cor, see what you mean!” Josh mutters, suddenly cheerful as he digs a sharp elbow into his friend's ribs. “She looks all right!”

“Lena’s a charmin’ lass, inshee?” They start guiltily as Dag’s voice materialises behind them. “But she’s gotta strong temper—yer mussen mess with ’er. Good yer made it, Nick, and brought young Josh.” He shakes Josh’s hand, his piercing blue eyes fixed on him from under the rim of a flat cap that is pulled down to his ears.

“Hi.” Lena reaches the group and extends her hand across the stile. “You must be Josh.”

“What news?” Nick interjects, feeling a stab of jealousy as Josh lingers over the handshake. Josh has good looks and an easy charm that women love and Nick finds infuriating.

“It’s not good.” A frown replaces her wide smile. “I’ve seen at least four more dead patches today. There’s one not far—come and see.”

They clamber over the stile and follow her along the path till they reach a rhyne, jutting out at

Chapter 2 by Alison Walton

right angles from the river. They see the dead patch immediately, running parallel to the rhyne. It is about thirty feet long and twenty wide. In striking contrast to the verdant green around, the grass is brown and withered; in some parts bare, cracked earth is exposed.

Josh lets out a low whistle of dismay. “What is going on here?”

Lena explains about the dead patches, how they join together and the lack of help from the council.

“There’s nothing in the local papers,” she finishes. “I’m sure it’s being suppressed.”

“There be powerful people that don’t want the public to know.” Dag’s face was brooding. “People with money... an’ worse.”

“Worse?” Nick feels a shudder of alarm shoot through him.

“Aye.” Dag does not elaborate. “We mus’ take action.” He straightens up like a general addressing his troops, despite the cap, shapeless trousers and patched shirt. “Nick, you mus’ use yer computer.”

“To do what?” Nick looks blank.

“Ow do I know?” Dag is equally uncomprehending. “Yer the computer expert. Josh,” he continues, ignoring Nick’s perplexed look, “cannee do some diggin’ round the council? An’ the local paper?”

Josh nods, looking suddenly committed to the cause.

“Lena, we need to do some testin’ of our own. Cannee get some samples to your friend?”

Lena nods. “I did geology at college,” she explains to Nick and Josh. “I’ve got a... friend... who can help with lab work.”

Nick experiences another strange feeling in his stomach, sure that her hesitation means this is more than just a ‘friend’.

The sunlight has faded fast. Dag’s sharp eyes rest on each of them, as the low mist creeping across the flat land reaches its tendrils out to encompass them in its silvery shroud.

“I’ll be busy on tuther side,” he taps his nose with a bent finger, adding no further explanation. “Yer Punky not bin too quirky, Nick?”

“Guinevere’s fine.” Nick glances at his phone. “She seems to be asleep.”

“She’ll do her bit for ye, if yer treat her right. We’ll meet dreckley. Come, Lena.” He marches off into the gathering darkness. Lena lifts her hand in farewell as she follows.

“Good luck. I’ll be in touch.”

With difficulty, Nick restrains himself from following. He and Josh start the long walk back to the car.

The next morning, Nick gets up early, determined to tackle his task. Perhaps the computer itself will show him what to do—Nick feels nothing can surprise him anymore. He watches it boot up, the disc whirring as it opens its files. At last it is ready. All the usual icons are in place but, apart from them, the screen is blank. Nick sits expectantly, hand poised over the mouse, waiting for inspiration or a clue to guide him. When nothing happens, he starts clicking at random, opening applications, checking directories. Everything behaves as it should. His searches on the internet

for ‘Punky’ and ‘dead patches in Somerset’ return nothing that is relevant.

For a long time, Nick stares dispiritedly at the screen. He’ll have to admit to the others that he has failed. The display flickers as the screensaver starts, but instead of the usual three-D graphic objects, there are white balls ricocheting across the screen, bouncing off the sides, swerving to avoid each other while raucous howls spring from the speakers.

Punkies! Nick feels a surge of relief mixed with trepidation. He moves the mouse to switch the screensaver off, but it doesn’t work. He pushes the mouse around wildly, clicks buttons, hits keys but the Punkies stay, hooting victoriously.

“Guinevere!” He snatches his phone up from the desk and waves it at the computer. “Do something!”

Guinevere complies with an earsplitting screech. The balls freeze and then, with discontented mutterings, gather to form one large amorphous blob that grows brighter until it explodes across the screen with a frenzied blast.

Nick sees his mystified expression reflected in the dark screen. A low hum is coming from the speakers. Gradually he realises that the eyes staring back at him are slanted and so dark as to appear black. They are not his own. A shape is forming around the eyes, wavering, like a reflection in water. A face is coming into focus: sharp features as though the skin is pulled back tightly, a beak-like nose, silver hair, long and straight. Nick's heart thuds painfully. He grips his phone tightly, holding it up as though Guinevere is a shield. The noise—a distorted buzz like an untuned radio—is getting louder. It reaches a

Chapter 2 by Alison Walton

crescendo and then dies away. Nick realises that a man's voice is speaking, deep and soft. He strains to catch the words but it sounds like a foreign language.

The image wavers, fading away. The voice is replaced with a static hiss. Then there is silence and a dark, blank screen. Nick curses: he has missed his chance and let the others down. He looks disconsolately at his phone. Guinevere is staring back at him.

“Caer Sidi,” she rasps. “He said go to Caer Sidi—the Spiral Castle.”

Chapter 3 by Tom Hales

Lena's look of rapt attention as she listens to his every word is reward enough for Nick. He had wanted to look for information about Caer Sidi but the Punkies had come back to his computer, and this time Guinevere had left them to dance around his screen as much as they wanted.

“I told you if you treat 'em right, them Punkies'll be good to yer.”

“Yeah, right,” says Nick, “but what does it mean?”

“Oh,” says Dag, “we shan't know that until we're there.”

“But Caer Sidi is just part of the Arthurian legend,” says Josh.

“Oh it's more than that,” says Dag, “Caer Sidi is one of those rare places in the world where the

realms of life and death meet. Now then, Nick, you'll be driving there, won't you? Listen to young Guinevere and you should be fine."

"Aren't you coming too?"

"Got one or two things to attend to first. But I'll see y' there."

Dag turns and wanders off into some trees. As they get into the car, Nick is pleased to notice that Lena takes the front seat next to him, which leaves Josh to sit in the back. Guinevere shouts, "Straight on!" Nick starts up the car and they drive for a while in silence along the quiet road. After a short while, Nick can no longer resist.

"Did your... friend come up with anything?"

"Not yet. I'm expecting a call."

Nick knows he has no right to feel jealous, but still...

At irregular intervals, Guinevere squawks, “Next left,” and then, “Next right.”

“She’s taking us in circles,” says Josh. Nick thinks he may be right.

“Look Lena, I’ve no idea who Dag is, but—”

“Neither do I,” says Lena as if denying an accusation.

“No. And my guess is that he came to you rather than you went to him.”

“Yes. The same as with you.”

“Right. Now, Dag said I was along for my clear mind.”

Josh lets out a loud “ha!” in the back seat.

“And he said Josh was a local—with a sense of humour, apparently. So, why did he get you involved?”

Lena looks down and lowers her voice. “He didn’t say. He said that I’d know why when the moment arrives.”

They drive around following Guinevere’s directions for hour after hour. They feel sure she is wasting their time. As the afternoon sun gently drowns on into early evening, they approach Glastonbury. There is a scream from Nick’s phone.

“Right! Right! Right!” The screeching from the mobile is unbearable. He stops the car and notices that both Josh and Lena have their hands over their ears. In the offside mirror, Nick can just make out a side road.

“I think I know what she wants.” Nick turns the car round and drives into the narrow lane. Suddenly there is music. Lena takes her mobile from her pocket and puts an earpiece in.

“Hi Ems,” she says.

Nick looks down at Lena's hand. He sees the picture that has appeared on the screen of the phone. He looks back at the road and then down at the phone again.

“So what did you find?” Lena's voice is full of excitement.

The picture on the phone is of a young woman, about the same age as Lena, with long red hair. A bend in the road requires Nick's immediate attention.

“Really? But that's impossible, isn't it?” Lena sounds confused.

The girl in the picture has fine, feline features. Beautiful in a harsh, haughty kind of way. She and Lena must make quite an impression together. He looks into the rearview mirror and sees Josh's eyes looking right back at his.

Chapter 3 by Tom Hales

“Look, thanks Emma,” and does her voice then really soften? “See you later, OK?”

“Your... friend?” asks Josh from behind.

“Yes. It’s amazing. The soil is completely dead. Nothing there at all. No goodness, no nutrients. Nothing.”

A tall hill rising suddenly from the ground stands before them in the late afternoon light.

“Caer Sidi! Caer Sidi!” screeches Nick’s phone. This time he thinks that he notices something more in the tone. Awe, perhaps. Maybe fear.

The hill seems to have a series of ledges cut around its side.

“Are they farming terraces?” asks Nick.

“You haven’t been a very good tourist, have you? Everyone knows a story or two about Glastonbury Tor. With so much good farming land

around, there'd be no need to cut into a hillside," says Josh.

"Some people say that those ledges are a spiral path to the top, others that they form a maze," says Lena, "but nobody really knows."

Nick looks up at the hill. Surely it would not take too long to climb it.

"Walk the labyrinth!" shrieks Guinevere.

"There's our answer," says Lena.

They walk around the lower ledge of the hill until there is a shout from Nick's phone. "Up! Up!"

They proceed in line. First Nick with the phone, then Lena and then Josh. Instead of heading directly upwards, they walk along the paths cut into the side of the hill, following a rise on one side and a fall on the other. Guinevere's directions

Chapter 3 by Tom Hales

seem to make them go back on themselves at times, instead of progressing upwards.

“She’s having a laugh,” says Josh, but they all keep going anyway.

Two hours pass. Maybe more. They finally work their way nearly to the top of the hill. The sky is red over a view of now darkening fields when Nick notices the mist ahead of them.

“That doesn’t make sense,” says Nick, “even I know that the weather isn’t that crazy around here.” They stop by a stone. Just beyond the stone, the mist begins, like a fine silk curtain.

“Straight on!” orders Guinevere.

They walk into the mist. As soon as they are all past the stone and are standing in the mist, they stop and look at each other. Neither Lena nor Josh say anything. Nick faces forward and walks on.

Then they fall. It feels like a long way down, and on the way, Nick is sure he sees flashing stars shoot past him, as if racing him to the bottom.

They land unharmed on a stone floor. Nick looks around at the others who are just as bemused, but also unharmed. The floor is made of large square slabs and the ceiling forms a high arch. The only light comes from torches burning at regular intervals along the wall. A few yards in front of them, an agitated cloud of Punkies flits and glides around in the air. Then they stop, suspended in the half-light, and then slowly part to left and right, and through them strides a tall, imposing figure in a long black cloak.

Chapter 3 by Tom Hales

“Welcome,” he says, “I am Gwyn, son of Nudd. And I have no pressing need to know who you are, so please spare me the formalities.”

“The master of the Underworld?” Lena’s voice sounds breathless and unsure. “That can’t be.”

“Oh, anything is possible. Though I would correct you on one count. I prefer ‘Otherworld’ to ‘Underworld’. Humans can be depressingly pessimistic in matters concerning death.”

He steps to one side to reveal a huddle of people in white robes. Each is going from one to the other, hugging, whispering in each other’s ear and then moving on, as if at a solemn cocktail party. They are a mixture of handsome young men and beautiful young women, each appearing to have a faint, white glow around them.

“Not such a bad advert for death, eh?” Gwyn smiles indulgently at them.

Nick takes out his mobile phone and looks at it.

“They’re Punkies!”

“Well done!” says Gwyn, as if he were mocking Nick. “The little pests followed you. They never miss a chance to take on the form... the form that they would have had.”

Nick stares transfixed at his mobile phone.

“What is it?” asks Josh.

“Guinevere.”

The face in his screen was frail but beautiful. Young, high cheek-boned with long, blond hair, Guinevere smiles shyly at Nick. He thinks he sees tears in her eyes.

“Guinevere, indeed! Anyway, to business. Why this intrusion?”

Lena, Josh and Nick all look at each other.

“It’s the dead land,” says Lena. “It’s completely dead. The patches are appearing everywhere.”

Suddenly, a bundled figure appears rolling around on the floor in front of them. It seems unharmed as it slowly unravels itself.

“Damn castle,” curses Dag, “why can’t it have a portcullis like the rest of ’em?” As he gets to his feet, he sees Nick, Lena and Josh. “Oh here y’are. Sorry I’m a bit late, I—”

“Dagonet!” Gwyn has abandoned his mocking tone and shouts the name as if it were a command. “I should have known. Well, what tiresome news do you bring me?”

Dag turns round. “Well, Lord Gwyn,” he says, “I think it’s started. I think it’s finally started.”

Chapter 4 by David Hutchison

Lord Gwyn looks at Guinevere smiling on Nick's mobile phone.

“I thought that she had vanished. Now she appears on this human's magical device. We will go at once to Ynys Witrin.”

Josh whispers to Nick, “Ynys Witrin, The Isle of Glass.”

Lord Gwyn brings a gold-tipped horn from a fold in his cloak.

“I call the Hounds of Annwn.”

He blows on the horn. Although no sound seems to come forth everyone is listening, straining his or her ears. Numerous tunnels lead off from the stone hall. A faint smell of mint and blood wafts from the tunnel directly behind Lord Gwyn. The sounds of many padded paws and

baying echoes down the tunnel. The sounds and smells get stronger as torches cast ominous shadows on the walls. A pack of huge slobbering hounds come rushing forth down the tunnel.

Josh gasps, “The Wild Hunt.”

The pack of gigantic white hounds as big as pit ponies spew into the stone hall. They have red-tipped ears above haunted brown eyes with strong jaws full of wickedly sharp teeth. Wailing and howling, they circle the stone hall causing a whirlwind to build up. The torches flare up and flicker, reflecting silver collars around their necks.

Lord Gwyn raises his hands and the hounds slow down and stop.

“Atterdag, Bargest, Fionn!”

Three of the gigantic hounds wander into the centre and sit down in front of Lena, Nick and Josh.

“Aurelius, Herne!”

Two more hounds come into the centre. One sits beside Dag and the other comes up to Lord Gwyn.

“Aurelius.”

The great hound sits down. Lord Gwyn sits astride the hound and holds onto its collar.

“Up!”

Aurelius gets up on all fours. Dag sits astride his hound. Lena sits on Bargest’s back, grabs onto the silver collar and says, “Up!”

Bargest rises.

“Easy,” says Lena to Nick and Josh.

“Come humans mount! They will not bite unless I command it!” says Lord Gwyn.

Nick shrugs at Josh. They each mount a hound and hold onto the silver collars yelling, “Up!”

The hounds lurch up. Lord Gwyn leads the pack off down a stone tunnel to the left. At first there is plenty of light from torches along the walls but soon they start to thin out. Some Punkies fly in front lighting the way. Occasionally the tunnel opens up into long courtyards lined with more tunnels and as they rush past there are glimpses of numerous empty halls. The place is like a labyrinth.

After ages of twisting and turning, the pack starts to slow down. The tunnel opens out into a cathedral-like cavern, coated in pale-green luminescence. They are standing on a shore of a dark underground lake. A small island glistens like moss in diamonds in the centre of the lake.

Lord Gwyn says, “Ynys Witrin.”

“It’s beautiful,” says Lena.

The humans get their feet wet up to their knees as they cross on their swimming hounds. Nick notices pale, blurred creatures flitting around under the water. Something with sharp glinting teeth rushes past and Dag's hound gives a yelp. Luckily they are almost at the island and the hound reaches the shore. Dag jumps off and he and Lord Gwyn help the wailing hound out of the water onto the glittering beach. Its hind legs are mauled. The dog peers up at its master with woeful eyes, lets off a bloodcurdling howl and dies.

“Loyal Aurelius, I will bring you back shortly,” sighs Lord Gwyn. The other hounds gather in a circle around Aurelius and let out a chorus of howls.

Nick asks Dag, “What was in the lake?”

Dag shakes his head. He follows Lord Gwyn heading up the sloping hill on a winding path

Chapter 4 by David Hutchison

covered in dark green moss that meanders amongst glistening lumps of glass. Lena stops and touches a glass lump.

Lena says, “It’s soft. Like that grow gel stuff.”

On the top of the slope there is a strange bush. An ornately carved stick is rooted into the ground. Thorny branches springing off it are covered in white sweet-smelling blossom.

“Behold the Glastonbury Thorn,” says Lord Gwyn.

“So that’s not the cause then,” says Nick, sitting down.

Lord Gwyn gathers some thorn flowers in his hand. Lena takes a photo of the bush with her mobile phone. The phone blinks out making a screeching sound. A face of a Punkie peers up on the screen. She smiles at Lena.

“Another Punkie in a phone,” says Josh.

“I’ve a thought,” says Nick. “Phone me!”

“What?” says Josh.

“Just try it!” says Nick.

Josh taps in Nick’s number.

“No network,” says Josh.

“Take a photo of me!” says Nick.

Josh holds out his phone and takes a photo of Nick. Suddenly there is a screeching noise. A Punkie guide is sucked into the phone. Josh drops it onto the moss. Staring up on the screen is a girl with pale skin and sad hollow eyes. She tries to speak.

“No good good good.”

Nick says, “The phones trap the Punkies!”

Guinevere speaks up, “Yes, yes, yes.”

Lena says, “Our mobile phones are hurting them?”

Guinevere says, “No. No. Good. More.”

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Lena says, “Could the Punkies be drawn to them. Addicted?”

Nick says, “Microwave energy or rare metal elements in the phone combined with its camera function?”

Josh says, “Is there a link with the Punkies and the dead patches?”

Lord Gwyn raises a bushy eyebrow. “I don’t know of the energies that you speak of but my Bog Fairies are the souls of the marshes. Offshoots of the Glastonbury Thorn.”

He continues, “If a Bog Fairy were to uproot, then all the plants would be full of sorrow. They would starve and wilt, and the earth would die.”

“Nick, can you find the positions of mobile phone masts around Sedgemoor?” says Lena.

“Get me back to my laptop and I’ll check it out,” replies Nick.

“Lord Gwyn, can you show me on a map where your Bog Fairies are vanishing?” asks Lena.

Lord Gwyn nods.

Nick brings out a map and gives him a pencil. Lord Gwyn slowly draws a series of circles on the map.

Lena says, “We must get to a computer.”

They walk back down the mossy path. Lord Gwyn bends over Aurelius and scatters thorn flowers over its ruined legs. The hound awakens and its legs start to heal.

Lord Gwyn says, “Show the humans the quickest path. Take Herne. I will wait for Aurelius to recover.”

Dag nods and mounts Herne. He beckons the others to follow him. They go around the island to the far side. They cross the lake without incident and reach another tunnel. With the Punkies

lighting the way, they travel up and up in a spiral for ages. Finally they reach a set of stone steps. Dag dismounts and the rest follow suit.

“Home!” says Dag. The hounds turn and howl as they race off back down the tunnel. The Punky guides hover and spin around, as Lena, Nick and Josh hold up their mobiles letting them blow kisses and farewells to the Punkies trapped in the mobiles, then they too rush down after the pack.

Using the lights of their mobiles, they manage to see their way up the tunnel. The tunnel gets narrower and the sides become covered in gnarled roots. They enter a small chamber with an iron ladder leading up into the dark.

Dag climbs up the ladder and opens a hatch. A shaft of light appears.

“Come on!” Dag shouts down.

Lena, Nick and Josh climb up the ladder, through the hatch into a dimly lit concrete bunker. Light is emitted from dials and other engineering instruments. Dag continues up another steel ladder and pushes open a manhole cover.

Lena gasps, “I can see the stars.”

They come up through the manhole into a glade surrounded by yew trees. Glastonbury Tor is lit up in the moonlight above them.

“What an experience that was,” says Josh.

“I feel like I’ve woken from a dream,” says Lena.

“It was no dream,” says Nick. “Look, I’ve brought proof.”

Nick takes several small white flowers from his pocket and the sweet smell fills the air.

Chapter 4 by David Hutchison

Dag is horrified and knocks the flowers out of Nick's hand. "Don't you realise what you've done?"

Chapter 5 by David Marston

“You little fool!” Dag pulls Nick down to eye level, his old-yet-strong hands firmly gripping the younger man’s jacket collar. “Don’t you realise what you’ve done?”

“What? I just wanted to prove to myself that all this was real.”

“These flowers, anything from the Underworld, carry the taint of death.” Dag is nearly snarling, “You have brought death to this land, to the world. If you thought we had problems before, you ain’t seen nothing yet! Everything will wither and die—plants, vegetation, machines, animals, people. And it’s your fault!” Dag releases Nick and stalks away.

“I’m sorry,” Nick holds his hands out, utterly despondent.

“We know you didn’t do it on purpose, Nick. You didn’t know.” Lena tries to comfort him, “Blaming him doesn’t help, Dag. Isn’t there anything we can do?”

“There’s nothing mortals can do. It will take some serious magic to reverse this—the sort of magic the Bog Fairies have. Do you still think you can find them?”

“I’ve an idea—if it’s right, then yes.”

They head for Nick’s battered old car. He pops the boot open and takes out a laptop, tossing the keys to Josh, he says: “You’re driving—I’m working.”

“Where’re we going?” Josh asks slipping in behind the steering wheel.

After a few minutes’ Googling, Nick announces, “The marks Lord Gwyn made on this

map correspond with the location of the new mobile phone masts. Turn right here, Josh.”

Josh brakes heavily, coming to a halt just metres away from the towering mast. “What are you doing, Nick?” Lena leans over his shoulder unable to decipher the array of windows open on the computer screen.

“Using the wireless connection through my mobile to get into the phone company’s website.”

“Look,” says Dag pointing into the middle distance. “You can see the dead land, the land that the Fairies have abandoned. It’s less than a quarter of a mile from the mast.”

“Where are the Punkies then?” Lena looks around quizzically, “I can’t see any.”

“No,” Dag explains. “You won’t be able to. In this reality they exist on a different wavelength to people. They’re just outside of your sensory range,

as though they were on the very edge of your vision. But they're here all right; they're clustered around the mast."

"So, what do we do? Ask them to go home?" Josh climbs out the car.

"Essentially, yes. And quickly, but persuading them might be difficult—they've obviously left for a reason."

"I think the masts attract them," says Nick looking up from his screen. "But I think I can make it repel them by changing the frequency at which it operates on. I think that if we then use our phones in close vicinity the resulting feedback will force them away."

"You can do that?" Lena asks.

"Of course I can. I'm a magician."

"It's a good idea," says Dag. "But we need to move quickly—look at the sky!" Black clouds are

drifting in quickly covering the sun, and the temperature is plummeting. “The taint of the Underworld is spreading fast.”

“Right,” Nick says. “Dag, you stay here with me. Josh, you drive Lena to the second mast and then get yourself to the third. Give me twenty minutes and then ring someone, anyone.”

Lena touches his arm gently, “Good luck.” Nick just smiles. “Twenty minutes to hack into a company computer system and manipulate it? He needs more than luck.”

“Hurry up, boy,” Dag frantically paces up and down.

“I’m going as fast as I can—this isn’t easy you know.” Nick has broken into the secure area of the website and he thinks he knows what he needs to do, but whoever designed the site either made it a

labyrinth on purpose or had no sense of aesthetic design.

The distant thunder rumbles, and flashes of lightning can be seen on the horizon. “The feed’s slow,” Nick grumbles under his breath.

“It’s the death,” Dag explains. “It will be starting to affect everything by now. People tend to be the last to succumb, but not always.” Nick glances up and then recoils in shock. Dag looks like he’s aged fifty years in barely five minutes. “Just hurry, Nick,” he whispers.

“Will you be OK?” Josh asks Lena as he pulls up close to the second mast. By now the rain is pounding off the windscreen with such ferocity that it will take scant seconds to be soaked to the skin.

“There’s not much point worrying about the rain if the alternative is the end of the world, now

is there, Josh?” She smiles gently—so calm, so collected, so knowing. Josh can understand what Nick sees in her.

“Guess not.”

Lena steps out of the car and into the downpour. She looks up and lets the rain splatter across her face darting under the relative cover of a stone wall.

Josh puts the car into first and speeds off, loose gravel scattering in his wake. The third mast is barely two miles away and he has ten minutes. Plenty of time and yet still he throws the car into every bend. The situation demands urgency.

He pushes his right foot down hard on the accelerator as the car comes out of a corner, but nothing happens. The engine splutters a moment later and then every emergency light on the dashboard illuminates.

“No!” Josh shouts and punches the steering wheel. Still in motion, but losing speed, he turns the key. There’s no spark, nothing. The car is dead. In his head he hears Dag’s words, “Vegetation, machines, people—all will die.” Josh abandons the car in the middle of the lane and runs through the rain as fast as his legs can carry him.

“Nearly there,” rain drips off Nick’s nose and onto his laptop.

Dag continues to pace, despite the fact it is now clearly causing him pain.

Lena squats down and tries to send positive thoughts of encouragement.

Josh runs and runs. His muscles scream, his lungs moan and he just keeps on going.

“OK, the frequencies are changed—I think—just in time, too.” Nick hits the return key and half closes the computer’s lid. He smiles at Dag and the

old man nods back. “Let’s do it, then.” He takes his mobile out of his pocket. “Sorry Guinevere,” he apologises as the Punky is pushed aside in the phone’s system and Nick scrolls down to a random number.

And three thumbs press the green dial button on three different phones simultaneously.

The air sparks around the phone masts as though there are loose electric cables flailing in the wind.

“Well, is it working?” Nick asks as Dag looks to the sky. Suddenly dozens of glowing balls appear in the air and a single one bursts out of Nick’s phone.

“Yes. Yes, they’re going back!” He gives a jump of joy shaking his fist in the air, “Yes!” When he hits the ground, though, all the strength

seems to leave him and his body crumples into a heap.

“Dag!” Nick darts across to his stricken mentor, “Dag! Are you all right?” The old man looks pale and empty of life.

“The Punkies,” he croaks. “You must get the Punkies to do the right thing. Only their combined magics can cleanse the land.” Nick nods and Dag closes his eyes letting loose a great exhalation of breath. Then he lies still. Nick touches his withered cheek—it’s cold, he’s not dead, but not too far from it either.

“Guinevere?”

“Yes-yes-yes?” The ball of light hovering nearby bounced around the sky.

“Do you know how to fix this? Can you and the Punkies really end the tainting?”

“Yes-yes-yes, we can. Make magic together, in a group powerful, alone not so. Change things we can.”

“Then get to it.”

“No-no-no-won’t-can’t-shan’t!” The icon manically shakes its head. “Cold out here. Warm in there—feel alive. Out here it is only endless death for us in the service of Gwyn of the Underworld.”

“What?”

“There, in phones, we are part of the real world again! I can be with you!”

“Guinevere, I don’t know what you are. I don’t know if you’re the soul of a child or a fairy or what, but if you don’t help me now,” Nick is trying to control his anger, “the Underworld’s taint is going to destroy everything—Dag said so—only the Punkies can end this. If this phone dies, if I die, you’ll just be alone again—only now you’ll have

the knowledge that you let all this happen! You'll have the guilt!" The little Punky is silent and then after what seems an age she splutters an annoyed grunt. She circles around Nick's head before shooting up high into the sky and emitting a piercing screech.

Moments later what seems like thousands of Punkies fly in from all directions convening on Guinevere. They fly in a display, diving at sharp angles, taking abrupt turns, building up momentum before heading off in the direction of the dead ground.

In the distance Nick can see a blue gas rising up from the ground. The Punkies fly straight into it creating electric sparks every time the blue and white lights touch. The rain continues to pour down, but the flashes are brighter, more pronounced than any lightning Nick has ever seen.

After a few minutes the Punkies converge into an almost solid mass and as one fly into the thickest patch of blue gas. The resulting flash turns the whole world bright white for just a second, and when it clears, Nick and the others can see again the rain has stopped. The clouds begin to clear and the sun comes out. Dag sits bolt upright and exclaims, “Well, they did it, then?”

Half an hour later and the four have regrouped and now hover around the ticking over car engine, trying to dry out. Josh sits on the bonnet as Nick tries to get closer to Lena.

“Guess that’s it,” Josh calls out cheerfully, adrenaline still pounding through his system. “We’ve saved the world. Wow. Tune in next week for more exciting adventures of the Mystic Team, eh Dag?”

“You better hope not,” Dag scowls. “We did well, children, but half the problems were of our own making and I still need to go and apologise to Lord Gwyn.” He pulls his hat down low, “I’m sure we will be needed again, but let’s try and make sure it’s not before I’m back,” and with that Dag turns, walks away and in a blink of an eye disappears.

“Well, I don’t know about you two, but I’m going home for a hot bath, something to eat and eight hours’ sleep.” Lena stretches wearily, “Nice working with you Nick—that was pretty clever stuff you came up with.”

“Ah, you know,” he scratches the back of his head suddenly embarrassed. “Just don’t ask where I learnt to hack into international corporations’ websites.”

Lena turned to make her way home. “Wait,” Nick says knowing that if he doesn’t do this he’ll regret it forever. “Um, do you think, maybe, we could go for a drink or dinner or something? Sometime? Maybe?”

“Sure,” she beams. “Drink. Dinner. Something. Sometime. Maybe. Tempting offer, Nick.” She turns away and starts to walk, before stopping and glancing over her shoulder. “I’ll send you a text.”

The two young men watch her disappear down the lane. Suddenly they feel older and Nick knows that working for a website design company in Weston-super-Mare is never going to be quite enough after today.

“Pint?” Josh jumps down off the car.

“Pint,” Nick says firmly.

