

**DEFINITIONS** CORBENIC (κῶrb3nik)n. the castle of the Grail Kings

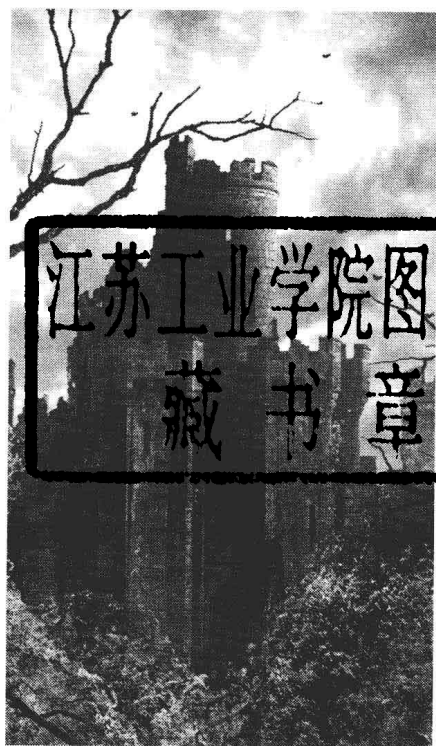


# CORBENIC

CATHERINE FISHER

'A writer of rare talent' THE SUNDAY TIMES

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CATHERINE  
FISHER

RED FOX DEFINITIONS

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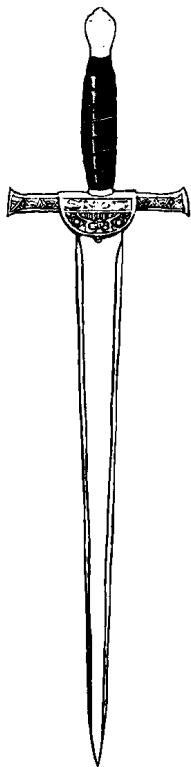
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RED FOX DEFINITIONS

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# S W O R D



## ONE

*His mother kept him there and held him back . . .*

Conte du Graal

Very far away, the voice said, 'Who drinks from the Grail?'

Jerked out of a doze, Cal opened his eyes. Then he tugged the earphones off and rubbed his face wearily. The woman who had been sitting next to him must have got off at the last station; now her seat was empty. A man in uniform was wheeling a trolley down the aisle of the train; it was crammed with crisps and sandwiches and piles of upturned plastic cups round the shiny urn. The man caught Cal's eye. 'Drinks? Tea? Coffee?'

It would be embarrassing to say no so he muttered, 'Tea,' knowing it would be the cheapest thing. Then he dragged some coins out of his pocket and sorted through them, trying to look careless, as if money didn't matter.

The train was a lot emptier now. It rattled viciously over some points; the trolley man swayed, balancing expertly in the aisle as he filled a plastic cup under the tap, the trolley rocking so that a small packet of biscuits slid off on to the empty seat. Chocolate digestives. Cal scowled. He was so hungry he almost felt sick. 'Those too.'

Outside, wet fields flashed by, and some houses in a scatter of dead leaves. The man leaned over and flipped down the small table at the back of the seat, clipped the lid on the tea and put it down. A tiny bag of sugar. Milk. A plastic stirrer. The train clattered; Cal grabbed the hot cup in alarm.

‘One pound thirty, sir, thank you.’

Sir. For a moment he thought the joker was making fun of him and glared up, but the man’s face was closed and polite, and once he had the money he trundled away up the carriage resuming his smooth, ‘Tea? Drinks?’

Cal leaned back and looked at the plastic cup with distaste. He hated tea. Coffee was more upmarket. He unclipped the lid and stirred the tea bag gloomily. When he’d made some money he’d really spend; travel first class where they had white china and linen, everything of the best. They’d call him sir and mean it then. He peeled the metal top from the milk and it sprayed everywhere. He swore aloud. The woman opposite glared at him. He glared back, scrubbing his jacket. This had cost. It wasn’t designer but it looked it. Or he hoped it did. The momentary fear that it looked cheap slid under his guard but he squashed it hastily and pulling the earphones back on he let the music blast out the train-noise, dipping a biscuit in the tea and watching the landscape through his own reflection.

He’d been on this train all day. It had left Bangor at nine that morning, late, so that his mother had lingered on the platform, tearful, her hasty make-up a mess, telling him to phone, going on and on about how much she’d miss him, couldn’t manage without him, about coming back for weekends, about keeping his room the same. His room! He thought of the little box with its grubby paper and the neighbour’s baby wailing through the walls. He was well shot of that.

Uncomfortable, he shifted. Why had she had to come? Anyone might have seen her, and as usual she’d been barely sober from the night before. He’d gone to find a seat long before the train started; still she had tapped on the glass and waved and cried at the window. Remembering her crumpled misery and runny mascara, his hand clenched on the empty



cup; he felt it crackle and then crushed it slowly. His face was hot. But the weak tea had made him feel better, and the biscuits. He hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, and he'd got that himself, as he always did.

The train slid into a station, brakes screeching. Cal rubbed a circle of damp off the glass and looked out. CRAVEN ARMS the sign said. Another place he'd never heard of. Mountains, a few people running under umbrellas, the bare platform plastered with clotting autumn leaves. Like all the rest of the stations that day.

As they pulled out the carriage lights went on. All at once, outside it seemed dark, the early dusk of November. Hills closed in as the train ran below them; odd craggy ridges, tree-covered. Most people had got off; no one had got on. Once, a mobile phone burred stupid music; far down at the end the refreshments bloke was reading a paper with his feet on the opposite seat.

Cal leaned back, yawning. He was so tired of sitting still, so stiff. The music was tinny, the batteries fading; he flicked it off with a groan and immediately the rhythmic clatter of the train came back, rocking him, comforting. He had at least another hour till Chepstow. Through the steamy windows he could only see himself, looking crumpled, and then very faintly a line of high forestry dark against the twilight. In a farmhouse the windows were lit, looking warm and snug. A girl walking a dog waved to the speeding train. He wrapped his coat around him, and closed his eyes. As the train roared into the blackness of the tunnel, he put his feet up on the seat, leaning awkwardly with his head against the window. It would be all right now. He'd planned this for years; he'd made the break. Life would be different. His uncle would meet him in some big, flash car. He wouldn't have to see her any more. He wouldn't have to hide the knives and the bottles ever again.

\*

He woke abruptly. A voice was crackling over the tannoy. Somewhere in his head the echo of what it had said was just out of reach, but it had been Chepstow, he was suddenly, coldly sure. The train was already stopping; outside, a lamp loomed close to the window.

Cal panicked. The train was empty. He scrambled up, confused. Dregs of tea from the crumpled cup spilt on him; he grabbed his coat, jerked his rucksack down from the rack and ran, past tea-stained tables and abandoned newspapers. Outside the windows it was pitch-dark. He jabbed the door button anxiously; as the doors swooshed open he jumped out and looked up the length of the train.

‘Hey! Excuse me!’

Far down in the frosty dark the guard stepped back into the train. Doors slid shut. Cal yelled, ‘Wait! Listen! I need to know if this is . . .’

His voice was lost in the roar of the engine; the train was moving, gaining speed, and he ran after it, and saw through the flashing windows the dripping sign in the hedge opposite. It said:

## CORBENIC

‘Bloody *hell*!’ he hissed furiously.

But the train was a rattle in the dimness, one red light. Tree shadows closed over it. And then it had gone.

The night was suddenly, utterly silent. So silent he could hear every drip from the trees. He flung the rucksack down in fury and looked around, unable to believe he’d been so stupid, so absolutely stupid! Where the hell was this? Why had he thought it was his stop? Raging at himself he shrugged his jacket on, shivering uncontrollably after the warmth of the train. The platform was deserted, gleaming with rain, lit by one dim lamp, the pool of light from it glinting with drips. God, this was the middle of nowhere! Looking around he saw

only the dark clustering shapes of trees; above them a bank of cloud loomed, torn by the wind to show fleeting, frosty stars.

There had to be someone, a ticket office. He turned. 'Hello. Anyone here?' His voice rang, echoing. Wind whipped leaves in his face. There was no station building, no waiting room, nothing but the small wet platform, the dripping lamp, a fence with a creaking gate. And silence.

His breath smoked in the damp air. He shook his head, bleakly. This was a disaster. But there would be a timetable. Outside, by the fence.

Dragging up the heavy rucksack he tugged it on, the weight making him groan. Then he crossed the wet platform to the gate in the hedge. It hung awkwardly on its hinges, and creaked in the wind. The white paint was blistered and old. He leaned over, getting soaked, his hands frozen, and found there was no timetable, nothing at all but the gate, and a dim lane that ran into utter darkness in both directions.

Cal swore in dismay. He stood under the dripping trees and knew that all around him the night was empty. For a moment the old panic threatened him; then he shoved his hands in his pockets and took a cold breath. Get a grip. Get the next train, that was all. Just get the next train. But when would it come? Would it even stop at this god-forsaken hole? He crushed the despair as he'd taught himself to do, over and over. It would be OK. He'd have to wait.

There was nowhere to sit. The bare platform ran with puddles. He leaned against the lamp and the rain pattered round him, the great trees overhead sighing and swishing every time the wind moved them, sending a cascade of icy drops to soak his shoulders and splash his shoes. His clean shoes. He looked at his watch. The tiny green numbers said 5:40.

Ten minutes later he had dumped the rucksack and was walking up and down, the tap of his footsteps loud in the

hush. At least he thought it was ten minutes, but when he looked at the watch again it told exactly the same time, 5:40, and he couldn't believe this. The watch had stopped, maybe hours ago. He kicked the lamp in fury, and as if in some sort of revenge, the rain immediately came down harder, drumming steadily through the leaves, a thrumming downpour.

He couldn't stand it any more. Doubts had begun to creep in; he couldn't keep them out. What if there was no train; what if he had to stay here all night? His uncle would go to the station and not find him, and he'd ring Bangor and his mother . . . Cal closed his eyes in despair. Then opened them.

A phone! All he needed was a stupid phone. There had to be one near. If he'd had a mobile . . . if he'd bought one instead of this useless jacket that was letting the rain in . . . But he hadn't. So he'd have to go and find one.

It was hard to leave the platform; he dithered, waiting, sure that as soon as he turned his back a train would come, but at last he was so stiff and soaked and fed up that he hauled up the rucksack and splashed back to the gate. The wood was swollen; it took both hands to force open, as if no one had used it for years. He squeezed through, shoved his wet fingers in his pockets, and looked up and down the lane. Dark trees met overhead.

He turned right, walking quickly, trying to get warm. His breath clouded the damp air, his footsteps crunching unnaturally loudly on the muddy, puddled track; all around him the night cascading and pattering and dripping with falling water. Scowling, he dragged his collar up. Someone must live here. Somewhere.

The lane was lonely. Scary. It became a gloomy tunnel, a swishing, pine-smelling dimness, and as he trudged the mud was slippery with great drifts of soaked, clotting leaves. Small noises disturbed him; the snap of a twig, rustles and soft fallings. He walked faster, trying not to imagine being

followed, dark shapes jumping out from the trees, but he was rushing, he couldn't help it and the panic was back. After what he thought was about half a mile he stopped, heart thudding, an ache in his side so sharp he could barely catch breath. He knew he was scared. Anyone might be down here. Murderers. Nutcases. He should go back. He might be walking for hours.

A screech. It was tiny, and high, and it made him jump with terror before he told himself it was a mouse, a stupid mouse. An owl, or a mouse.

He wished he had a weapon. If he could find a thick stick . . .

Clutching his side he breathed in the damp air. His nose was running; he wiped it wearily on his damp, ironed handkerchief and pushed the wet hair off his face, wishing hopelessly for the warm train, turning and looking back into the pitch black lane. It would be worse going back. He'd come too far already.

Then he heard a splash. It was loud, as if something had plopped into water. Below him. To the right.

Cal breathed out slowly. The noise of the downpour was unbelievably loud, but this had been different. He took a step towards the trees. They were thickly massed. He looked down and saw a steep overgrown incline, dark with brambles and undergrowth, its rich smell of rot and soil rising to him. Down there was water, maybe a lake. It trickled and lapped; he saw glints of it in the dimness. And faintly, above the pattering rain, he was sure he could hear voices. Then, between the wet black trunks, brilliant as lightning, a torch flickered.

He straightened up, breathing hard, listening. Poachers? Gamekeepers, maybe. He didn't know and he didn't care. He was too wet to care and the thought of the empty, terrifying lane that might go on for miles and miles filled him with

despair. It was dangerous – they could be anyone. But he had to find a phone. He squeezed his hair back, feeling the rain from it run down his back. A great leaf plastered itself to his face and he snatched it away in hissed panic; maybe it was the fright that finally made him shout.

‘Hey!’ he yelled recklessly. ‘Hey, you down there. Hello! Can you hear me?’

The night poured on his shoulders. It seemed an age before someone said, ‘We hear you.’

The torch came on again. He glimpsed a tiny boat, a flimsy wicker thing tethered to the bank, the long line slack in the water, and two dim figures looking up at him. The beam of light moved up the bank till it hit Cal’s face and he put his hand up against it crossly. ‘Cut it out!’

But the light stayed on him a long moment. Then it bounced off the trees till he saw one of the fishermen clearly; a bulky man, standing awkwardly. The other was slighter, dark-haired, sitting with a net over his knees.

‘What are you looking for?’ the big man called, his voice deep over the rain-patter.

‘I’m lost. Is there a phone near here? Have you got one I could use?’

To Cal’s surprise, the man laughed, a low, humourless sound. ‘Why?’

‘So they can come and pick me up from home. I got off the train, at the wrong station.’

The dark-haired man, sitting down, said quietly, ‘Have you any idea where you are?’

Cal felt annoyed. Then he remembered the station sign. ‘Corbenic.’

The man said something to his friend. The bigger one nodded, and looked up. ‘You must go on to the Castle.’

‘Castle?’

‘Hotel. About a mile on.’

The wind blew Cal's hair into his eyes. 'Great,' he muttered sourly. But he was immensely relieved.

There was a splash as if the fishermen had dropped the nets over the side. 'There's nowhere else,' the deep voice said. 'This is the Waste Land. Nowhere else for miles.'

Uneasy, Cal said, 'Do they get many visitors?'

'Not so many as they used to.' The torchlight flickered over Cal's face. 'Tell them we sent you.'

Rain spattered. 'Thanks,' Cal yelled. But as he turned away the other man, the dark one, said, 'Wait!' He looked up; Cal saw even at this distance that he was pale, almost gaunt, his eyes dark hollows. 'Are you sure you're ready?' he whispered, his voice anxious, deeply troubled.

'What?'

'You need to be ready. Or it will be a long journey for all of us.'

Cal frowned. 'I thought your mate said about a mile?'

The fisherman shook his head, almost sadly, and the torch went out. 'So he did. So he did.'

Uneasy, Cal climbed back up onto the track and trudged on. He felt worn out and it was hard to think. A hotel. Lucky. He might be miles from Chepstow. His uncle wouldn't come. And his mother would be down at Murphy's by this time anyway, and be past caring either way.

He was so wet now he didn't care about the jacket or the drenched boots; rain trickled into every crease of him, even his pockets, and his clothes felt heavy and sopping. He was almost running down the dark leafy tunnel of the lane.

And finally, round the bend, the hedge became a wall, a high red-brick wall smothered with glossy wet ivy, the trees behind it black and ominous. He squelched alongside it, seeing how the track was a mire of mud here, and at the muddiest place of all he found a wooden door, and above that a sign that swung and creaked and dripped on his face.

## CASTLE HOTEL CORBENIC

The letters were worn, and rain-streaked. Below them, cracked and badly painted, was the pub sign, but instead of a castle all it showed was a crooked yellow chalice. And hanging from that on rusty hooks, swinging so wildly he could barely make it out, a tiny addition read:

## VACANCIES



## Two

*A sorry figure in a court so distinguished as that.*

Peredur

There was nothing to knock but his groping fingers found a latch under the dripping screen of ivy; he lifted it, and the door opened. Beyond the arch was a shadowy garden, blackened by frost. Bare branches dripped onto a gravel path. The trees were dead or leafless.

Cal stepped through, holding the door open. It didn't look promising, and it was too quiet. Maybe the place was closed up. Out of season. Maybe they were all in bed.

He let the door swing behind him with a soft clink. He'd find out. There was no way he was walking back up that lane.

The gravel crunched under his feet. On each side of the dim path small statues peered from among the withered plants: peculiarly crouched animals; bears and cats and tiny foxes whose eyes gleamed fleetingly in wet faces. He passed them quietly, choked with an odd feeling of excitement, the rich stink of the clotting leaves seeming sharper here, the watching animals tense, as if ready to pounce on his back. It made him remember a picture in a book he'd seen when he was small, of a garden of sleeping princes all tangled in thorns, and beyond them, high and grey and sinister, the walls of the castle, with one light in a high window. He had forgotten it till now. For a second, he remembered how the story had made him feel, the flavour of it.

There was a light here too. It flickered through the