

THE SACRED BAND

UNION

James MacTavish



Red Dragon

Sir Galahad
(Thomas Wentworth-Higginson)

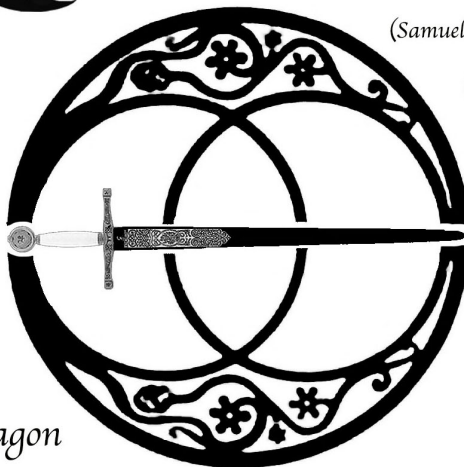
Sir Gawain
(John Brown)

Sir Bors
(Gerrit Smith)

Sir Kay
(Theodore Parker)

Sir Gaheris
(Samuel Gridley-Howe)

Sir Bedivere
(Berry Benson)



White Dragon

Sir Lancelot
(Henry Worthington)

Sir Tristan
(John Breckinridge)

Sir Geraint
(Israel Greene)

Sir Gareth
(Jeb Stuart)

Sir Palamedes
(James Longstreet)

Sir Lamorak
(John Wilkes-Booth)





The Sacred Band
Lions of Leuctra / Sons of Ares

Owen 'Wood' Brown
Nelson 'Bull' Tubman
Shields Green
John Anthony Copeland
150 male partnerships

*If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.*

- Emily Dickinson

Prologue

It is the year 1776 in the name of the one many have come to call the Lord... and what a glorious year it has proven to be. I sit here in the beating heart of the British Empire, the decadent halls of Saint Stephen's Chapel alive with richly woven robes, chalk-powdered complexions and finely-propped wigs—curls of silver strands down to the waist that I must say look utterly ridiculous on a man. Still, to embrace such a feminine quality can only be considered a compliment.

The pulse of London is weakening. The whispers carried through Parliament carry a sorrow that no one individual dare admit to, yet it is written all over their pale faces. A colony across the Atlantic is rising, and just as son is to father, will soon come to challenge and claim its throne. The conquered lands basking in the majesty of the king have been hard-fought, a territorial expanse upon which even the sun itself cannot set. The leaders of these islands have benefitted from my powers just as the Spanish did two hundred years earlier, and much to my delight, have carried the British influence far and wide—King Arthur would have been so proud. It almost pains me to now become an instrument in its downfall, having given birth to its monumental success, but even I know once a canvas is stretched too thin, it begins to fray. I

may dictate the timing of an empire, brought forth by my Palladium, just as I may bring about both its growth and demise through the treasured Necklace of Harmonia. I have enjoyed my time here upon my home shores. Now, I seek a new beacon, a new order, a new power.

You'll remember, I keep watch over a privileged line of knights—my Six of the White Dragon. Closest to my heart is the bloodline of Sir Lancelot, the knight who swore his loyalty to me in secret and confessed his love for Lady Guinevere with such fervour that it would have taken a far colder heart than mine to deny him his one true pleasure. No. I speak a mistruth to you—for I cannot say I did not fall for the midnight locks, hazel eyes, and satin skin of this mortal knight. His chivalry unrivalled, his passion unwavering, his charms...well, all too easily manipulated. Sir Lancelot broke the Arthurian code, and with it the Round Table itself through his infidelity with the queen—blissfully unaware of course that it was all an illusion of my own making. Life is driven by lust, and if one can control lust in men, then what more is there to be said? His progeny continues to follow me to this day, be it man or woman that inherits the twin blades, for while I may be a sorceress, I will always need my true knight in shining armour, for it would be a lonely immortal life without him. Do not consider me one so weak, however, to cave to the quaint notion of a timeless romance—I am a goddess, after all, have been revered as such in ages past, and need no master.

Mankind might have forgotten me, but I am here nonetheless.

Just as I take the hand of the heir to the sword of Sir Lancelot, I now offer my skills to the child of this British Empire, the thirteen colonies of America with fresh thought and vision, united in their cause. What a wonderful palette. Believe me when I tell you I know what the bond between thirteen can do, each seated in a circle, no one head rising above the other. However, there is always a king, is there not? And which one would be brazen enough to deny that they wished for a crown? This is where I say it is not the king that holds the power, but the king maker. A position I have gladly retained throughout these many centuries.

My time is short—such windows of opportunity fleeting. As these stuffy, wrinkled carcasses bicker amongst themselves over how they see it wise to take up arms and strike back at an impertinent declaration of independence, I will take from them their latent strength and protection, the carved statue that has fuelled their very influence, and allow its counterpart in the jewel that sparkles playfully across my chest to leave only the ill legacy of greed and corruption that once drove them forward. It can sense my own eagerness as much, I am sure, as the curse from Ares that once more spars with the gift from his sister Athena. I tremble too with excitement at such moments, none more so this time, as

word reaches me of the legacy through another important bloodline, the knights of Sir Bedivere, custodians of the fabled King's Blade, and therefore my only equals. Their kin rises with the souls of America, dutiful to their people as always...perhaps one step ahead of their fellow Red Dragon knights this time. They go by the mortal name of the Benson family in the colonial territory of South Carolina, a pedigree in fortitude, lured to foreign shores in a quest for golden riches sadly never to be found. Let me spark the wildfire that is national pride within them, have them believe that to belong to the Americas is to manifest a new destiny, and watch how their allegiance sways—a red stripe turning into a white, you could say.

When we next speak, a new empire will be rising—they will say it was born on this very day, the Fourth of July, and made so by the declaration of men observing rights to freedom. So be it. I, however, know only too well that freedom isn't free, and the price of its perceived maintenance can be dear. With three sacred relics all working in true synchronicity for the first time, the result could be not just a global power, but a *superpower*. One that has learnt from its father's own mistakes and was born stronger and more determined...history is always the finest of teachers, even for me.

As written in their own Lord's text...there may be blood. I, Morgan le Fay, intend to raise as many of my knights'

swords as needed to ensure they carry on my legacy. A legacy that no one shall forget.

Chapter 1

New Bedford, Massachusetts

1st July 1859 AD

The midsummer sunlight was breathing its last. Just one, maybe two hours left, Owen Brown thought. Enough for a few more rounds, at least. He dragged his mud-caked fingers through a mop of pale blond hair, spat out a globule of blood, raised both fists towards his opponent – ‘Again.’ A quiver was noticeable in his voice.

‘Really? Your taste for dirt now insatiable, good Mr Brown?’ The confident tone of Nelson Tubman mocked. He slid his right foot back, black leather boot planted firmly in front, spine straightened, and two clenched fists like a pair of cobra’s teeth poised to strike. ‘I shan’t be listening to any lectures from your father if you return that pretty white face of yours, mottled with blue. Not again.’ He flashed a grin.

‘I said again,’ Owen growled in a temper and kicked towards Nelson’s upper thigh. His opponent glided neatly to one side and effortlessly dodged the follow-up punch. A sharp jab to Owen’s ribcage was more tease than intent to harm, a gentle chuckle from Nelson sparking Owen further still. ‘Son of a...’ he hissed through a bitten bottom lip.

‘You make too much noise,’ Nelson chimed. ‘Your breath can be heard before you even move. Might as well holler a warning or sound off a shot before attacking.’ He took

several modest steps back, fully expecting Owen to bolt for him in anger once more. Instead, his partner sucked in a lung full of air, composed himself by tidying his now scruffy white collar, and rolled up his sleeves. 'You still there?' Nelson quipped, palms now open submissively.

'You can hear me breathing?' Owen asked.

'When you attack, yes.'

'So, what am I supposed to do? Not breathe?' Owen cussed back.

'Control it. Exhale slower. And certainly don't make loud stomping noises with your feet like a bucking horse, as that really gives...' Nelson got no further before he felt his legs swept from under him, the ground meeting the flat of his back, hard. Winded, he tried to inhale, but his chest was pressed under the weight of Owen, a sly and unforeseen move by his opponent. A surge of frustration flashed his eyes blue for a moment. In a blink, the moment had passed.

'And you, my good sir, talk too much.' Owen released his grip on Nelson's wrists and planted a playful peck on his cheek, reminiscent of their schoolboy days. They rolled over the dew-damp grass together, laughing, coming to a halt as breath failed them both. 'In all honesty, I'm impressed,' Owen confessed with a sigh.

'How so?' Nelson coughed out his last remaining chuckles.

'That you can...well, you know.'

‘Feel, but not see? Believe me, you get used to it. You have to in this world.’ Nelson placed a hand over his eyes in self-ridicule. Robbed of sight since age nine, the son of a free slave would have been the easiest of pickings for his opinionated white counterparts—even in the relative sanctuary that was now known as the Freeland of the North—had it not been for his Sacred Band partner. For many a year, he and his family had lived in the shadows, fugitives on the run and forced into squalor like so many that fled in the depths of night guided only by the stars...and the rickety tracks of the railroad. ‘Bound for the promised land,’ his mother would say. Little promise about it, Nelson would often think—perhaps his kind needed to travel a little further into the borderlands of British Ontario to be gifted with true emancipation, but hope was a fragile yet precious thread, and to abandon it when so many of his kin were prisoners in a country built upon the very foundations of freedom would not only snub his birth right as a Sacred Band warrior, but as a human being upon this Earth. He toyed with a wisp of blue flame over his knuckles, recollecting the earliest of memories when such power was first manifested—its shade closer to the deepest of navy blues rather than the powder blue of the spring sky, a circle like deep ultramarine conjured from the left arm in honour of those soldiers of Ancient Thebes, the Lions of Leuctra, or Sons of Ares as some called them. Fell, to the very last of their one hundred and fifty pairs, on a horde of Macedonian blades, to protect their lands, their beliefs. Owen swore that it was this very notion that continued to drive his father John to this day, that be it

an army or a lone soul, they must stand for what they believe in, not flee in fear. For every step you take back in fear, is another step the next generation must then try to regain forwards. The Tubman family would of course then come to know a shred more about the lineage of the Brown family, tales, and popular folklore brought across the Atlantic by the Founding Fathers, carrying both legacies and prophecies that captivated his own family and their closest friends. Indeed, Nelson's secret heritage might have gone undetected had it not been for the fortuitous meeting between his mother Harriet and her close ally, Frederick Douglass—an upstanding man of virtue for their people and seemingly well versed in what Nelson came to learn as Arthurian legend, Douglass in turn introducing Owen's father, and with this came a far richer truth. Nelson would confess to being captivated by such tales and the further embellishment of Owen, even if his mother would often require more substantiation. To this day, Nelson would not reveal his born power to his family in spite of all they had come to learn. Let myth be a grain, not the whole story, the Brown family would caution.

'How's your spear?' Owen interrupted his reverie.

'My what?'

'Your spear. Your throwing arm?' Owen pointed to the pulsing blue fire still twisting its way between Nelson's fingers. 'Got to be good at both shield and spear, you know. Can't be all defence.'

‘Remind me, who just got roundly beaten twice in hand-to-hand combat with a blind man?’ Nelson jabbed an elbow into Owen’s hip.

‘Seriously, Nelson. Fistfighting is all well and good, but it might have escaped your attention that many men use guns. The shield of fire can deflect the odd bullet or two, maybe even several volleys when we’re paired, but sooner or later...’ Owen summoned a slim shard of blue flame from his right hand, a good metre or so in length, beads of sweat forming across his brow a telltale sign of the strength required to conjure such a weapon, even for a short time. ‘You’ll need a projectile of your own. An accurate one at that.’

Nelson let out a grunt. ‘Aim is not my strong suit, Owen. Think you’re smart enough to know that,’ his sarcasm masking the hurt of his physical disadvantage.

‘Come now. If you can hear me breathing and anticipate my moves close up, you must be able to tap some hidden skills to sharpen your skills with a throwing spear,’ Owen insisted, rising to his feet and hauling his reluctant partner up. Their two horses munched the ripe grass, a battered drinking bucket nestled between their muzzles. ‘I’ve got an idea.’ Owen curved a smile.

A worm-rotten fence provided a good balance point for the half-full bucket of water, Owen faffing over its position and instructing Nelson to stay a good ten metres

back. He jogged back to Tubman's side and placed both hands on his solid shoulders. 'Right—give it your best shot,' he whispered.

'Seriously. I can't see a devil's thing, Owen,' a crestfallen Nelson sighed.

'Just try, for Heaven's sake, will you.'

Nelson screwed up his face, eyes squeezed tight. The fire radiated down his right arm, and with a bellow the spear was let loose, sailing high above the bucket, finding the roof of a shabby old chicken coop and setting it ablaze to the panicked clucks of its inhabitants as they fled in a cloud of feathers. 'I missed, didn't I?' Nelson found Owen's fingertips.

'What gave it away?' Owen joked drily, shooing away a cockerel from his feet. 'Your mother won't need to fry those tonight for dinner,' he jested. 'Try again.' Nelson sucked in hard until his chest could contain no more, released a second time. The burning coop missed, only the root of the fencepost was incinerated. Owen reassured with a pat on Nelson's bicep. 'Closer.' He strode back to the bucket, using the last remaining water to douse the licks of fire from the hut. He cast a glance back to his despondent partner, who was squatting miserably on his haunches and shaking his head. A shot of inspiration came to him while hooking his thumb through the rusty bucket handle. 'Hey, Nelson...' he shouted back, placing the bucket as neatly and precisely as he could upon his head. 'Can you hear me? Right now?'

‘Of course, I can hear you right now, Owen. You’re bloody talking!’ Nelson snipped with a dismissive wave of his hand.

‘Fine, then if I don’t talk...could you still hear me?’ Owen pondered out loud. Nelson raised his head and cast a quizzical look. ‘Like before, I mean. My breathing.’

Nelson narrowed his eyes doubtfully, cocked his head to the side. ‘You have to be close for me to do that...not sure at this distance...’ he trailed off in thought. Maybe it was more than just mere breath or movement, a stronger connection between partners, between soldiers—the Sacred Band always at their best when paired through love, not only the power of shield and spear, but senses, feelings that ran deep to the bone. Even as Nelson sat now, without a hint of intention or urgency to act, it was undeniable that Owen was close by, a tingle of electricity that rippled in his skin and made even his peach fuzz stand on end. He rose to his feet once more, flame spear ready. An audible gulp came from Owen—no need for extra-sensory adroitness for that one, his partner was scared—do it, he willed himself, let go. His arm arched back, and heat singed his neck as the spear flew loose. A yelp of pain soon followed. Fear gripped every muscle in Nelson’s body – ‘Owen! Owen! You all right?’ he called out in panic. The cry from his partner turned to a more warming chuckle, leading Nelson right to him. ‘What happened, you hurt?’

Owen hoisted himself up, his arm wrapped around Nelson’s neck, still making a noise somewhere between pleasure and pain. Nelson felt a trickle of warmth down

his back, the rich scent of blood. ‘Dear God almighty, what did I do?’

‘You got closer than you ever have before, that’s what.’ Owen’s trembling ebbed. A soothing laugh followed, together with a congratulatory nuzzle of Nelson’s brow.

‘But...your arm!’ Nelson insisted.

‘It’ll heal. We always do, right?’ Owen smirked. The intimate moment was broken by the gallop of hooves from behind. The stern, mounted figure of Owen’s elder brother John Brown Junior cast a shadow over the pair.

‘You know what time it is, Owen?’ the throaty voice boomed. Junior always tried to imitate their father, getting better with practice. ‘You know it’s not safe to be out here after dark, especially for...well, you know.’ He gestured to Nelson.

‘Always seems strange that, doesn’t it—that I’m the liability after dark, when I’m far less likely to stand out,’ Nelson joked, his humour slain by a fierce growl from Junior. The pair bowed their heads.

‘Home. Now. Both of you...and what in blazes have you done to your arm, little brother?’ Junior enquired. Owen swiftly hid his limb from view, only for his brother’s attention to be drawn to the charred remains of the chicken coop roof behind. ‘That’ll be a week’s pay for you to the Johnsons family right there, boys. Well done.’ The two went to speak in protest, silenced immediately by the elder man. ‘Not another word. I mean it. Harriet and Frederick expect you at the table for supper. Eight

o'clock. Clean.' He scanned the two grimy bodies from top to tail.

'Eight o'clock? Why so early?' Owen asked.

'Father is coming. Calling a meeting at first light tomorrow—all are to be in attendance.'

'All? As in...' Nelson's jaw dropped, words failing.

'Indeed. *All*. And before you both ask, no, I don't know why or the nature of the meeting. We are just to be there.' With a kick to its flank, he turned his horse and trotted back down the hill. 'Eight o'clock sharp. I mean it, boys,' his warning echoed.

'You think your father means it? All of them?' Nelson fashioned a rough bandage from his torn shirt and tightened it around Owen's weeping wound.

'My father does not lie, and my brother copies him. So yes, I believe so.' Owen winced as the bandage bit.

One household, under one roof, and for the first time, Nelson would meet the infamous *Secret Six*.

Chapter 2

Hamburg, South Carolina

3rd July 1859 AD

The thorn had buried itself deep under Gracie's cuticle. She pinched the end of her thumb and attempted to pick the barb out. After several attempts, she cursed within earshot of the plantation warden. The clop of hooves grew louder. She froze for a moment, hands still fidgeting. It had been mere seconds, but any inactivity on a cotton field was hard to go unnoticed. Not here. Not on this cotton field. The snarl of the warden would soon be followed by a harsh command, occasionally the whip—depending on which warden, of course. Gracie had come to know them all on the Benson estate, some mild-mannered, others deliberately cruel. When slaves could only cower, it was a matter of Russian roulette which warden towered over them, and they would shake with anticipation, waiting for a lash of the whip or merely of the tongue. Only last year a young man, not long grown out of adolescence, suffered such a fit of panic that he lost all control of his bodily functions. A simple trickle of urine was seemingly revolting enough for a particular warden to deliver such a blow to the back of his skull that the young man never stood again. Gracie could still hear in her mind the cracking sound, followed by the eerie thud of his body collapsing to the ground, a pitiful whimper, and then silence. Fear arrested her every instinct to rush to his aid, for while the warden remained attentive on his mount,

those on foot must remain subordinate. Always. Once the words ‘clear this coon’ were spat, his body could be approached and whisked away, clinically, without remorse, as if turning out a chamber pot. The labour would resume in a blink.

‘Sand,’ Nina whispered, her face partially obscured by the cotton blooms. She rubbed her hands to show Gracie; a scoop was sufficient to pry the stubborn thorn from the nail just as the warden cast his shadow over them.

‘You ladies got a problem?’ The warden’s voice was familiar to Gracie, a sense of calm enveloped her, but her head remained low. It was Blackwood, the younger of the Benson siblings, and at a mere fifteen years of age, he had yet to inherit any of the ferocity of his peers. His pimply complexion and stringy chestnut hair made it difficult for him to carry any authority, a bean-stalk of a boy, yet to cut his buck teeth the way his parents had. But there was still time, time enough to mould a monster from a meek soul—Gracie had witnessed such tragedies all too often. His one and perhaps only salvation came from riding up alongside the bulkier frame of his elder brother, Berry. ‘I said, you ladies got a problem?’ Blackwood barked with greater conviction, putting on a front for his brother, no doubt.

‘No, sir. No.’ Gracie remained penitent.

‘Good, ’cause I ain’t foolin’ around at this time of the evening. Not on the eve of Independence Day. Tomorrow’s gonna be a fine day for our family and...’

‘Blackwood, go chase a groundhog or something, will you,’ Berry dismissed his younger brother’s paltry attempts at grandeur. Blackwood cast a solemn look at them before turning away in a sulk. ‘Ma says to pick up the mail from the box, too,’ Berry ordered.

‘Thank you, sir,’ Gracie croaked. She dared flash a glance up at Berry’s face, more rugged and mature than Blackwood’s despite being only a few years his senior. His bristle was darker and he was growing a moustache just like his father’s, but it was still patchy. His hazel eyes closed in a quick wink, and Gracie cracked the briefest of grins in reply.

‘You ladies head on back to your quarters now. Losing daylight.’ He gestured with his staff, a smooth wooden instrument Gracie had first noticed in the hand of his father, perhaps now passed on down the line to his eldest son. She drew a sharp breath at the thought of such a young man taking up the mantle of the tyrant someday. Her trance was broken by Nina tugging on her arm, offering a far less welcoming look towards Berry. ‘Good night to you both, now.’ Berry donned his cap as they shuffled back and turned away.

‘Stop your smiling now,’ Nina continued to hold Gracie’s arm as they retreated.

‘Why? What’s wrong with a smile?’ Gracie simpered.

‘Don’t you think you can fool me, girl. I see the way that warden looks at you, the elder Benson, and only trouble will come your way,’ Nina cautioned.

‘He’s not like that, Nina. I know it to be true.’

‘You don’t know a thing about anything, Gracie girl. These wardens, they all the same...some take pleasure from the beatin’, others hurt in different ways.’ Nina’s grip tensed.

Gracie rolled her eyes, loosened her headscarf, and ruffled her tight black curls free. ‘You keep treating them like monsters, they might become one. You see the good in one of them, maybe it can be nurtured...just like these fields.’

‘Ha! What? These fields of blood?’ Nina scoffed. ‘Nothing good grows here, Gracie, not of these folk. Don’t you go believing in fairytales and dreams. It’ll only hurt more when you wake up.’ She tapped the crooked door of the hut. The acrid smoke of a freshly lit fire caught Gracie’s senses, together with roasting catfish and freshly baked cornbread. She licked her lips at the thought of the day’s one and only true pleasure...a warm evening meal. Well, that, and the familiar knock upon the door of her quarters, late in the night. She watched the last rays of the summer

sun setting into clouds of gold and smiled once more at the thought of tonight being one such night.

The knock came. Same time as always, Gracie had come to know. Her bed lay only a few feet away from the door of the slave quarters, so she was the only one to hear it. She scanned the room quickly, making sure each pair of eyes was closed and in slumber before tiptoeing her way to the iron handle. Gingerly, she twisted the lock, each creak of the rusty hinges setting her teeth on edge. A beam of moonlight cut through the shadows, just enough for her slender frame to inch its way out. The cool evening air greeted her, together with a warm woollen coat offered by Berry Benson.

‘Colder tonight than last,’ Berry whispered, as he pulled the shoulders of the coat in snugly. ‘Thought this might fit...belonged to my aunt, God rest her.’ Gracie tucked her fingers under her arms and pursed her lips when noticing Berry himself had little more than a ghost thin cotton shirt on. ‘Don’t worry about me. I’m more used to it than you are,’ he reassured. He took Gracie’s arm and guided her down the small flight of steps, each one creating a creak of its own that triggered fits of giggles from the two. They hurried across the fields to the haven of the shady woods that seemingly stretched for miles. One day, Gracie thought, she might get to see the entire Benson estate—from fields to high hills. But, for now, the tranquillity of the local river was sanctuary enough.

‘You know this one?’ Berry pointed with his wooden staff to a particular fungus sprawling across a rotten stump. Gracie scratched her head. ‘It’s called Bear’s Head—you can eat it.’ He picked at its fleshy white fringes. ‘Best cook it first, though,’ he smiled.

‘What about this one?’ Gracie crouched down by a flock of brightly coloured yellow frills down by the riverbank.

‘Ah, Hen of the Woods. Ma sometimes uses that as a garnish in salads,’ Berry confirmed.

‘You know nature very good, sir,’ Gracie grinned. ‘Why is that so?’

‘Always good to know the land. So my parents told me. My father tried to bleed gold out of it not so many years ago, failed like so many others. But he did at least learn about the fruits of the soil. At least a man will not starve with such knowledge.’ Berry took a seat at the river’s edge and started skipping stones. ‘You and your kind well fed at present?’ he asked.

‘My *kind*?’ Gracie shot a look of disdain at her companion.

‘Beg pardon. I mean, your people...no, your, your.’ Berry’s tongue tripped from offensive to endearing, the brawny adolescent struck dumb and defenceless in the presence of a slave girl. Gracie put him out of his misery with a palm on his face.

‘My kind are fine, Mr Benson. Just fine.’ Gracie coiled both arms around Berry’s shoulders.

‘Good, good,’ Berry gruffed with whatever masculinity he had left. ‘I know Father and Ma don’t always treat you so well, my brother Blackwood even less sometimes, but they ain’t bad people. Y’know?’

‘Yes. I know. It doesn’t go unnoticed,’ Gracie tried to reassure him. ‘Others in your father’s employment, however, not so much.’

‘I heard about the killin’. I had that crook of a warden removed the followin’ day. I swear,’ Berry replied, looking down at his feet in sorrow.

‘Giving orders to your parents now, are we?’ Gracie lifted his head. ‘Soon to be Lord of the Manor, Sir Berry Benson?’ she teased while running a hand down to meet his knuckles, clenched behind, the staff. ‘Is this a gift? From your father?’

‘It is, yes, ma’am. Been in my family for generations, I’m told. Heirloom of sorts. Father was rarely seen without it. It’s supposed to bring good fortune.’ Berry twitched his pubescent moustache. ‘Didn’t exactly work out, though, did it? All hokum, I’m sure of it.’

Gracie lifted the staff and inspected it. No intricate carving, but polished smooth—willow bark maybe? Or thorn? Not like those they see upon the cotton fields, but

delicate and as light as a feather. 'A lucky charm, perhaps? Bringer of hope to the Benson estate?' she mused.

'You heard of King Arthur?' Berry abruptly switched subject, catching Gracie off guard. 'He's a legend back in England, had knights...y'know, armour, swords, shields—rode around on horseback and slew dragons,' he toyed, mimicking their moves and made sounds like a child at play. Gracie admitted to being confused. 'Well, my father told me once that some of these knights had descendants, kids of their own, and that they survive to this day. And...'

'And you're one of them? The noblest Knight of Benson?' Gracie laughed.

'Hey! Would that be so impossible?' Berry swept Gracie off her heels and spun her around. 'I could rescue the sweet maiden from her prison, free the entire kingdom from a reign of terror!' he announced grandly before growing dizzy and toppling down with a splash into the river shallows. The moment his ears became submerged, he heard it, a chilling sound, carried through the slow churning of the waters. A command, by a voice he'd heard a handful of times before, but tried desperately to shut out. He wrenched his head from the waters, panted, Gracie there to wipe his soggy brown fringe from his eyes.

‘You fine, Berry? Look like you’d seen the dead walking.’ Gracie cupped his face.

‘I’m fine. Honest, I’m fine.’ His breathing settled. ‘Just cold is all. We should head back.’ Gracie pulled the woollen coat from her back and wrapped it around Berry, much to his chagrin. As they walked arm in arm back across the cotton fields, sparking with the luminescence of darting fireflies, Berry mustered a serious tone. ‘What word is there amongst the workers of the next election? The future president of these United States?’

‘Not much, sir. If there is such a word, I’ve yet to hear it. Why do you ask?’ Gracie pulled in close.

‘Just family talk. It ain’t no secret many a worker has attempted to travel north, make a new life for themselves. Can’t say I blame them, but...’ Berry paused.

‘But...free will comes at a price?’ Gracie completed. Berry’s head lowered. ‘Your estate, your family.’

‘Not what you want to hear, I know, but truth is, many a good man down South here relies on those fruits of the earth—mushrooms ain’t gonna cut it. Not for them,’ Berry sighed. ‘If pushed to move, we Southern States know how to push back.’

‘So, you saying you’ll fight to ensure I remain yours?’ Gracie moved to block Berry’s footsteps. ‘I’ll become your

maiden forever? Whether I like it or not?' she ran her coffee-coloured finger across his chin tenderly.

Berry took her wrist, noting the faded scars from the shackles she bore when she first arrived at the estate, hastily removed by his own hand. 'I hope, dear Gracie, I never have to fight for you, but in turn, that you do not once think of me as your...*Master*.' He planted a kiss on each of her hands, pressed into one palm a small trinket, and slid quietly back to the main house. 'See you at first light, and happy Independence Day, m'lady.' Gracie gave a tender blink in reply, then smiled upon seeing the wooden doll he had gifted her. Instinctively, she thought it could be for the children stacked high in their bunk beds inside, but Gracie felt the little girl within her surface, and this token was hers to keep.

Chapter 3

Richmond, Virginia

4th July 1859 AD

‘Are these the best seats they could find?’ Henry Worthington squeezed his chubby frame between the armrests, a stitch or two pinging loose from his blazer. He mumbled an apology to the slighter built gentleman who sat to his right and wedged his wooden cane between his thighs. ‘Honestly. With all our connections in New York and Washington, you would think a private box somewhere up high with a better view...’ His tongue froze when Morgan’s eyes lit up with impatience at her husband’s behaviour. He let out a grunt of contrition, awkwardly squeezed his shoulders together, and tried to settle. ‘What’s this one called again?’

‘*Julius Caesar*, dear. Before you ask, yes, you’ve seen it before.’ Morgan Worthington interlaced her fingers with Henry’s. ‘Surely, I need not explain the plot?’ she whispered and smiled.

‘If we’ve seen it before, then why see it again?’ Henry continued to moan. ‘Wait, don’t tell me. Jonathan gave you free tickets?’ he snarked.

‘You know, this one is his favourites, dearest. Loves to play Brutus.’ Morgan twisted her head around, attempting to pick

out a few familiar faces within the audience, giving the odd graceful smile to those that happened to catch her in the act.

‘You know, I’m pretty sure some of my own money helped build this theatre. The water pipes below the main stage, I swear, were some of the first to be used in such a building and...’ Henry was again cut short by Morgan’s critical gaze. ‘Fine. Just let me know when Jonathan’s on, and I make no excuses if I doze off.’

‘You will do no such thing, Henry!’ Morgan gave a playful slap to Henry’s arm. ‘I don’t see Israel or Jeb. Did they get the invitation?’ She continued to browse faces.

‘Only if you sent it. Why? Why the concern if they did not?’

Morgan crossed her long legs and let out a timid sigh. ‘Just that it’s so rare we get the opportunity to all meet together these days. I’d like to brief them more frequently. Especially ahead of the presidential election.’

‘That’s a full year away,’ Henry moaned whilst trying to rub the fatigue already setting in from his eyes. He felt Morgan’s fingertips roll across his silver signet ring, tracing the motto of his ancestors – *‘Albus Draco’*. A year is a heartbeat in the mind of an immortal, such as Lady Morgan, and he knew he should forgive her these impulses. ‘They are both very busy men, the knights of Sir Geraint and Sir Gareth, men of the military. I’m sure you understand, my dear,’ Henry soothed. ‘What about Breckinridge? Where be the knights of Sir Tristan these days? Not still gunning for the White House, surely?’

‘You know John. Vain and arrogant as always—I heard he’s even commissioning a portrait to hang on the presidential walls before his nomination is certain,’ Morgan sighed.

‘I’m getting the impression his nomination is *certain*, Morgan,’ Henry insinuated. Morgan’s expression went blank. ‘You think there’s a war coming, don’t you? Don’t keep secrets from me.’ Her composure slipped a little, recovered quickly. ‘My dear, if our knights are to be thrown into battle against the Red Dragon, then we need to know...and I mean details, tactics, strategies. Not just words of whimsy or loose doctrines born of myths.’ He reached towards the rich crimson jewel lying against Morgan’s ashen skin, desperate to touch its inviting gleam, a hypnotic sparkle that seemed to draw a man’s consciousness in like a fish on a line. Morgan swatted the curious digit away. ‘Well, your actions speak volumes, my dear wife,’ he grumbled like a spurned child.

‘I apologise, my dear Henry. You are quite correct, for I do foresee something...a pivotal moment in America’s history. A division, a split of these great lands. Forgive me, but I have witnessed such internal aggression before in England, and the side you choose can be, well, a delicate matter.’ Morgan withdrew her hand anxiously.

Internal aggressions? You refer to a civil war?’ Henry asked. ‘Is the fabled Palladium not the unifying force for an empire unchallenged?’

‘With a land so vast as the Americas, it depends on which soils the empire rises on. These colonies have been granted

freedom from their overlords. The British Empire will fall with time, that much I know, for I have made it so, but...' Morgan paused as she spotted the stone-cold face of James Longstreet making its way down the far aisle. 'Ah, it would appear the knights of Sir Palamedes received the invitation, at least,' she said, exhaling in relief.

Henry raised a hand of acknowledgement to his fellow White Dragon knight, Longstreet responding with a wave of his programme, followed by a mocking gesture towards an off-stage Jonathan Wilkes Booth appearing to ruminate through his lines in some form of pep talk ritual. James and Henry exchanged grins, relieved at both now having to share the same torture of melodrama from the fellow knight of Sir Lamorak. 'You still wish to gather afterwards, my dear? Now that James has made an appearance?' Henry leant in close to Morgan's ear.

'Please. I do agree—no more talk of prophecies and legends. I promise.' Morgan looped her arm through Henry's. 'As you say, time for some strategy. I know how you knights operate, believe me. Trust me when I say I am not so naïve to the tactics of divide and conquer either.'

'Oh, how so? A civil war presents an opportunity for us, you think?' Henry inquired.

'Very much. But more so than just its people—one person in particular.' Her eyes glistened misty-grey. 'A very valuable person.' The red velvet curtain rose and the soothsayer took to the stage, grandly announcing to the titular character to

beware the Ides of March—a signal of betrayal, a knife to the back of loyalty. In Morgan’s mind, she saw not a knife, but a sword, a sword that could bring that same red curtain down once and for all.

Chapter 4

New Bedford, Massachusetts

5th July 1859 AD

‘The Secret Six? Is that what we are to call ourselves?’ Samuel shooed away a pigeon, tempted by the trail of breadcrumbs left from the crusts of his turkey sandwich. ‘Let me guess...Theodore’s idea?’

‘John’s, actually,’ Thomas replied, running his wooden staff along the railings. ‘Not a bad neighbourhood Mr Douglass has found himself in, is it?’ he remarked aloofly. Samuel grunted, then gave a shrug, licking each finger. ‘Has been spending quite some time with Theodore now though, our Frederick, maybe our myths and legends are beginning to rub off on him?’ Thomas slowed as he approached the Johnsons’ residence. He inspected the slip of paper John Brown had given him, checked the door numbers. ‘Number Seventeen, Seventh Street. It’s this one. Think he and Gerrit will be mad at us for not making it for yesterday as planned?’ He gave a quick grin, knocking twice.

‘Crazy idea, meeting on Independence Day. He knew we would have plans,’ Samuel scoffed.

‘More important than his?’ Thomas raised an eyebrow just as the door creaked open. The wide eyes of Polly Johnson studied the two figures. She dared open the door a little wider,

then shouted down the hallway for husband Nathan. ‘My apologies, Mrs Johnson. I appreciate Mr Gridley Howe and I are a day late and...’ His excuse was left hanging as Nathan reached the door.

‘Better late than never, gentlemen. Do come in,’ Mr Johnson beckoned. ‘I’m afraid I cannot promise you any leftovers from yesterday. One of your compatriots has quite the healthy appetite, it would appear.’ Samuel and Thomas exchanged glances. Gerrit Smith was definitely present. Just how much wine was now left would be the follow-up question. The pair were led through to a modest reception room, sparsely decorated, a bouquet of fresh red carnations upon the windowsill, breaking the chilly grey walls and monochrome framed portraits. A glossy, upright piano played the same note, again and again, then shifted to another key, its player seemingly testing its pitch. Broad shoulders, stout neck and neatly shaven wiry black hair—he didn’t turn around, even when Thomas and Samuel were announced by Nathan Johnson.

‘Ah! Finally. I was beginning to worry,’ John Brown heaved a sigh upon seeing his two fellow Red Dragon knights. His gaunt frame and thin limbs embraced the two warmly, a lingering grip filled with nervous energy that Thomas felt.

‘Worry? Not like you, knight of Sir Gawain,’ Samuel snipped. ‘And you know, I don’t want to miss Independence Day celebrations with my family, nor does Thomas. Even for you.’

‘Yes, yes, I know. Poor timing, it must have appeared. My logic was that during the festivities, our clandestine session might have gone less noticed,’ John replied. ‘I see you have met Mr Green here.’ He pointed across to the gentleman sitting at the piano, the repeated note now paused. ‘Most valuable ally. Alongside his compatriot Mr Copeland, they have rescued many a rightfully free man here to the North. Frederick Douglass and I owe them a great debt of gratitude.’

‘Still using the railroads?’ Thomas enquired.

‘Of course. But soon, there may be no need for them. Nor indeed the gracious hospitality of the Johnson family here.’ Brown nodded to Nathan and his wife Mary. The pair huddled together, heads bowed. ‘Please, Mr and Mrs Johnson, do not let us keep you from any plans you might have for today...for I’d much rather you went about your business as usual. Do venture outside, for it is a fine summer’s day.’ Nathan Johnson gave a modest smile, Mary distinctly less confident before being escorted outside. ‘Poor souls. I ask too much of them. We all do,’ Brown whispered, as the door clinked shut. ‘Do follow me through to the back, gentlemen. Mr Green here can keep a lookout for us.’

‘Shields.’ The broad-shouldered man rose from the piano seat. ‘I prefer *Shields*.’ His leather-black eyes flickered with blue fire.

A dimly lit room little more than two metres from the kitchen galley emitted a musty smell of tobacco, patches of damp

seeping in through its corners. A rustic, worm-riddled table sat squarely in its centre, modestly dressed in torn linen and wobbling at the slightest touch. 'Not a round table then? I'm somewhat disappointed,' Samuel hissed into Thomas's ear, receiving a prod in the hip from Thomas's staff in reply. 'Sooo...the two of you were busy making happy families yesterday, I suppose?' came the cranky tone of Gerrit Smith, perched at the shadowy end of the table, turkey leg gripped in one hand, remnants of its crispy skin caught up in his untamed moustache. He let out a belch before clearing his throat. 'Was a time when the Red Dragon knights would come a'callin' no matter what the day was.'

'I'm sorry, the *what* knights?' came an inquisitive voice from the opposite side. A kind-faced man with gentle features leant across. 'Have I been addressing you wrong all this time, Mr Smith?'

John Brown placed a reassuring hand on the gentleman's shoulder. 'No, no, Mr Sanborn, not to worry. An old title from my friend and colleague here, Gerrit. Some members of this formation go way back.' He shot a judging glare in Gerrit's direction. Gerrit played along with a jovial raise of his wine glass and sank his teeth into the remaining flesh on the bone. 'Apologies, Mr Sanborn. Please meet Mr Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mr Samuel Gridley Howe—a bit of a mouthful, those surnames, I know, but I'm sure they'll both be fine with the more informal Tom and Sam should you desire. This upstanding man here is Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, a firm supporter of our cause, together with his associate, Mr George Luther Stearns.' Brown moved his palm to the shoulder of a

hirsute, shorter gentleman whose face Thomas instantly recognised from many a local paper—the wealthy shipping Chandler and vocal supporter of slavery abolishment. No doubt quite the coup for Brown and his much-needed finances. Samuel tapped his digits behind his back. Mr Sanborn and Mr Stearns made up the honorary Six in John Brown's group once Theodore Parker slid into the room from behind.

'Sir Kay...I mean, Mr Parker. Good to see you again,' Samuel sparked, locking hands with Theodore and his slip of the tongue prompting a splurt of wine to escape Gerrit's lips. Brown heaped scorn upon him once more. Theodore winced a little as he hurried to the nearest chair. 'How's the old chest holding up, dear friend?' Theodore let out a wheeze, clenched his side, and rested his weight upon his staff.

'Fine, just fine,' Parker sighed. Thomas took the seat next to him, desperate to turn up the corner of Theodore's shirt and inspect the old scar below the rib cage. The blade of a White Dragon knight would take more than time to heal; in fact, heal it might not. Theodore had become known for his imposing speeches in very exposed public places, quite the contrast to the more subtle ways of working of his fellow knights. He preached from the pulpit on concerns of liberty and equality, words flowing like nectar into the ear, drumming up the attention of would-be reformers, congressmen, and even presidents-elect. Sadly, such brazen activity also drew the unwelcome attention of their counterparts, the Wilkes Booth family of Sir Lamorak striking during one such sermon in Baltimore in outrage over the likening of faith to morality. That

was the cover story Junius Wilkes Booth gave to the authorities anyway, marred by slurred, intoxicated words.

‘Father,’ a taut voice followed Theodore’s entrance. ‘Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman have arrived.’

‘Thank you, Junior. Gentlemen, you remember my son, John Brown Junior.’ Brown gave a casual wink towards Thomas, Theodore, Samuel, and an increasingly weary Gerrit—the next inheritor of the sword of Sir Gawain, with looks nearly identical to his father’s. ‘Welcome them through, please.’ Junior looked despondently at the floor. ‘What is it, Son?’

‘While this fine young son of yours, Mr Brown has made it to your meeting fully dressed and in his best, your younger son is found wanting.’ Mr Copeland drew to Junior’s side, a slender African American, erudite with powder blue blazer and matching slim-cut pants, colours reflected in the irises. ‘Frederick, Harriet—seats free over there. Forgive the gluttony of Mr Smith in the corner, for Independence Day comes but once a year.’ He snapped a grin towards Gerrit, the knight of Sir Bors screwing his fist tightly in contained rage.

‘Gluttony! I’ll eat that little Sacred Band gnat for breakfast! Him and his partner Green...you watch me! I’ll...’ Gerrit stirred, only to be overcome by a woozy, alcohol-fuelled dizzy spell that made him slouch back into his chair. His vague words thankfully floated past those ignorant of both Knight and Sacred Band meaning. The scampering footsteps of a toddler bolted for John Brown.

‘Uncle John!’ the child cried, cheeks puffed out to a gleam, piercing white smile, stubby arms wrapped around Brown’s leg.

‘Good to see you, little Gertie. Your mother bringing you to one of her dull meetings again?’ Brown cuddled her scarfed head.

‘Mama said I can’t be left alone.’ Gertie gave a playful roll of her eyes. ‘Said I’m safer here with you.’

‘Did she now? Well, a smart woman is your mama.’ Brown knelt down to meet her gaze, Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass sweeping past to take their seats. ‘Perhaps you can do your Uncle John a little favour?’ He held both Gertie’s small hands in a single one of his. ‘My son, young Owen, appears to have overslept along with your elder brother, Nelson. Could you go upstairs and wake them both? Tell them that neither should be asleep on the job. Lazy boys.’

‘Boys are always lazy. Especially my brother.’ Gertie sneered with turned up nose. She turned and hurried towards the stairs.

‘He might need help, Gertie. Your brother Nelson. This isn’t his house, and things will be unfamiliar,’ Harriet began to fuss, settled by the arm of Frederick.

‘I’m sure Owen will guide him, Harriet,’ Brown reassured. ‘Now, while we wait for the morning to greet my youngest’s eyes, would anyone other than Gerrit care for a drink?’

Gertie's quick feet slowed to a trot as she approached the guest room door. She pressed her ear to it, heard the familiar snooze and snore of her brother, and giggled. The brass knob was just within her reach to twist. A loud squeak from the hinges was not enough to stir either Owen Brown or Nelson from slumber. She couldn't help herself. Seeing the two bodies knitted together beneath the sheets like soft mounds, she ran and leapt onto the bed. Nelson immediately bolted upright.

'Gertie! Damn it, girl, is that you?' His hand frantically searched the air around her. 'Aw, I know it's you. Don't try to hide—your laugh is all too familiar.'

'Mama says you two are late. Need to get up,' Gertie teased, rolling to the back of the bed out of Nelson's reach, gleefully bouncing up and down. 'Lazy! Lazy!'

'Jeez. You might be familiar...I'm certainly not.' Owen let out a yawn and then slung his arm around Nelson's torso, dragging him back down to the mattress. 'Day after Independence Day...what was my father thinking?'

Gertie had resorted to tugging the sheets off the men, leaving their near-naked bodies exposed. 'Got to get up. Got to get up!' she snickered. Nelson seized a corner and sharply snatched the covers back, then ordered his little sister to report back to their mother—message received.

'What time is it?' Owen continued to groan.

‘I’m guessing not the right time for us to still be in bed.’ Nelson allowed himself a slight chuckle. ‘How’s your arm?’

‘Sore, but manageable.’ With bleary eyes, Owen inspected the minor scorch wound on his right arm. He swung it back and forth a few times, checking his throwing strength. ‘Spears might go a little off-target for a while, but...’ he turned and hugged Nelson at the waist. ‘I’m really not in the mood for a lecture from my old man, not today. Can’t we just let Shields and Copeland take this one?’

‘That’ll go down well with your father and my mother. Miss a Secret Six meeting? I was looking forward to seeing them all yesterday. Well, you know what I mean.’ Nelson had already swung his feet out of the bed onto the cold plank floor. ‘Most of all, Mr Gridley Howe. My mama says he’s doing some great work at the Perkins School over at Waterton...might yet be some hope for me and my education. Not many schools are willing to take the blind, yet alone a coloured blind.’

‘Nah, what’s a Sacred Band warrior got to learn from school, huh? Bred for fighting, not readin’.’ Owen let out another yawn. ‘Another gift of prose from you, Master Brown Junior. Should really share your talent for words with Theodore.’ Nelson felt his way around the edge of the bedpost, found a plump cushion, and hurled it at Owen’s head, but caught the lampshade instead.

‘Close. Real close,’ Owen mocked, just as the lampshade tipped and shattered on the floor. ‘Like a bull in a china shop you are.’ A booming voice reverberated through the walls from

Harriet Tubman, emanating from the foot of the stairwell...something about paying the Johnsons for anything broken or damaged. ‘Hmmm...think she and Frederick might have found out about the chicken coop.’ He gritted his teeth. ‘And Brown Junior means my brother, by the way...don’t get me confused with that snitch!’

Nelson held a hand out to his partner—accepted by Owen. ‘Come on. This is clearly important to your father as much as it is to my mama. Besides, we shouldn’t look so lacklustre, not in the presence of Shields Green; he is the leader of the Band after all.’

‘Oh, the Sacred Band leader who can summon a shield so strong even a thousand rifle shots couldn’t penetrate it. How I envy our great captain!’ Owen dramatised while slipping on his mud-splattered shirt. ‘Hey, is this presentable enough?’

‘Seriously?’ Nelson gestured towards his eyes.

‘Fair point. Bit messy. Let me borrow your spare, will you?’ Owen tossed the stained shirt aside. ‘Your better shirt, if you please. This is, after all, such an important occasion,’ he smirked.

Chapter 5

Richmond, Virginia

5th July 1859 AD

The air hung heavy with the scent of face powders and rich perfumes backstage. Henry ducked to avoid a poorly painted Roman column prop being wheeled behind him by two bickering teenagers, both of whom had clearly been having a joke or two at the cast's expense for overdoing the eyeliner and lipstick, caked comically on their faces. 'Look, I am the adorned Cleopatra! Come rescue me, my dear Mark Anthony.' One swept the back of his hand across his brow.

'Wrong play. Idiot,' the other replied. 'Make a decent Juliet, though. Wilkes Booth could be your Romeo? How about that?' he jested. Henry brushed past the pair of them in a huff—in what feeble hands are his knights to leave this new empire once they are gone? He breathed deeply ahead of greeting Morgan and her counsel—*his* counsel he questioned himself, moments of misconduct amongst his White Dragon knights skipping through his mind, with his wife so often the cause. He slid his staff behind his back and reached out a welcoming hand to Jeb Stuart, the noble and loyal knight of Sir Gareth, cutting a sharp and splendid figure complete in full cavalry attire, grey cape lined in red velvet, and sun-soaked sash tied snugly at the waist. His drawn eyes spoke of his tiredness, having travelled all night from Washington to arrive in

Richmond despite him protesting. Henry patted his comrade warmly on the shoulder in gratitude, catching Morgan Worthington's fleeting chuckle with Israel Greene in the far corner of the dressing room, the knight of Sir Geraint certainly looking more refreshed after his long journey than his counterpart.

'This had better be worth it, Henry,' Jeb muttered. 'You know Israel, and I should not be so readily abandoning our duties in the capital. Not at this time. If Lady Morgan wishes us to fulfil our requirements in this promised land of hers, commanding its armies will remain a top priority. The British are not so easily deterred, with or without sacred statues.'

'Nor the Red Dragon. We are aware, Jeb—trust me. I have kept a close eye on the events in Washington, and just how finely tipped these scales are. Morgan has belief in the Americas, and that belief should suffice for all of us...but this new world is fragile, and what is fragile can...' He paused to acknowledge the wave from Israel, followed by a twitch of a grin.

'Fracture,' Jeb completed. 'Understood, Henry. I will hear our good lady out, but come sundown, Israel and I must return.'

The contrasting, gangly figure of Jonathan Wilkes Booth made its typical dramatic arrival, skin still partially pale around the jowls from stubborn makeup. 'Well? What did you all think?

One of my favourites, Julius Cesar, so deliciously tragic and yet poetic in equal measure—the rise of a formidable leader, only to be betrayed by his own kin.’ Wilkes Booth spread his arms open, caught in his own moment.

‘Is that supposed to be a metaphor?’ James Longstreet pushed Wilkes Booth aside with his wooden staff, the knight of Sir Palamedes eager to take the seat next to Lady Morgan. ‘And for the record, one of your better performances, yes, Jonathan,’ he appeased. Jonathan bowed, taking his usual seat in front of the vanity mirror, rubbing the remainder of the powder from his neck. ‘You have news, dear Lady Morgan?’ Longstreet pressed.

‘In a way, James, yes. My husband and I have kept the Palladium close to Washington, as you all know, and what a success it has proven to be—the repulsion of all known former colonists from our shores...the British, the French, the Spanish. Often without spilling a drop of blood, I might add,’ Morgan reminded, fingers interlaced.

‘Must have been a disappointment for you, Lady Worthington. The Louisiana Purchase. Sure the knights of Sir Gareth and Sir Geriant were chomping at the bit to charge the Gallic flanks!’ Wilkes Booth quipped merrily, still smearing away the pasty foundation. Jeb let out a chuckle.

‘No need to waste blood, Sir Lamorak. Not that which is as precious as ours. Besides, it kept the lingering coals of the once-formidable Europe in turmoil long enough for us to capitalise on our designs here,’ Morgan replied. ‘Which brings me to the present, and our purpose here today.’ She stood boldly. ‘This nation has achieved incredible feats since its birth over a hundred years ago, but has grown precociously, so eager to run before it has learnt to walk.’ She moved to assist Wilkes Booth and his clumsy attempt at makeup removal. ‘This requires a woman’s touch, Jonathan.’ Her grey eyes glinted in a motherly fashion.

‘You’re saying we should slow down?’ Israel tightened the grip on his staff. ‘Surely, now is the time to advance? Clear the East of this land from the remaining Spanish strongholds, Native Americans and any other creed that might ally themselves to the Red Dragon or worse, the Sacred Band?’

Morgan Worthington turned directly to Henry. ‘Our focus should be the *South*, my dear Israel, not the East.’ Israel shot a curious glance towards Henry to see what the knight of Sir Lancelot had to say on this matter. Henry raised his palm, urging calm amongst his fellow knights. ‘The Palladium, bringer of empires, and the Necklace of Harmonia—its opponent—are mine to command, as you all know only too well. You are also born of this time, this era, and thus forget the many instances where those of the Red Dragon have foiled my plans. The King’s Blade, Excalibur.’ Her tone became firm and bitter. ‘The bringer of death, we once said, all too clear to me now, capable

of overpowering my two most treasured relics.’ Her fingers caressed the red jewel beneath her chin.

‘And wielded by the worthy, the bloodline of Sir Bedivere. Yes, we know the tale, m’lady.’ Longstreet interjected. ‘Not an ally of ours, and therefore no more than a flight of fancy, if indeed your plan is to reclaim his line for our own.’

‘Time bears a penance, Sir Palamedes. Of all the lines sworn in an oath to King Arthur, Sir Bedivere is the most capricious—troubled, unwieldy, manipulable. Especially one that has much to lose,’ Morgan resumed. Longstreet turned first to Israel, then back to Henry, face puzzled.

‘She’s alluding to a civil war, James. Right here on this soil,’ Henry concluded. Jeb Stuart choked on a startled cough. ‘It’s true. She has foreseen it, and more so, I have witnessed its sparks throughout the capital. It is coming.’

‘Ah, is that why you’ve had our good Mr Breckinridge manoeuvre into political circles? The charming Sir Tristan making a play for power?’ Wilkes Booth swished his spare hand while busy with a wet towel in the other. ‘President Breckinridge. Leader of a free world—at least, that’s what all shall think, right?’ he winked.

‘How does Jonathan Breckinridge becoming president trigger a civil war? To what end, if we are ultimately in control?’ Jeb questioned. Henry folded his arms and glared back at Morgan.

‘Sir Tristan will not be president,’ Morgan cut in coldly.

‘What? Not Senator Seward or, worse still, Abraham Lincoln? Surely...?’ Jonathan protested. ‘That career ladder climbing, spineless bureaucrat? It’s a death sentence for all we’ve built, Morgan.’ Both hands slammed onto his dress table. ‘I won’t stand for it.’

‘Which is exactly why you were not asked to stand, Jonathan,’ Henry tiskted and moved neatly between the knight of Sir Lamorak and his wife. ‘Nothing rallies anger in the passionate than a weak and ineffective leader, as you have just demonstrated. If there is to be a civil war, let it be started by an individual so careless and nonchalant as to play on citizens’ insecurities of equality...those citizens that have worked hard to establish new lives for themselves through hard labour and...’ Henry tapered off, his conscience making him bite his tongue.

‘Slavery?’ Israel finished. ‘We are to build a new empire upon slavery?’ His body contorted awkwardly with his words.

‘To us, most are slaves, Sir Geraint,’ Morgan asked. ‘You don’t honestly believe the wealth of your own family, all your families, has been simply gifted from the Heavens, do you? You are all the product of plain exploitation, only a tier higher than other colonialists that you consider company. Yes, Greene, you are welcome.’ She flicked a spark of green flame from her fingertips. ‘Which brings me to the heart of this very matter...the bloodline of Sir Bedivere, or shall I say, the Benson family.’

The surname carried weight within the group. Benson was a failed gold rush tycoon who set up shop in Hamburg, South Carolina and made a fortune on the cotton fields, a long-time supporter of purchased foreign labour. A swing to the Northern ideologies would undoubtedly be met with fierce rebuke from such a family, irrespective of any allegiance to their foes under the banner of the Red. Knights of both factions have their duty, it was true, but were also flesh and blood, the human thread Morgan Worthington so often seized and twisted, their very weakness across the centuries. Love of family, of kin, of their next in line to inherit their blades. This particular calling to this most revered of bloodlines might prove valuable to Morgan’s cause, for if Sir Bedivere could not be forced into alignment with the White Dragon, he could at least appear sympathetic to their goal, and ensure the might of Excalibur was not wielded against them. Questions remained, for such a plan was fraught with conjecture—the knights of Sir Galahad, Sir Gawain, Sir Bors, Sir Kay, and Sir Gaheris all held firm footing upon America’s soil now too, scouting the White Dragon’s every move as they have done for centuries. Influences of their own,

capturing the ears of many a well-respected businessman, statesman, and even soldier. *Soldiers*. The ever-determined and dutiful Sacred Band, whose blue fires had also been set ablaze across the North American continent, the partnerships eternally fighting for justice to those held under the brutal thumb, and never flinching from fealty developed over thousands of years since the Ancient Greeks and their Theban brethren. The Palladium will be their target, and stirs of revolution in the African-Americans a suitable weapon of choice should those of the Red Dragon fail. 'What is it you are asking of us, Lady Morgan?' Jeb broke the silence. Morgan beckoned Henry forth.

'You and Israel shall seek the companionship of General Robert E. Lee and await further command,' Henry instructed.

'General Lee? That wasting, old fool?' Israel grunted. 'Is there no one better equipped for such an undertaking?'

'He's a skilled general, Israel. The manifest destiny owes much to him and his expansion into Mexican lands. Yes, he grows old, but with the Palladium...' Henry was interrupted by a melodramatic protest from Jonathan, settled quickly by Morgan. 'Yes, Morgan and I shall ensure he is benefitted by the Palladium, as all those in the Southern States shall, and with the knights of Sir Gareth and Sir Geraint at his command, will hasten victory. The man is equally charismatic, one might say.' Henry sent a judging look towards Booth, now huffing like a child, arms crossed. 'Longstreet will remain here in Virginia,

play out a little eastern theatre alongside General Thomas Jackson and his troops. When the time comes, both sides shall strike.’ Henry pumped both fists.

‘And you, my good knight of Sir Lancelot? What can a fellow Northerner and renowned industrialist offer during such bellicose times?’ Jonathan cocked his head to one side, his eyebrow raised. His eyes were drawn to a scrolled-up parchment concealed beneath Worthington’s grey coat.

‘Intelligence, Mr Wilkes Booth,’ Morgan grinned. ‘Our fellow knights of the Red Dragon will move to block us, and seek out their saviour in the Benson family as they have always done. Henry and I intend to keep watch upon the Northern States that whisper favour to Abraham Lincoln while putting my husband’s talents to good use.’ She unrolled the parchment across Booth’s dressing table, his annoyance at seeing several of his finest perfume bottles tossed carelessly to the floor palpable. A detailed schematic was revealed. Stuart, Longstreet, and Greene leaned in with curiosity.

‘Is that...?’ Israel tapped a finger at its corner.

‘A ship. A warship. The likes of which the world has never seen before,’ Henry boasted. ‘Made of iron, powered by steam—my own design. Capable of destroying any vessel crafted from wood that sets sail across our Atlantic shores.’

‘A ship of iron? Damn thing will just sink,’ Wilkes Booth scoffed.

‘Trust me, she won’t. For she has a hull already built and sits here waiting in this very state of Virginia,’ Henry confirmed.

‘This is a new age of warfare, my dear Jonathan. You’ll see.’

‘You want us to command the ports? Points of access?’ Longstreet enquired.

‘Ensure our lifeblood. It will be the first principal target for the North, should the South secede. I’ve lived through enough wars to learn the side that controls the waters, controls the conflict.’ Morgan squinted, jolted by a memory, her sibling flashing in her mind. The knights withdrew to their chairs, muted; an unshakeable sense of displeasure filled the air. ‘My friends, I am aware that the thought of tearing this country we have all come to love into shreds may strike fear, even pain, into each and every one of your hearts, but I ask that you believe in me and the son of Sir Lancelot. For from these ashes will come a stronger union, and a trinity untiring, that will serve you and your families for generations to come. I shall see to it, you have my word,’ she said, bowing graciously.

‘The word of a witch,’ Israel snipped softly under breath and out of earshot to Jeb. ‘How long do you think this charade will last until the penny drops for old Wentworth Higginson and his followers? Once again, the knights of the Round Table will be

forced to cross swords.’ His resigned sigh went unnoticed by Henry and Morgan.

‘John Brown and the line of Sir Gawain most certainly will not go down without a fight,’ Jeb kept his tone gravelly low.

‘Already there are whispers of revolt amongst the slaves given newfound freedoms in the North. The Sacred Band will be ready, even if the Red Dragon are not.’

Chapter 6

New Bedford, Massachusetts

5th July 1859 AD

Reckless. Slaughter. *Suicide*. Barbed words lingered in Samuel's mind long after the meeting of the Secret Six had ended. He had sat quietly on the backyard terrace with moonlight for company for the past hour, scratching the tip of his wooden staff and taking the occasional sip of red wine. He had kept his thoughts firmly to himself during the gathering, a subtlety that did not go unnoticed by Thomas Wentworth Higginson—the knight of Sir Gaheris typically shooting off opinions on matters of engagement and conflict for the Red Dragon like sparks popping from the embers of a coal fire. Thomas could only assume the dual nature of the group—some familiar with the games at play from their Arthurian counterparts, others completely ignorant—had held Gridley Howe's tongue, but his sombre expression throughout the discussion spoke volumes. At some point between Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman courteously shaking John Brown's hand, bidding him farewell and good fortune, and Mr Sanborn and Mr Stern slapping their hands on their foreheads in despair, Samuel departed—forcing himself between a bickering Anthony Copeland and John Brown Junior as he headed for the rear door.

‘Not the finest specimen of the Sir Gawain line, I’ll concede.’ Thomas took a seat next to his friend, his wine glass half full. ‘Apparently, the Brown family hold a small estate somewhere in Ohio...and an island in the middle of Lake Erie, I believe. Good enough climate for fruit, grapes in particular. Might be a good retreat for their family one day,’ he said with a grin, raising his glass.

‘What’s left of his family,’ Samuel grunted. ‘And no, this one has all the taste of paraffin.’ He spat his last mouthful into the closest rose bush.

‘So, you don’t approve of the raid?’ Thomas followed. Samuel’s brow creased. ‘You know sooner or later, there will have to be a rebellion in the South, an insurrection by the slaves—perhaps such an act should be in the hands of a Red Dragon knight? Green and Copeland seem to agree.’

‘Suicide, Thomas. That’s what Frederick and Harriett said. *Suicide*. I cannot blame them either...for all their efforts in subterfuge and the smuggling of innocent but incarcerated lives to the havens of the North; it could soon be undone by the rash decision of Mr John Brown. They will be exposed, brought to trial, and even executed perhaps. Who knows?’ Samuel buried his face in his hands. ‘We think here in these states we are invincible, but the alliance with the South is fragile, now more than ever. I just urge patience and persistence, not martyrdom.’

‘Shame the leader of the Sacred Band does not share your view, Sam.’ Thomas offered a comforting arm around Samuel’s shoulder. ‘I appreciate that patience is a virtue, but for them, it is merely the prolonging of a death sentence. Perhaps twice so, for reasons you well understand.’

‘The Sacred Band!’ Samuel huffed. ‘Exactly who else in that room knew of their legacy, of Shields and Anthony, beyond those like you and I and the ancestors of the Round Table? Certainly not Franklin Benjamin Sanborn or George Luther Stearns—being asked to front up money, resources, and weapons at Brown’s beckoning so they can all be the heroes of the hour. I question whether Mrs Tubman and Mr Douglass even know of their true nature.’

‘I think Nelson Tubman and Owen Brown have made their feelings for one another perfectly clear, Samuel,’ Thomas noted with an irreverent chuckle.

‘You know what I mean. Let us ask the Johnson family how they think their chicken coop got incinerated, set ablaze with fabled blue fire by two blood-born warriors. Sure, they’ll buy the tale,’ Samuel sneered. Thomas put his hands up in defeat. ‘Exactly. We knights and the Sacred Band, the Red and White Dragon factions, we’ve always operated in the shadows, behind walls and secret societies such as this...but we know our fate and thus our purpose—millions of people do not. Yet, we ask them to risk their lives.’

‘How is that different from any war, my friend? Born of mankind, or of myth and legend?’ Thomas gave a wry smile. Their conversation was interrupted by Theodore’s throaty cough, his tired frame slumping down beside Thomas.

‘You should really get that looked at, Theodore.’ Thomas poked at Parker’s ribs. ‘A wound caused by the blade of Sir Lamorak won’t simply heal on its own.’

A blood-stained handkerchief dabbed at Theodore’s mouth, then was swiftly and stoically tucked back into his pocket. ‘I’d be interested in which physician you recommend, my dear Wentworth Higginson.’ He grimaced through a laugh. ‘Besides, it sounds like we’re all about to go down fighting. Even Brown’s youngest.’

‘Owen? Surely John will not risk his son in this raid?’ Samuel’s eyes widened.

‘Loyal bunch, the Sacred Band. If Green and Copeland attend, so will Owen.’ Theodore confirmed.

‘And Nelson? What did Harriet have to say?’ Thomas followed.

‘Under strictest orders not to go to Harper’s Ferry. He is to remain and assist the underground railroad efforts set up by Mrs Tubman and Mr Douglass,’ Theodore replied, still wincing.

‘Told you. Patience and persistence,’ Samuel uttered to the wind. The man couldn’t even dress himself or make it down the stairs alone, let alone fight in a Sacred Band partnership. He caught sight of a heated exchange between the Brown family, elder son Junior waving a judgemental finger at his little brother, while John desperately tried to adjudicate the altercation. Gerrit Smith shook his head despondently in the corner. ‘Appears to be going well in there. Family feud?’ he quipped.

‘Junior Brown there sides with Douglass and Tubman. Raid is not worth the risk...Owen, of course. Always the dutiful son,’ Theodore twisted with a groan. ‘Mr Green and Mr Copeland left them to it.’ The Brown bickering grew louder, and the smash of a wine bottle snapped Gerrit Smith to attention as Junior stormed out of the room under a cloud of rage. Owen sought solace in the arms of his father. ‘We’d best return. At least that’s one wound we can all help heal,’ Parker concluded.

‘You all think me mad, don’t you,’ John Brown said resting his heavy head upon his fist. ‘The five knights of the Red Dragon hurling themselves into the fray once more against the rise of Morgan le Fay and her White Dragon acolytes. The powers of the Palladium wreaking havoc across yet another land, like so many generations before us, so much blood, so much destruction. Only to begin again and again.’ His words became weary. ‘It is not in my nature to give in, gentlemen, not when so

many lives are at stake. This nation of ours was built on freedom, so what good are we as knights of the Round Table if we cannot carry forth such responsibility?' His passion animated him.

'To be honest, John, I'm pleased you recognised that there are only the five of us,' Thomas soothed, hand on Brown's. 'The Secret Six was perplexing our decent friend Samuel over here—both of us agreed it was a poor charade.' He grinned. Brown's eyes moistened with a welling emotion. 'Look, we understand, all of us do, but as leader of our faction, I cannot endorse such a move—bold and brave though it may be, dear Sir Gawain. Samuel is right. We must reconsider.'

'You know me well enough by now, Thomas, that though my heart will always be true to the line of Sir Galahad, a man must forge his own destiny.' Brown leant back, his chest swelled.

'And then you'll know you risk war. Civil war,' Samuel cautioned.

'So, the remaining knights of the Red Dragon will see to it that the just cause triumphs. With or without me,' Brown remained resolute. Owen gave an approving nod. 'Now, excuse me, good sirs. I must speak with my son.' Owen stood to attention once more. 'Not you, Owen,' his father ordered, emphasising his words with his staff, then marched out and closed the door.

‘You don’t think others will join such a rebellion, do you?’ Owen cast his shade over Thomas, Samuel, Theodore, and Gerrit. ‘The slaves will not follow?’

‘I’m sorry, Owen, your father chances death. As do you, Shields Green and Anthony Copeland. But, as he says, your fate is for you to command, not me,’ Thomas replied, then bowed. ‘As brutal as it sounds, I would sooner see your heart stop beating than for us knights to impose our will upon it. You must do as you see fit, Lion of Leuctra.’ With Thomas’s blessing and a thump of the left pectoral in Sacred Band salute, Owen retired.

‘It’ll be a massacre, Tom. You know it.’ Gerrit held back a belch. ‘If a civil war is triggered, the four of us will be exposed by our foes...and without Berry Benson and his allegiance, we risk annihilation at the hands of Morgan and Henry Worthington.’

‘Always the optimist, knight of Sir Bors,’ Theodore Parker sighed.

‘And you’re unbearably naïve, Theodore! Look at you. You can barely stand! Might as well make it three knights on six at this rate,’ Gerrit struck back.

‘Naivety has its benefits, Mr Smith. Means I still have the capacity to learn, and won’t ever *presume*,’ Theodore retorted with a sharply raised eyebrow.

‘Save your play with words for the masses and the politicians, Parker!’ Gerrit brought a stiff finger within an inch of Theodore’s nose, stamped his staff hard on the floorboards, and wrenched the door almost from its hinges in frustration as he left.

‘Perhaps he’s right,’ Theodore said, clutching his side once more, gritted teeth desperately trying to subdue the pain. ‘My blade is of no use to you when my body is unwilling.’ He hung his head low.

‘Retirement calls?’ Samuel tried to lift his fellow knight’s spirit. ‘Your staff can find a new hand for the knights of Sir Kay?’

‘Indeed. Indeed,’ Theodore managed a meek laugh, mindful of the irony that he and his wife had borne no children, hence had no descendants. But unlike the blood of the Sacred Band destined for Wentworth Higginson and Brown, the blades of knights can be bestowed upon any whom their owner deemed worthy. That much he was certain of, and the wise-worded friends who were the Barrett Browning family settled in the tranquil Tuscan hills of Florence might present such an opportunity. He knew Thomas would approve, the lady Elizabeth taking every occasion to charm the knight with sweet

verses of love and desire. The heart of Sir Galahad, so easily won by a poet's siren.

The creak of the front door signalled the return of the Johnson family, and the three knights tapping their staffs together in unity for what could be the final time.

John Brown knew he had minutes, maybe seconds only, to defuse the anger boiling within his eldest before the moment passed. Junior softened his ranting when he heard the Johnsons' return, but kept its bite, his father still on the hook for his proposals—using Owen as cannon fodder along with the rest of the Sacred Band, all in the name of honour and perceived urgency. 'There is always a land that needs saving, lives like necks on a chopping block, but you never learn! Your arrogance, Father, it will be your downfall...but not just yours, our entire family's.'

John fell to his knees, an act of contrition that took his son by surprise. He joined his palms in prayer and gazed only at the ground. 'Jonathan Junior—I have loved you from the moment your mother brought you into this world, as I have your brother. I knew from that moment I would never seek to command you both, as your lives are what you are to make them,' he stuttered through clenched teeth. 'I must, however, ask something of you. Should I fail, should this raid be in vain, then

I bequeath onto you my staff and blade, and you shall carry on my line, the line of Sir Gawain and the blood of the Band.' He held his staff up in offering. 'Will you accept?'

Junior furrowed his brow, every muscle bunched, then suddenly eased when looking deeper into his father's aching eyes. He pushed the staff back, gave a firm nod. 'You'll need this more than I, Father,' he whispered as the room door began to creak open, Nathan Johnson peering through the gap. 'Promise me now, you'll keep Owen safe, no matter how passionate his cause may become, his fervent desire to serve Shields Green—have him reach us at South Bass Island.' His father nodded back in accord. 'Now, do what you must do. Maybe we'll see each other again with a better wine collection.' He relieved the tension with a teasing grin. 'Grandfather always said there were interested buyers in Western France, and La Rochelle is a beautiful city, I'm told.'

'Second promise, please. Keep the French off our vineyards,' John Brown said, a quick wipe of a tear from his eye before the Johnsons made their presence formally known. 'Please, Nathan, Mary, do come in. Our work here is near its end.'

Chapter 7

Hamburg, South Carolina

17th October 1859 AD

The soft tick-tock of the grandfather clock matched the rhythm of Berry Benson's heartbeat. Tick-tock, tick-tock — like a hypnotic. He felt his eyelids start to droop, having spent ten long hours patrolling the fields that day. The harvest season was once again upon the family, and with last year's crop ravaged by boll weevils, this season would determine the estate's future. Pressure had been placed upon not just its plantation wardens, but its workers as well. Longer hours eating into the fading beams of daylight, the crack of whips doubled, the slaves returning to their quarters barely able to stand, shuffling like crooked pegs sliding down a clothesline. Berry had insisted on working every day, partly to ensure his brother Blackwood didn't take their father's recommended harsh penalties too literally should workers stall, but also to keep watch over Gracie, so far spared any lashings, but with each morning, the tiredness growing in the heavy circles beneath her eyes. He'd slipped her food once, two slices of cornbread taken from the very table he was sitting at now, and was already preparing his napkin to do the same when his father Abel flung the door open, his dishevelled grey hair now long enough to reach the sides of his beard, the odour of whiskey in his wake.

‘You’re late dear, very late indeed,’ Mother Nancy said as she rose to attention. ‘The boys are starving.’ Her husband growled some words of dismissal and took his seat at the head of the table, hand refusing to part with the silver flask—several quick sips before grace.

‘You boys work all day today?’ Abel grumbled, reaching for the orange mound of sweet potato mash. Berry and Blackwood nodded. ‘Good. Need a strong yield this year, biggest we’ve ever had, only that will suffice, you hear me?’ An arthritic finger pointed at both. Berry parted his lips to speak, but his mother’s sharp glance silenced him.

‘How went your visit to the merchants in town, dear? Are the conditions more favourable this season?’ Nancy tried to lighten the mood.

‘Worrying times, worrying times.’ Abel gnawed at a pork chop. ‘All this talk of free rights in the North, got every merchant and plantation owner scared. A lost cause, they say, our very way of life set to be destroyed if such a path is followed.’

‘What path, Father?’ Berry spoke before his mind engaged. Nancy’s eyes narrowed once more.

‘What you talkin’ about, boy? Our workers. Our rights. This whole family plunged into the depths of poverty—everything I’ve built, your ancestors built on this promised land, destroyed.’ The bent finger rose again. ‘That food there, that fills your belly, your brother’s belly, your mother’s belly—all gone. Roof over your head, gone; those fancy clothes on your back, gone. You’ll be no better than...’ The gradual slurring of his words provided a chance for Berry to interject.

‘Than the slaves? Go on—say it!’ Berry spat.

‘Berry!’ Nancy shot. ‘Mind your manners, young man.’ Blackwood cowered, burying his head into his plate. Berry read the earnest look on his mother’s face, took to his feet, and bowed apologetically. Resuming his seat, his wooden staff slipped and rolled to the floor. His father blinked several times as it rattled, himself caught in a trance.

‘Where’d you get that?’ Abel stuttered, a tremor visible in the shaking of his fork.

‘Dear, you gave it to Berry, remember? Not three months ago. We were sitting here at this very table,’ Nancy fussed, hand seeking to soothe the twitch in her husband’s. Abel pulled his arm free from his wife’s in alarm, eyes darting around the room in confoundment. He looked at their three faces as if they were ghosts. The

voice—that *voice*. Smooth as polished glass, kind, and unfaltering, but all the same *demanding*, relentless. Attention drawn to duty, the highlighting of failure—memory came to Abel in pieces, a curse he had tried to drown. Disowning the wooden staff was an attempt at riddance, desperate relief. Now seeing it for the first time in the hands of his son, fear and guilt struck at once, an abortion of a knight now shifting blame to his eldest.

‘Give...give that back to me, Son.’ Abel took a steady step towards the staff just as Berry lifted it. His son, puzzled, looked at his mother for advice. She nodded her approval. Still, he couldn’t relinquish the staff.

‘Damn it, Berry! Just give Father his walking stick back, for Heaven’s sake!’ Blackwood’s temper frayed. ‘Would have been nice to eat dinner in peace tonight, given the weeks we’ve been putting in,’ he sneered and returned to his meal. Berry gave in, handing the staff back to the fragile hands of his father. ‘Bloody Knights Templar hog-wash.’ Blackwood could be heard grumpily shifting his peas around. The room fell silent, save the ticking of the clock once again, then came a knock. ‘Jesus Christ. What now?’ Blackwood tossed his arms high. Nancy beckoned the help to open the door. A burly plantation warden who went by the name of Jepson—Benson recognised him from the brutality in his face as the same warden Gracie had described, reliving the death of the young slave out in the fields. Heavy-tread boots entered in a storm. Berry leapt to

his feet when seeing Gracie's twig-thin limbs in the callous clamp of the warden.

'Pardon me, Mister Benson, sir. But we appear to have a thief in our midst,' Jepson growled.

Berry tried to catch Gracie's eyes, offering whatever reassurance he could as she twisted and struggled in Jepson's restraints. 'I ain't no thief, sir. That ain't true!' she pleaded with Abel. Jepson silenced her with a hard slap to the temple, snapping Gracie's head to her shoulder.

'Stop it!' Berry blurted. Blackwood and Jepson's faces turned sour at his defence. 'Father, let her speak...please.' His tone weakened.

'Found this on her!' Jepson passed the small wood doll across to Abel. 'Pardon me, sir, but I recognised it from your household. Your young sons there played with it when they were small, I believe? You, yourself, were never far from it. How it came into the hands of a coon, I sure as hell don't know!' He continued to wrestle Gracie into submission.

'I gave it to her, Father. As...as...' Berry's words dried up. He was judged equally by family and his heart in a single moment. 'Please, this is a misunderstanding.' A measure of desperation was all he could muster. His father reached out for the doll, but froze when his fingertips came within inches of the carving. He recoiled, held back in that same reverie that had ensnared him seconds earlier, faces again appearing like apparitions, the voice silk-smooth in his ears. *Enough.* Abel let out a cry, struck Jepson's open palm, and sent the doll flying across the room. A move misread by his eldest son as a drunken, crazed attack on Gracie—the wooden staff seized and swung, turning into a brilliant blade in a blink, tip squarely at Jepson's throat. 'Let...her...go!' Berry trembled.

Aghast, Jepson released his captive. Held his hands open and high. 'Beg pardon, young Master.' He scanned Berry from head to toe, still in clear shock at the sudden appearance of a sword at Berry's command. Abel had folded to his knees, weeping gently as Nancy rushed to comfort him. 'I'll...I'll leave you to it then. I'll return the slave girl to her quarters.' Jepson took Gracie's wrist, more gently this time.

'She's not a slave,' Berry affirmed with a newfound edge of confidence. He traced Jepson's steps back towards the main door, attempted to calm Gracie's quivering lower lip with a gentle wink as the latch clunked shut. The blade returned to its wooden form; beads of sweat ran down

Berry's arm and along its plane, dripping into a pool by his feet. He stood pensively for a moment, the weeping of his father bringing him back to the dining room. Abel sat curled in a ball, hands clamped on each ear while Nancy slowly rocked him. 'I'm sorry, Father. I truly am.' Berry knelt down, handing back the staff as a peace offering, briskly brushed aside by his mother.

'To your room, Berry! *Now*. We are not to hear or see you until dawn, you hear me?' Nancy snapped. She snatched the carved doll from her husband's side and threw it far over Berry's shoulder. 'No more, I say. *No more!*' Her son swallowed hard, kept his head low in shame, and took his orders. In the doorway to the kitchen stood Blackwood, rolled-up newspaper pinched firmly at one end.

'Good to see that things have cooled down in here,' he jested. 'Didn't realise that walking stick Father gave you was actually a concealed weapon, Brother. Quite the honour.' Berry sensed the jealousy that laced Blackwood's words, but was relieved that despite his rash actions, the true nature of the blade had perhaps not been apparent to his little brother in all the commotion. 'Tomorrow's paper. Had the help pick up a copy from town.' Blackwood unrolled the newspaper and spread the pages under the candlelight. 'Wanted to see if the rumours were true.'

Berry leant over his brother's shoulder. 'Rumours? What *rumours?*' he enquired. Blackwood ran his finger down to

the bottom of the front page, gave a few taps, and said no more.

Baltimore to Ohio train seized by notorious abolitionist Mr John Brown. Hostage situation at Harper's Ferry. President Buchanan urged to act. Berry forced himself to read on, each line cutting like a razor in his mind. He pulled his staff close, heart outpacing the tick of the grandfather clock—his own loyalty now soon to be put to the test.

Chapter 8

Harpers Ferry, Virginia

18th October 1859 AD

‘Stay back. And keep a lookout.’ These were Owen Brown’s father’s last words before he departed, leaving him shivering in a rickety old ammunitions shed a good ten minutes from the engine house in which John had barricaded himself along with Shields Green and his partner Anthony Copeland—perhaps seven minutes, maybe five at a real sprint, he thought to himself. What if he was needed? The two Sacred Band warriors not enough to repel an advance of White Dragon knights alerted to the possible insurrection in Virginia? A third wielder of blue flame would come in use, surely? But no. His father had strictly forbidden it...as if his elder brother Junior had gotten into John’s head right at the least appropriate time, Owen fumed. His knuckles turned white as he gripped the windowsill, looking out over the pastel dawn breaking over the Potomac River. The residents of the sleepy town creaked their shutters open tentatively, foreseeing an eruption of violence as a fresh-faced, fair-haired boy ran through the streets announcing General Lee was on his way to liberate those armoury workers held behind locked doors just beyond the main bridge. A few cheers of relief were heard, a snippet or two of racial slurs, then silence. Owen had spent the night surveying

his father's stance—brazen, but not so bright. Unlike a hostage situation on a train, cornering yourself on a sliver of an island with only a second narrow bridge straddling the smaller Shenandoah tributary was like lighting a stick of dynamite while tied to a chair. Too easily cut off, outmanoeuvred, trapped—with now the rousing rally of others passionate about their cause. Whatever response John, Shields, and Anthony had expected from those they had hoped to inspire, it had fizzled out. No more slaves, freemen, or radicals had joined over the past few days despite the publicity—if anything, the mood had turned sour. Was his brother right? Were Fredrick Douglass and Harriet Tubman? Had this all been for nothing? The faint sound of a bugle horn announced the arrival of a handful of Marines, barely more than twenty, Owen counted. Certainly not the amassed strength expected by General Lee—more a scouting party. Rifles glistened, uniforms dapper and full of intent—at their head stood two upstanding officers, pistols in holsters, wooden staves by their sides.

‘Situation?’ Jeb Stuart leant over Israel Greene’s shoulder. ‘We’ve been sent down here to kill or capture?’

‘Managing.’ Israel nodded back. ‘It’s a bold move by the noble line of Sir Gawain, if a foolish one. Still, an overly emotional mind can lead to dire consequences. Shame.’

He inhaled deeply, swelling his chest. 'We should give him and his Band a chance to surrender.'

Surrender? Jeb thought. An opportunity for the White Dragon to claim the scalp of not just the knight of Sir Gawain but also the named leader of the Sacred Band, Shields Green, and his partner? He wanted blood. Enough to smear his palms and present them to Lady Morgan Worthington as a badge of distinction. A hammer blow to the Red Dragon, all of their own making. His hand trembled with anticipation over the end of his staff, eager to transform it into the blade, but held back, chewing his lower lip as Israel gave his announcement. The offer of capitulation was met only by whimpers on the wind from those innocents held inside the engine room. 'Waste of time,' he muttered to Greene. 'When has the Sacred Band ever surrendered, Israel?'

'First time for everything...' Israel's sentence trailed off, as a flash of blue struck the bridge mere metres from both their feet. The two White Dragon knights took a step back and drew their blades, their cohort raising their rifles.

'True—and this ain't it,' Jeb snipped back. 'Step out, John! You going to face us as a man or a mole? Old fool!' he bellowed with a firm step forwards. The engine room door clicked, and the broad frame of Shields Green moved into the streak of dawn, eyes flaring blue. 'Ah,

least one of ya has the skin to show himself? All alone, are we?’

A second flare of blue landed closer still. Jeb and Israel leapt back, swords held higher. ‘When are we ever, Sir Gareth?’ Shields gave a confident grin as Anthony jumped down from the high window, landing neatly. ‘Your mistress must have underestimated us, to send only two minions—a few rebel slaves not worth Lady Morgan’s time, I suppose?’

‘No. Not when completely outnumbered and lacking in support...even from your own kind,’ Jeb snapped back. ‘Oh yes, Israel and I heard the word, the best-laid plans of John Brown and the Red Dragon to challenge our good lady’s ambitions for this great nation, but when even his voice catches no ears, you must begin to realise you are on the wrong side of history, Mr Green.’

‘Enough of this. Mr Green, Mr Copeland, we offer you and Mr Brown terms. Release those held captive and leave Harper’s Ferry now, or fall where you stand,’ Israel demanded. Shield’s protective shimmer of blue fire encircling his forearm gave the knight of Sir Geraint his answer. ‘As you wish.’ He lowered his sword, beckoned forward his company, rifles aimed. ‘Fire!’ he ordered from the rear. A salvo sounded in unison; plumes of charcoal smoke filled the air, obscuring vision. Jeb squinted, coughed through a cloud of gunpowder, picked up faint

cries from several of the troops. The ring of blue flame broke through the smoke, revealing soldiers scattered on the beams of the bridge, wounded by deflected bullets finding hips, legs, and torsos. Others propped themselves up against the railings and meekly retreated. Copeland's hand rested firmly on Shield's shoulder, the Sacred Band partnership in full force, lovers tied in life and in death. *We are lions*, one whispered to the other. Jeb took a glance over his shoulder. A faint line of silvery muskets shone on the horizon as General Lee's company approached. Hell would freeze over before ordinary soldiers took the glory for subduing this insurrection at the hands of an Arthurian knight and their brothers in arms, his mind pulsed, shooting a determined look towards Israel.

'Old habits die hard,' Israel concurred, drawing his blade. 'Split these two up,' he uttered with an opening swing at Copeland.

John Brown had watched patiently from within the engine room, surrounded by a sea of panicked faces. 'We're doomed!' shouted one brave black man, calloused hands twisting with nerves. 'The soldiers will overrun us, Mr Brown. We must surrender.'

‘I never intended murder or treason...’ Brown whispered aloud to himself in a trance. The only face he could see was that of his eldest son, staff held close to his waist.

‘What?’ the slave stepped closer.

‘Had I interfered on behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great—this would have been right,’ Brown continued to speak in tongues, pinching his brow and pacing back and forth.

‘We must leave, Mr Brown. Escape by the second bridge. Set the captured free. We may leave with our lives.’ The slave tugged Brown’s sleeve in plea. The sword of Jeb Stuart crashed down upon Shield’s blue spear, shattering it into a flurry of sparks. The Sacred Band leader rallied, conjuring another and striking at Stuart’s head, skilfully dodged by the knight of Sir Gareth. Israel Greene had successfully put distance between the two warriors, cutting Copeland off on the pier edge, blade swinging frantically. Flashes of white knight light lit up the air around the two engagements, deflected by the blue flame from the Band. Jeb’s sword hammered hard once again, Shield’s circle of fire straining to resist its edge, a solid punch from the Sacred Band leader enough to spin Stuart around on the heel of his boot and to the planks, only to be quickly repulsed. Brown’s gaze shot back to Anthony and Israel, the senior knight gaining the upper hand of the young Lion of Leuctra, with a stunning thrust of his

pommel into the ribs, bringing Copeland to his knees, winded. The knight of Sir Geraint curved his fingers around his pistol, seeking to finish the job not by blade but by a bullet, not before a kick to Copeland's jaw producing a spray of blood. The pistol loaded, the shot fired, Copeland's shield summoned just in time to deflect, the pellet ricocheting downwards into his calf. He yelped, began to inch back towards the engine room door, Israel following like a vulture waiting for death. Brown tried to read the knight's lips... 'I expect no mercy from your kind,' he thought he'd interpreted, his sword raised above his head for the final blow. Without hesitation, he flew out of the door, staff turning into cold steel, meeting the edge of Israel's a hair's breadth from Copeland's neck.

'Ah, glad you could join us, Mr Brown,' Israel quipped through crooked teeth. 'Far from you to have the Sacred Band do your dirty work. Or is it?' Sweat formed across his forehead from the force of John's sword. 'What does the decrepit corpse of the Sir Gawain line have to offer?' he swiped his blade free and parried, blocked by Brown. 'Surely, not just this? A ragtag bunch of would-be freedom fighters and fossils from Ancient Greece? Standing alone against the Palladium?' the two parried and blocked each other's moves once more. 'Futile. Endlessly futile, John. Let order take its course. A new empire, a new world, built upon a great nation.'

‘A subjugated nation,’ Brown yelled, pushing his fellow knight back against the wood railings. ‘Never of equals. Just as the White Dragon has always preferred.’ He caught sight of the silver signet ring on Israel’s finger. ‘*Albus Draco*. Might as well serve as a sentence of imprisonment. No more.’

Israel heaved and tossed the lighter-framed Brown backwards. ‘What the Red Dragon calls imprisonment, we call nature, and nature sees the strongest survive, destined to lead.’ He swung again, Brown nimbly swerving, straddling the wounded Copeland and urging him to retreat inside. ‘Great nations are born of blood, knight of Sir Gawain. Why, your own family has profited the same as we, or did you think that was a mere accident?’ Greene sneered. ‘We knights of Red and White are not dissimilar; we have always towered above the masses.’

‘Those masses are the volcano beneath the snow, Mr Greene, and a volcano can bring down a tower.’ Brown stabbed with a move of his own, forcing Israel to riposte.

‘Had Theodore Parker pen that one for you?’ Israel gave an uncomfortable smile, watching fellow knight Jeb locked in combat with a seemingly tireless Shields, pushed on the back foot and into one of the engine room side houses, an impressive display of blue sparks and knight lights following. ‘Pity you all couldn’t be here to

witness such a tragic failure.’ He gestured back to the approaching force of General Lee, reaching the edges of the town, following orders bellowed by the figure on horseback who was dressed in civilian clothes but nonetheless intimidating. Brown’s attention was distracted, enough to allow Greene to slide his blade down to the thigh and cut neatly. Brown buckled. ‘I ask you again, knight of Sir Gawain, do you yield?’ Israel’s sword tip pointed between John’s eyes, a steely and unfaltering gaze back taken as an answer. ‘Fine.’ Greene’s intended death-stroke met with a defiant spear of blue, held just long enough to repel the blow. Anthony Copeland staggered forward, barely enough energy in one leg to stand upright, but saving Brown’s life. Israel’s muscles tightened in frustration. ‘Never simple with you folk, is it?’ he growled, followed by a second swipe at Copeland, shattering his conjured shield and slicing through his torn vest, drawing fresh blood.

Brown breathed heavily, regained his footing, and threw his sword towards Israel, the piercing grind of metal grating in Copeland’s ears. ‘Get them out, Anthony! All of them!’ he shouted, attention split between his opponent and Lee’s troops marching across the first bridge.

A groan came from the pump engine behind as it belched hot steam from the cut made by Jeb’s sword. Shields

tried to dodge it but it scalded the knight's face. He popped a quick one-two to the midriff, but for all his power, might as well have punched a stone wall. He was kicked back, took advantage of the distance, and hurled a blue spear. Jeb bent to one side but was quickly propelled forward by the explosion of the wounded engine. Their bodies collided outside the side house, splinters and shards of wooden slats raining down. The boom snapped life into Lee's troops, rifles switching one hundred and eighty degrees towards the fresh fire and letting loose a volley. Shields and Jeb drew cover from the main engine house, bricks puffing out red dust with each bullet.

Jeb threw his weight against Shields, pinning the larger man to the wall by his wrists. 'What a sight it will be to see you hang like rotten fruit.' Saliva laced his words. Shields responded with a thrust of a kneecap into the groin, the two toppling to the floor, locked, and rolling atop one another. Their commotion had provided a reprieve for his partner Anthony to usher some of the rebels across the second narrow bridge just as Lee was thrown from his horse and momentary confusion ensued. Copeland's light blue shield flickered with the shuffle of scared feet, those captive rushing for the safety of Lee's lines prompting the general to shout the words 'Coloured only' as soldiers began to shoot wildly at anyone within range. A few stray salvos found their way to Anthony, his shield just firm enough to hold them, but slowing him down further. A handful of rebels made it over, some opting for the icy-

cold waters of the Shenandoah River, only to splash around, losing control in its rapids. Copeland finally fell against the railings, blue flame circle fading out—his precarious position jolting Shields into life, hard fist catching Jeb squarely on the chin. The knight fumed, lunged with an overly-eager strike, blade caught between the spokes of a cartwheel. Stuart prised his sword free, but this left him exposed to Green. A single blue spear pierced the wielding shoulder, blade clattering down by his side. Shields held the spear long enough to prolong the suffering of his foe, every sinew of rage evident in its twist. The torso of John Brown appeared from behind the engine room corner, a deep slash across the forehead and blood tricking into his grey beard. The sword of Sir Gawain transformed back to wood, kicked loose by a triumphant Israel Greene.

‘It’s over, Shields. Lower your spear,’ Israel commanded, the point of his blade hovering over John’s throat. Such instruction would have washed over him, had it not been for partner Anthony now surrounded by Lee’s gunmen, hands held open in surrender. ‘Let your fate be determined by trial, Mr Green. We are, after all, gentlemen, are we not?’ Israel coerced. A fog of confusion and conflict flooded into Shield’s mind, a dereliction of duty to capitulate—the famous Sons of Ares, Lions of Leuctra, or further still, men of equal conviction now forced to bow to their oppressors. But the gentle eyes of John Brown expressed some hope, however fragile, for him and his lover. To give up hope

now would be to break the very foundations of their reason for being here in the first place, and if this were to be the leader of the Sacred Band's last stand, it should hold with it a construct of the future, not the ghost of the past. He retracted his spear and knelt.

Chapter 9

Salem, Massachusetts

2nd November 1859 AD

Winter's first snow had begun to dust the rooftops of Salem. Its docks were unsettlingly calm, the handful of local folk staring into the pale mist that had slowly begun to dissipate with dawn's break. The bleak bow of a fisherman's ship pierced through, creaking on approach to the jetty and spurring men into action on its tow ropes. The locals remained motionless, exchanging the odd glance with one another as if waiting for a command of some sort. Samuel Gridley Howe deliberately held back, shuffling to the rear of the group and keeping his head lowered. 'Thomas. Where are you?' he whispered to himself, breath frozen in the bitter air. A loose scrap of parchment fluttered to his feet, the ink blotched but legible—*Fugitive Slave Act*—a sobering reminder of the punishment awaiting those caught in this illicit act. He drew his leather coat in close, fingers and staff tucked under his arms, and panned around again for any familiar faces. No Harriet Tubman, no Frederick Douglass, no reassuring presence of any other Secret Six member. Perhaps the events of John Brown at Harper's Ferry had injected an unwelcome fear across the Northern States, his ongoing trial with his co-conspirators leaving no room on the front pages of the

press for anything else. A traitor, some called him. A radical. A *lunatic*, even. The process of civil law was surely not set to apply under such circumstances, and the line of Sir Gawain was likely to meet a grizzly end once all had been judged. Perhaps martyrdom was its purpose? For all the efforts of Douglass and Tubman in announcing the free world for every man, woman, and child in the United States, unity was not seen as progress...not even upon Capitol Hill. But a death sentence, that could change everything—the knights of the Round Table had come to learn of their ancestors prepared to carry out many a selfless act for what they believed to be the greater good...be it White or Red. John Brown could chalk his name up alongside Shields Green and Anthony Copeland for the sanctity of the next generation, irrespective of creed or colour. Three broken hearts in exchange for a single beat within a nation.

‘You’re early,’ Thomas Wentworth Higginson said, tapping Samuel’s forearm with his staff.

‘And you, knight of Sir Galahad, are late,’ Samuel quipped back. ‘No Harriet or Frederick I see? Unusual for them to miss an underground crossing. Hiding, are they? Can’t say I blame them.’

‘Monitoring.’ Thomas neatly sidestepped the splash from a thrown tow rope. ‘Brown’s actions have had them

rattled, just as Frederick had warned. Will take some time to coax them out of the shadows.'

'Time? You mean before the inevitable death penalty for John and his Sacred Band pair,' Samuel grunted. 'It is the only outcome of that farce of a trial being held in Virginia under the mantle of the White Dragon. You don't truly believe Lady Morgan Worthington and her knights are going to allow both the son of Sir Gawain and the Sacred Band leader off the hook, do you?'

Thomas looked despondently into the still waters, the knight of Sir Gaheris sombre but sincere. This was too perfect an opportunity for Morgan and Henry Worthington to deplete their rival numbers, and with Brown's eldest son retreating to safer lands and his youngest, Owen, downcast by grief and remorse, their allies grew thin. He felt a firm shove to his back, turned quickly, staff at the ready, only to face a smartly suited gentleman with dark-olive complexion, fine features, and slick-black hair. He held his hands open, showing the paler skin of his palms.

'Apologies, good sir, but might you be Thomas Wentworth Higginson?' the gentleman enquired.

'Who is asking?' Samuel interjected, staff ready to strike.

‘Mr Jackson. John Andrew Jackson—my pleasure, sirs. Mrs Tubman told me you both might be present here today. Decent of you, sirs, in view of recent...events.’ The gentleman gave a quick bow of the head before returning to his tarpaulin-covered cart. ‘I try not to miss an underground arrival from the South. It’s difficult these days to go undetected, as I’m sure you will both appreciate, but necessary.’ He whipped the covers off, revealing crates of fresh vegetables, blankets, and clothing. ‘Many aboard this boat will have left their plantations with little more than the shirts on their backs. Douglass and Tubman like to see to it that food and shelter are here waiting for them.’

Thomas poked around the crates with his staff, raised a curious eyebrow towards Samuel, sniffed a bread roll. ‘This is warm, Mr Jackson.’

‘Freshly baked, sir, yes,’ Andrew replied.

‘The Tubman and Douglass families are a fair distance from Salem—you have not acted alone here, have you?’ Thomas pressed. Jackson gave a wry grin while unloading the first crate.

‘You gentlemen think you’re the only whites that serve our cause? Trust me, the Secret Six, as welcome as they are, are not alone.’ He snapped his fingers towards

two bystanders for assistance, pointing to the crates. 'When I arrived here, it was not the wealthy bureaucrats that stood before me with open arms, nor those that paved the journey before me...but a writer, a simple writer. Oh, the power of words, gentlemen. No greater weapon, in my humble opinion.'

'Name?' Samuel queried.

'Beecher.'

'Ah, the wonderful preaching of the Beecher family,' Samuel mocked. 'Tell me, which servant of the Lord greeted you? Was it Charles? Edward? Another orator with enough heat packed into his words to fuel a furnace?'

'*She* was called Harriet, strangely enough,' Andrew huffed. 'I remain by her side to this day, hers and her husband Calvin, Mr Stowe to you.' He grabbed a heavier crate off the cart and passed it to the strongest looking youth nearby. 'Not a writer of speeches, Mr Gridley Howe. I grant you that, but stories, yes. Everyone seems to fall in love with stories and legends these days, don't you think? Far more intoxicating than souped-up political and theoretical grandeur. Speeches are loud, like a clap of thunder, but a story can linger, and be stretched

beyond belief into hope if necessary. Need people like me ask for a more potent gift?’

Samuel leant into Thomas and muttered something about Harriet Beecher Stowe and the extracts in the local press concerning an Uncle Tom and some sort of cabin. Didn’t follow it piece by piece and confessed to not knowing its ending. Thomas knew about as much, but was mulling over Jackson’s analogy of stories and legends, its relevance to their own lineage bringing a hearty chuckle. A soothing warmth embraced him at the thought of regaling his children someday with the tales of brave John Brown and the dashing leader of the Sacred Band, standing to the very last, courageous under fire—how their names would be emblazoned in narrative and destined to live on beyond any noose around their necks. Samuel looked dismayed at Thomas’s lighter mood as the knight of Sir Galahad helped unpack fabrics from one of the crates and passed them along to the shaking sea legs of disembarking slaves. ‘Something I’m missing, Thomas?’ he nudged.

‘No, nothing, dear friend.’ Thomas caught the shoulder of Mr Jackson. ‘Sir, you said you are still in contact with the Beecher Stowe family?’

‘Indeed. Until my paperwork is complete to travel to the British Canadian Provinces, at least,’ Andrew replied. Thomas held his shoulder again purposefully.

‘Aren’t the Beecher Stowe family close to Mr Lincoln, the potential Republican presidential nominee next year?’ Thomas busied himself with a stubborn nailed-down crate, sneakily transforming his staff to a blade to shear off its top. Samuel leant in once more, curious as to where such a line of questioning might be leading.

Andrew Jackson suddenly stood to attention, eyes narrowed. ‘You’re well informed, sir. Yes, the family is relatively close, but far from a regular in the Abraham Lincoln household. What is the nature of your query?’

‘Please, simply pass on my regards and gratitude, Mr Jackson, in the name of Mr Wentworth-Higgins and Mr Gridley Howe here. If the two of us could ever meet in person, that would be a delight. I, for one, love a good story or poem,’ Thomas charmed, offering his hand as a gesture of goodwill. Samuel rolled his eyes at the thought of a drawn-out evening listening to poetry recitals and endless chitter-chatter about prose. Andrew accepted the hand, shook it firmly, and wished blessings upon the Douglass and Tubman families.

‘Mind explaining yourself, Thomas.’ Samuel pulled his friend free and walked him away from the dock, scouting left and right for any suspicious signs. ‘I’m sure others within the Secret Six could get you close enough to Mr Lincoln—hell, even those two not wielding a sword of the

Red Dragon. Sandstearns and Borne, or whatever their names were.'

'*Sanborn* and *Stearns*,' Thomas corrected. 'And no, they probably can't. Even you, Samuel, with all your lofty connections to President Buchanan, cannot infiltrate the potential future resident of the White House—I know you've tried, dear friend, but our enemies outpace us here. Lady Morgan and the White Dragon will seek to push their candidate John Breckinridge, knight of Sir Tristan, and through him the cause of the Southern Democrats...a victory that would leave this entire nation at the mercy of Morgan's will and that of the Palladium.'

'And your plan is what?' Samuel asked incredulously. 'Rig the election? Hardly the noble act of a knight!'

Thomas sighed. 'All I'm saying is we need to be closer to the political fight. That is the imminent battleground here and one where both Morgan and Henry Worthington have gained sway. Clearly, John's manoeuvre at Harper's Ferry was foreseen, quickly covered by Jeb Stuart and Israel Greene—Sir Gareth and Sir Geraint tipped off at the highest of levels, and a rebellion quashed. Whether by the clairvoyance of Morgan le Fay or through some loose lips in Washington, we don't know, but an ear to the walls of the White House wouldn't hurt.'

Samuel paused, shook his head, and wiped away a tear welling up in his left eye. 'I do...I do try, Tom. To serve us all with the best of intentions,' he stuttered through the chill. His sudden emotion piqued Thomas's curiosity, parting his lips to enquire further, but he decided upon a benevolent arm around Samuel's shoulders, pulling him close.

'I know, Samuel. I know. Such times are an ugly business,' he comforted. 'Come now. We promised we'd meet Gerrit this evening at Seven Gables. He may have news from the South, both on Brown's trial and, dare I say, our very own Berry Benson.'

'Bloody Benson! Curse of Sir Bedivere becoming a tiresome excuse, if you ask me, always addled by liquor. Need to keep a closer watch on that bloodline,' Samuel tiskied.

'What would you recommend, Samuel? A decent book club? I'd be all in favour of that. I can share with y'all a book Theodore offered up to me before he parted for Italy, Nathaniel Hawthorne's latest, inspired by our very destination now...you'd love it—a touch of witchcraft, evil spirits, *revenge*,' Thomas chuckled.

Samuel swung his staff at a chubby rat scampering across the docks, the transformed blade sticking just shy

of its ears, the rodent spared Sir Gaheis's wrath. 'No more prose and poetry, Thomas. *I mean it.*'

Chapter 10

Charles Town, Virginia

16th December 1859 AD

Close enough to smell the fear—that is what Jonathan Wilkes Booth wanted. The sting of sweat, the salt of tears as the noose sprang taut, muscles limp like cotton sheets draped from a clothesline. A final twitch of the mouth and dribble of spit, then done. Two negroes to the untrained eye, but to him, the heads of two lions. His Lady Morgan Worthington had proven true, not two weeks earlier dispatching the knight of Sir Gawain so easily, John Brown executed in front of an audience of over a thousand—many applauding on behalf of the seven souls lost during his raid on Harpers Ferry, others, standing in solemn silence, his final words uttered out of earshot from all but the first few rows of spectators...something about the sanctity of blood, Wilkes Booth caught, little more. The knight of Sir Lamorak shared thoughts of caution upon realising Brown was without his staff, the blade no doubt passed down to one of his sons. Owen Brown, perhaps? No. Not a Sacred Band member by birth, he reconsidered. But the elder, Junior, suspiciously absent from the raid. Say what you will of the Sir Gawain lineage, Brown must have known this audacious manoeuvre carried great risk, enough not to commit all his kin together. Owen, of course, would not have been deterred,

and as the bowed black heads of Shields Green and Anthony Copeland arrived, shackled in a wagon, guarded by several dozen armed Marines, Jonathan smirked at the thought that the youngest of the Brown family might be amongst the jeering mob that surrounded the guilty pair. A white gentleman sentenced to death, a nobleman held in high regard in the North, that carried with it a palpable sense of friction in the crowd—two former slaves, however, more satisfaction than sincerity.

‘Back for more, Mr Wilkes Booth?’ a grim tone came from behind Jonathan. ‘Your family never far from the crows, are they?’

Jonathan turned and cracked a smile. ‘Crows feast on the flesh of the sinners, Mr Whitman. As good a reason as any to bear witness.’ He raised his staff to the sky. ‘I assume you are here for some form of inspiring pathos? A new line for a poem or song, maybe? Surely, sir, you’ve had your fill too from the dangling boots of Mr Brown?’

Whitman shook his head, huffed at the growing intensity of the drum beats as Green and Copeland were taken to the gallows. ‘To see one American hanged for a just cause is trial enough, yet now we see three. John Brown will bring with him the North, Shields and Anthony the beating heart of the Black South. Our great nation, divided like never before. All for the sake of...’ His throat tightened as the first noose slipped over Green’s head,

the fighter's hand interlocking with that of Anthony, a shimmer of faintest blue entwining both their wrists. Whitman swallowed his final word.

'The sake of...what, Walt?' Jonathan squinted.
'Rebellion? Why, there was a time not so long ago when many an American took to arms to rebel against the yoke of the British. I assume you had no quarrel then. But now, when an affront is given to your very own people, you holler crime. Nonsense, sir.' The sudden snap of the ropes cracked both Sacred Band warrior necks in harmony, hands interlocked until the very last inch of their fall. Their swaying corpses evoked a stunned silence from the crowd, a whisper or two about consequence and action, and then a healthy roar of defiance. Walt Whitman's gaze remained transfixed on the two swinging bodies, his hands scrunching his writing paper almost to a pulp. 'Ah, over and done with. All too quickly,' Jonathan said with a shrug.

'Their bodies,' Walt croaked.

'What about them?' Jonathan replied curiously.

'Will they be...buried?'

‘Good Heavens, sir, no. These insects of insurrection? Never! They will be sent to the nearby medical college for dissection and learning,’ Wilkes Booth rebuffed.

‘Learning?’ Whitman’s tone grew sharp. Jonathan stuttered out an explanation, attempting to waffle his way clear of specific instructions from Jeb Stuart and Israel Greene to examine any Sacred Band member at the request of Morgan Worthington. After so many centuries at war with the infamous elite male lovers, she still held a fascination with their powers and the bond that fuelled them. No doubt she was trying to sever the ties somehow through the Sir Gawain and Sir Galahad bloodlines, trim down any future adversary that dare stand in the way of her dominance with the Palladium. What fine specimens Shields Green and Anthony Copeland would make, the leader of the Sacred Band and his partner—the Lions of Leuctra— dealt a blow as harsh as their founders in Ancient Thebes. Those who remained, now desperately scurrying for a new head of the pack—a prime time for the White Dragon to strike. His lazy words became a licking of lips for Jonathan at the thought of successfully fulfilling their destiny—the *manifest destiny*. Most settling of all, the blade from the staff may not even need to be unsheathed, as John Breckinridge, knight of Sir Tristan, made his move on the presidency less than a year from now. He snatched a glimpse of Jeb, the honourable son of Sir Gareth speaking openly to General Robert Lee, and the coarse face of Thomas Jackson, the trio deep in discussion while Israel Greene despondently scuffed his

boots on the gravel, staff carving small trenches on either side. The knight of Sir Geraint had made his views clear on the matter of civil war to both Morgan and Henry Worthington, shying away from such internal conflict, irrespective of bounty. Assured by Henry that the good Lady Morgan would not choose such a path for his homeland, Jonathan discerned a conflict of ideologies between Sir Lancelot and his magnetic muse. Israel remained loyal for now, but the future of such unity was uncertain. Blood of your own kin shed upon the earth—a step too far for some.

‘Beat! Beat! Drums! Eh?’ General Lee swept past Wilkes Booth and Whitman, just as the hanged were cut from their ropes and dumped unceremoniously back into the wagon. ‘Cannot say I took pleasure in watching John Brown wither, but today, I feel justice has been served.’ He ushered Jeb and Israel into the group, Jackson still stern as ever just behind. ‘How goes your family, Jonathan? Father still fighting the good fight?’

‘While there is a fight to be had, General.’ Jonathan bowed reverently, a wink towards his fellow knights.

‘Just remind him not to be so public with his altercations. Drama serves the theatre, not the fields,’ Lee reminded them before recalling the incident in Baltimore and the hazy bloodlust from Junius Wilkes Booth. Parker’s subsequent ill health was the subject of amusement from

each of the generals before Lee made an abject apology to Walt, mocking his title as the Father of Free Prose—a trite, liberal notion. Whitman squirmed uncomfortably, turning his back to attend to the wagon weaving its way through the dispersing crowd. Israel feigned commonality with his brothers before excusing himself from the ever-aggressive language. A slip of Jonathan's tongue prompted a nudge from Jeb's staff—the Leader of the Band, a traitor, dead—the dramatic and careless wording from Wilkes Booth raising questions about Shield Green's role in the uprising, and exactly what the Band was amongst slaves. The knight of Sir Lamorak swiftly backtracked, again clumsily tossing out phrases referring to captaincy and leadership within the negro population. Jeb marked each word carefully to avoid any mention of myth and magic. 'Close as thieves, were these two? Figures. Bound close aboard a ship, stands to reason they'd get to know each other...*intimately*,' Lee jested, rewarded with a sycophantic laugh.

Walt Whitman removed his hat as the wagon slipped from sight, two chafed wrists falling through its slats, rough skin lying upon one another. 'O Captain! My Captain!' He spoke softly to the breeze.

Chapter 11

Chicago, Illinois

18th May 1860 AD

‘I must say, we were not expecting you, Mr Wentworth Higginson,’ the speckled boy stated, thumbing through the guest list. ‘May I ask who it was that arranged your invitation tonight?’

Thomas coughed into his hand, trying to act as casual as he could. ‘The Beecher Stowe family. Surely, you’ve heard of them? Favourites of the Lincoln family and...’ His eyebrows jerked upwards as he caught the wave from Samuel Gridley Howe, already holding a flute of champagne and ushering his friend forward. ‘There, you see, Mr Gridley Howe, my longstanding acquaintance. No doubt on his third glass by now. I’ll see to it that he sips not a drop more,’ he tried to charm. The boy monitored the exchange, grumbled, then finally stepped aside when Samuel thrust a welcoming and distracting handshake towards his friend.

‘Thomas. So good to see you, and glad you could make it. Much to catch up on. Dear boy, please do pass my regards on to the Beecher Stowe family for extending this invite for such a special occasion.’ Samuel

overenunciated each word, prompting an awkward grin from Thomas, spared further embarrassment with the popping of another bottle of champagne and excuse for both to whisk themselves away into another dull political conversation. 'How is it my invitation was all cleared, and yours, Sir Galahad, caused problems? Typical!' Samuel snorted out of earshot.

'Clearly, I don't carry as much sway in Republican circles as the Gridley Howe name. Your reputation precedes you, my friend,' Thomas tutted, taking a flute of his own. 'I saw you speaking with someone. Looks like a young lady? Didn't recognise her, mind.'

'I'll introduce you later.' Samuel curved a smile. 'Sure, you'll get on.'

'Please don't tell me you're already slipping secrets, Samuel.'

'Wouldn't dream of it.' Samuel looked offended. 'Besides, other than the two of us, I've yet to see one of our kin present at this so-called seminal Republican convention...so seminal they had to build the shoddy shack of a marquee to play host.' He prodded one of the struts that held up the speaker's platform. It wobbled, and he let out an unforgiving sigh. 'With all the money thrown at Lincoln's campaign, from the Parkers to the

Stearns and the Sanborn, they could construct something a little more permanent.'

Thomas cast his eyes down to his feet. 'Theodore, I take it you have heard?'

Samuel straightened. 'Indeed. Word reached me upon arrival, the wound of Wilkes Booth finally catching up with him. I heard it was quiet and dignified, just as he would have wanted. The Barrett Browning family informed Frederick Douglass, he in turn passed it on to me and Gerrit...same with you, I suppose?' Thomas gave a pensive nod. 'Shame. Damn shame. I don't suppose we know to whom he bequeathed his blade?'

'The most secretive of all of us, noble knight of Sir Kay. Sadly, no. The Barrett Browning family had a child, Pen, I believe, who might have made a suitable candidate, but with Elizabeth of ill health too, wider bloodlines might have been considered. Very close connections in England still, and it wouldn't surprise me if Mr Browning returns to his roots there from Italy over the coming years. Another artist seeking a muse once more.'

Thomas continued to scan the crowd for familiar faces, a brief glimpse of Henry Worthington's intimidating frame weaving its way through the masses, politely nodding and smiling. 'Wasn't aware the Worthingtons would be attending the Republican convention? Where Henry

stands, Lady Morgan will not be far behind.’ He gestured with his staff.

‘Must have been gifted with an invitation as well. Figures that an industrialist of his magnitude would be sought after by any potential president...especially if your suspicions in the South are correct.’ Samuel began to slide forward as the candidates took to the stage.

‘Where are you going?’ Thomas grabbed his friend’s arm.

‘To socialise. Is that not why we’re here?’ Samuel winked.

‘Do not make a scene, Sam. Not with Henry Worthington or any other White Dragon present. Not what we need.’

‘Out of the two of us, who’s more prone to tempestuous, erratic outbursts, Mr Wentworth Higginson?’ Samuel reassured playfully. ‘You do your thing. I’ll do mine. Oh...there she is.’ He took the palm of the fair-faced lady Thomas had spotted him alongside moments earlier, a peck of a kiss given to the fingertips. ‘Thomas, please meet Miss Emily Dickinson, a wonder with words. Enjoy each other’s company for a moment, please.’ He excused himself, leaving Thomas gauchely half-raising

his hand in greeting, half-bowing, spluttering out an introduction, no less captivated by Dickinson's sherry amber eyes.

'If it's any consolation, Mr Wentworth Higginson, it took your friend Mr Gridley Howe three attempts to perfect his rather chivalrous kissing of the hand with other good ladies here tonight before reaching mine,' Emily soothed. Thomas breathed a sigh of relief at not having to attempt one of his own. 'He also told me you recently lost a close friend, Mr Theodore Parker? My deepest condolences—I know he was quite the orator, and supporter of Mr Lincoln here tonight. Why, we may even hear a word or two of his own making in Abraham's acceptance speech.' She smiled warmly.

'Acceptance speech? You believe Lincoln has won?' Thomas' interest was piqued.

'I do, yes. Whispers across this hall suggest his rivals are split on the issue of the Fugitive Slave Act—abhorrent practice if you ask me—but when one comes out with a firm stance, as Abraham did at the Copper Union earlier in the year, that shows leadership...at a time when I fear the United States may need it the most.' Emily panned the stage of candidates, noticing that the gaunt figure of Abraham was not amongst the lineup.

‘I thought he was an outsider, to be honest. Not as familiar to voters as Senator Seward or Governor Chase. Look, he hasn’t even made an appearance here tonight, despite many loyal followers present on his behalf. Suggests to me that he is more of a nobody in this debate,’ Thomas sighed.

‘Ha! I am a nobody, Mr Wentworth Higginson. And I must say, how dreary it must be to be a—*somebody*,’ Dickinson chirped and riddled.

‘Now, I know you’re a poet,’ Thomas said, cracking a grin.

‘Or just one with a tender spot for the underdog. I like to think it’s those that people underestimate that bring the greatest surprises in life. Not the rich and the powerful, but the strong of heart and the just. Would you not agree?’

‘I...I would indeed, my lady.’ Thomas felt himself sway shyly like a child in awe, eyes widened, lips parting. His own heart skipped a beat or two when Dickinson reached across his chest to attract the attention of a friend, almost grossly misread by the knight as he felt himself lean in towards her bright-pink lips. He recovered with some grace, the corner of his eye noting Henry Worthington chuckle with a group of suited gentlemen

and their well-presented wives, some sort of coin trick sparking gasps and hysterics. His blood turned cold. A surge of pain gripped his chest, and fresh memories of John Brown hanged alongside Shields Green and Anthony Copeland, all the while Henry and Lady Morgan laughing at such cruelty. The tip-off to incumbent President Buchanan of Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry almost certainly at the hands of the White Dragon...and now its head has the temerity to show himself here tonight and put on displays of jollity. Cold blood turned to boiling, knuckles pale from the firm grip on his staff, he marched with intent towards the knight of Sir Lancelot, pleasantries be damned.

Gerrit Smith sniffled into his sleeve as Samuel approached, the foam from the half-full tankard of beer swiped clean just as Gridley Howe's hand landed firmly on his shoulder. 'Good to see you, Gerrit. Whatever the state you are in,' Samuel said. Smith grumbled a reply, switched his attention to the announcer on the stage, shuffling through ballot papers.

'I hear Mr Lincoln has it. Surprised, to be honest,' Gerrit huffed. 'Still, the Beecher Stowes will be pleased.'

‘You’ve seen them? Thomas and I have been looking—without them and Andrew Jackson’s help, we wouldn’t have made it here tonight.’ Samuel darted his eyes around the room. ‘Odd to see Henry Worthington here, mind...’

‘Been working the room as he always does,’ Gerrit interrupted with a splash of beer on his boots. ‘If I didn’t know better, one might almost perceive him to be an ally of Mr Lincoln, who would have thought?’

‘Odd. Most odd.’ Samuel cast an incredulous look over at the casual Henry. Still no sign of Lady Morgan or any other acolytes, sly as a fox...perhaps more a snake. ‘I don’t care for it. Lady Morgan would not have sent him here without motive, and we all know where her allegiances lie.’

‘Breckinridge. knight of Sir Tristan. Already a firm favourite for the Southern Democrats and possibly the White House...I am up to speed, Sir Gaheris.’ Gerrit covered a sneer as the Beecher Stowes joined their company, Calvin Ellis taking the time to introduce his modest wife Harriet, then her brother Henry—the three gleefully anticipating the result and gushing at thought of Abraham giving lyrical speeches to help unite a fractured nation. Smith feigned interest with the occasional interjection of belches, Samuel swiftly apologising for each and thanking the family for their efforts to bring him

and Thomas to the festivities. When asked of Abraham's whereabouts, the Beecher Stowes confessed to being unaware. 'A fair way to avoid assassination.' Gerrit was blunt as a shovel, again, Samuel placating with a mild chuckle before explaining the pain and suffering the knight of Sir Bors was still reeling from following the passing of dear friend Mr Theodore Parker only a week earlier. Harriet's face lit upon hearing Parker's name, seized Samuel's wrists, and offered the sincerest of blessings—if he were looking down from on high, he would be beaming, she swore.

A stout, balding gentleman shuffled to the pulpit, adjusted his glasses a little, and cleared his throat. 'Ladies and gentlemen, each ballot of the third and final vote has now been tallied. By the power invested in me, I hereby declare Mr Abraham Lincoln to be the Republican candidate for the United States presidential election in the year of our Lord, Eighteen-Hundred and Sixty,' he boomed. A brief silence greeted the announcement, followed by a reserved cheer and applause from the delegation sent to represent Mr Lincoln in his absence, a sobering shake of heads from the camp of Senator Seward, and an early muttering of disapproval at the direction the presidential campaign was now set to take...a controversial, moderate Republican from Kentucky now tasked with the mounting challenge not only of the South, but of members of his own fractious party. It would take more than silk-smooth speeches and an explosion of red, white, and blue confetti to prove

himself worthy of leadership, Samuel mulled—so many blissfully ignorant of the seismic powers at play. A shattering crash was heard from beyond, the shards of a flute glass scattering between feet—Samuel and Gerrit both turned to a flustered Thomas with his lower lip curled and blotched red. Square in his face was Henry Worthington, expression placid but transfixed on his opponent, staff at the ready.

‘Knew it,’ Samuel muttered under his breath.

‘Knew what?’ Gerrit asked, staff pulled close.

‘Don’t cause a scene,’ he said. ‘Well, who would have thought...?’ came Samuel’s sarcastic tone. ‘Please, excuse us, gentlemen, ladies.’

‘Care to explain your plan, Henry?’ Thomas brought himself within inches of Worthington’s trimmed moustache.

‘What? This?’ Henry calmly revealed the coin he’d been tossing all evening. ‘Not really a plan, Mr Wentworth Higginson, more of a trick.’

‘Indeed, you are quite the master of those. You and your wife,’ Thomas spat. A suited gentleman requested the two men to take their quarrel outside and not disturb the celebrations. Henry took the lead by hooking Thomas’s arm as cordially as he could. His adversary played along, one eye on Worthington’s staff. ‘John Brown’s exploits at Harpers Ferry...you told President Buchanan! Rather than face him yourself, you and Morgan sent your lesser knights to fend him and the Sacred Band off. Coward!’ he continued to hiss as the brisk evening Illinois air met their faces.

‘I would hardly call the knights of Sir Gareth and Sir Geraint lesser, Thomas. Israel Greene and Jeb Stuart carry the most loyal of blades to my dear Lady Morgan and the White Dragon...whereas, I sadly cannot say the same of the Red at such time,’ Henry mocked. ‘Tell me, Sir Galahad, where is your saviour? The purest blood of Sir Bedivere and summoner of the King’s Blade? Surely there is not a traitor in your midst, is there?’

‘Not been for over a thousand years, Henry,’ Thomas snapped. ‘Wherever you and the Palladium go, we will undo its wrath.’ He drew his staff back, a glimmer of steel pierced through the wooden veneer.

‘Oh, I am most aware, Sir Galahad. But answer me this...what if your saviour were to choose an alternative side? Not simply for Red or White, but for the good of his

own people, his family. A tough knot to cut through, even for your...blade.' Henry stood firm, staff planted between his feet.

Thomas's irascibility got the better of him. He swung, the edge of his sword slicing the space to the side of Henry. Worthington, having read the move, neatly sidestepped. 'He's loyal to us!' he cried.

'But is he loyal to the North? Perhaps not.' Henry drew one staff from the other, the familiar double blade of Sir Lancelot revealed and crossed. 'Let me state this, Thomas, that I knew not of John Brown's rebellion, nor did Morgan le Fay.'

'Liar!' Thomas swung again, his metal meeting Worthington's with a splinter of sparks, a subtle turn, and a grind of sword edges saw the two knights lock once again, Henry down on one knee, channelling a surprising amount of strength to throw the younger Thomas back onto his heels. 'The Witch sees much, but not into a man's heart.'

'On that, we can agree,' Henry replied, casting a forlorn expression. Blades once more held in defence of Thomas's efforts. A hammering blow from high brought Worthington to his knee once more, the blades holding long enough for Samuel and Gerrit to arrive, staves

transformed, and tips aimed. 'Alas, I know when I'm outnumbered.' He gave a slight sigh of resignation.

Samuel tip-toed round to Thomas's side. 'Tempestuous outburst? Splendid timing.'

'You know what he did, Samuel,' Thomas defended.

'Henry didn't alert the president to John's activity. *I did,*' Samuel spoke sharply. Thomas did a double-take, switching back and forth between Henry and the knight of Sir Gaheris. 'I thought, with enough warning, John, Shields, and Anthony would see sense and stand down...you heard what Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman said, no aid was afoot, the rebellion doomed to fail. I never considered...' His mouth ran dry.

'That they would be killed? That the White Dragon would claim any excuse it could to peel the scalps off three vital allies?' Thomas turned his anger towards Samuel. Gerrit offered a more sober hand of discouragement to spare an act of dissension in front of Worthington. Had it not been for the china-white face of Emily Dickinson peeking from behind the marquee rear door, there could have easily been a deplorable scene of self-destruction between the trio of Red Dragon knights as Henry merely sat back and laughed. He lowered his blade, transforming it back into

its more inconspicuous wooden form, swiftly followed by Gerrit, Samuel, and Henry.

‘Ah, the playful shenanigans of politics, Miss Dickinson. Please accept our sincerest apologies.’ Henry was quick to shield. ‘Some, it would seem, cannot fully comprehend the notion that there can be only one winner,’ he smarted, flicking his coin towards Thomas. ‘Better fortune next time, Mr Wentworth Higginson...I prefer to ensure the odds are always in my favour.’ He bowed graciously and returned indoors.

‘My apologies, too, Miss Dickinson. Foolish men’s games.’ Samuel nodded, tapping Gerrit on the arm and ushering him back inside. ‘A poet,’ he whispered into Smith’s ear, provoking an eye roll from the knight of Sir Bors, all too aware of their leader’s gullibility for such talents. Thomas stood solemnly in front of Emily, attempting to straighten out his dress jacket, cheeks flushed with humiliation.

‘So, you don’t approve of Mr Lincoln?’ Emily helped tidy Thomas’s collar. ‘You wouldn’t be the only Republican in there to think so.’

‘No, no. I assure you that his nomination is sound. It’s just...’ Thomas almost burst with candour, desperate to explain every little detail to Miss Dickinson—their lineage,

their histories, their infinite struggle against powers beyond mortal comprehension. He clenched his jaw, screwed his eyes shut, and settled for Emily's soft palm brushing against his brow.

'You've got secrets, haven't you, Mr Wentworth Higginson? Trust me, I have ears in that room, too.' She prised open his hand to reveal the coin shared by Henry Worthington. 'Ah, perhaps secrets that could stoke division? The Beecher Stowes can talk as well as they narrate, you realise.'

'What...what have they told you?' Thomas gazed deep into her eyes, trying to hide any alarm.

'Only that you, Mr Gridley Howe and Mr Smith, all have something to lose, and perhaps something quite splendid to gain. Should the world move in your favour.' Emily held him in a trance. 'And that fortune favours the bold.' She pointed to the coin. 'I believe Lincoln will need all the luck he can be granted in the months to come.'

Thomas inspected the coin, turning it over in his palm—a simple silver dime, but inscribed with Lady Liberty on both sides. He clasped it tight again. 'Some amongst us make their own luck, it would seem.'

Chapter 12

South Bass Island, Ohio

20th May 1860 AD

The staff was inspected carefully. A smear of blood on its handle—his father’s blood. ‘I left it,’ Owen said meekly. ‘Couldn’t bring myself to...’ he choked. His older brother patted his forearm, insisted Owen took a seat at the dining room table and ate something, noting his unusually lean physique and darkened circles beneath his eyes. ‘Suppose you’re now the only John Brown, Son of Sir Gawain.’ He tore a chunk off a bread roll.

‘There will only be the one, our father,’ Junior replied. ‘We’re all our own person.’ He placed the staff down on the table, wiped his brow, and with a grave sigh placed a fresh newspaper down. *Lincoln declared Republican candidate for the 1860 election—upset for Seward* read the headline. Junior sighed again. ‘Not what the North might have wanted. A divisive figure...certainly not welcomed in the South. What did Thomas and Samuel have to say?’

Owen continued to chew greedily. ‘Don’t know...haven’t spoken to either of them.’

‘What? Really?’

‘Not since Harpers Ferry, no. Thought it too risky. Father managed to get the staff to me before he was sentenced, but never got to say goodbye to Shields and Anthony.’ Owen’s eyes moistened. ‘Didn’t dare stay for any of the trial, or the...’ he struggled to gulp down a crust.

‘Execution. No, he wouldn’t have expected you to, Brother.’ Junior poured a glass of water for his guest. ‘Did Father leave any last instructions?’

Owen shook his head. ‘Only to have me get back to you with this. No further orders, no retribution, no more fighting.’

‘And you will, of course, comply.’ Junior squinted an eye. Owen stared at the glass. ‘I did have Father say he’d keep you safe, despite your ill-advised willingness to follow him in his insurrection. Now he and the Sacred Band partnership of Shields and Anthony failed. Fredrick Douglass and Harriet Tubman were right. This is not the correct way or path of action—too much to lose.’

‘More than freedom?’ Owen rallied.

‘Don’t be dramatic, Owen!’ Jonathan Junior hit back. ‘There was more to Father’s lineage than just this piece of wood. There is the matter of family. The Tubmans thought the same of Nelson—we all need to be smarter. You need to be smarter.’ He gave a sharp tap to his temple.

‘Outsmart a centuries-old deity with a magic statue and a host of sword-wielding knights that have been commanding empires for over a thousand years? By what means? A ballot box?’ Owen countered, suddenly sick of the taste of bread, ‘Father might have overstretched himself with his actions, Shields, and Anthony too proud perhaps...but nothing can undermine their motives. Either we stand ready to fight Lady Morgan Worthington and the Palladium, or we do nothing and watch the entire United States be chained, not just the blacks,’ he said with a jerk to his feet, a glowing circle of fire wrapped around his wrist.

‘Thomas and Samuel would tell you, just as I am to tell you right now, that the Palladium’s power cannot be undone by the blue fire of the Sacred Band, or the blades of the Red Dragon alone...we need the King’s Blade, Excalibur. The bloodline of Sir Bedivere himself...and you know on which side he lies,’ Junior urged calm from his sibling.

‘Then we go after him. Get him to find the King’s Blade and put an end to all this...just as his ancestors did,’ Owen spat.

‘And ask the Benson family to sacrifice everything they own? Their entire livelihoods? The roof over their very heads, after all they had lost in the would-be glory of the gold rush? Tell me, little brother, how would you respond if it were our family at risk?’ Junior queried.

Owen tightened and resumed his seat with a grumble. 'For the greater good,' he muttered into the remains of the bread roll.

'There's always a greater good to be had somewhere, somehow, Owen. It takes a very disciplined and stable mind to show allegiance to such a romantic notion. Alas, from what I have heard, the Benson family bears a curse that often denies them the blessing of said stable mind,' Junior's reply held firm.

'So...we should just quit?' Owen scowled.

'No. We remain patient. Watch to see how this leadership election unfolds.'

'Breckinridge will win for certain. The White Dragon will see to it, and the South will rise. What more do you want?'

'As I just said...let us remain patient. For none of us are fortune tellers, and the sparks of protest ignited not just by Father, Shields, and Anthony but the tireless efforts of Frederick and Harriet in their quest for liberty for all could make these lands of America quite the battleground.'

'Civil war. Great solution.' Owen pushed his plate away in disgust. 'No bloodshed to be had there,' he snipped.

'Empires are born of blood, Owen. Soaked in it. We will be no different. That's not to say the Red Dragon or the

Sacred Band need be the first to draw it.' Junior finished the crust edges left by Owen.

'Only the ones to finish it?' Owen creased a smile. His brother reciprocated. 'What will you have me do? I will not sit back, Jonathan, watch my kin and friends be routed or be at the mercy of the Worthingtons. In the name of Shields Green, I shall stand.' He moved to his feet once more.

'Of course you will...and if I am indeed to take our father's place in this world, I cannot undo his last command. I shall not stop you. But I shall offer some advice.' Junior slumped back and raised a finger.

'Do tell.'

'Nelson. Reunite with Nelson Tubman. You need a partner, a lover—just as Shields had Anthony. Channel your strength together, for you shall need it, should hardships come.'

'His mother won't approve. Neither will Mr Douglass,' Owen doubted. 'They barely know of our true strength.'

'Well, you'll have to convince them, won't you. You've always had a penchant for the dramatic, little brother.' Junior curved a grin. 'Shields and Anthony's untimely demise might just have given you both some leverage.'

Owen nodded, a thought flashing through his mind as to the potential whereabouts of many other Sacred Band warriors across the continent. Limited in number, of that he was sure, but not impossible to locate with the right calling. Some settlers from Europe, perhaps? Amongst the most vocal of slaves standing tall alongside their leader? Willing to step forward out of the shadows, finally. All three hundred? Not likely. Not likely at all...but a few, a handful maybe. Just a single pairing would be worth ten Confederate soldiers, should the embers of war begin to smoulder. Now was the time to bring those long-subjugated to the front line, and there might not be an opportunity quite like this one ever again in America's history.

'How is he? Nelson?' Owen asked softly. 'Did he...?'

'Did he miss you?' Junior cocked his head. 'It was a hard winter, and you've been gone for much of it—yes, I am told you have been missed, Owen. But...' He stood and placed both hands on his brother's shoulders. 'You still have your life, and that in itself is a gift. Fight or don't fight, the choice will always be yours, but do not waste what you have right now.'

Owen looked his brother straight in the eye, held back the sting of his tears. 'Will you fight, Brother? If called to it?' he questioned.

'We're tied by blood, not by destinies, Brother. I may fight, should the time come. But know this, that just as you owe

fealty to the Sacred Band, I too owe mine to Father, the line of Sir Gawain and your very next generation of warriors, just as Thomas Wentworth Higginson and the knights of Sir Galahad have done. There is a longer game to be played here, and a man's word should be his bond,' Junior replied, with a heave of his barrel chest. Owen bowed, went to wrap both his arms around Jonathan Junior, but such sentimentality would seem foolish, he thought. Instead, the Sacred Band thump on the left side seemed more apt. He turned towards the door, pausing to hear his brother's words. 'Father loved you, Owen. No action in this world would ever change that.' His throat tensed; he swallowed hard to bury any emotional outburst. He didn't look back.

Chapter 13

Baltimore, Maryland

6th November 1860 AD

How could she? *How could she?* John Breckinridge cursed over and over, slamming his hands up against the reception room doors. His stampede gave his spouse Mary quite the fright. The servants clanged their silver trays, heads lowered. ‘She lied! She goddamn lied!’ he roared.

‘Darling...we have...’ Mary moved to reassure her raging husband, but he snatched his hand away as if bitten by a viper. Breckinridge stomped towards his writing desk. He scattered sheets of papers over the floor, ripped up parchments of state-line maps, and hurled a jar of black ink into the fireplace. Mary leapt up again, mildly asking the servants to give them privacy. ‘Darling...before you...’ she tried again.

‘A year of campaigning! Blood spilt to the bloody Mexicans! Floating around, bumbling old bureaucrats and crusty corpses of men in the Senate all for her. The great Morgan le Fay. Our time will come, she said, and the knights of Sir Tristan shall lead the way. It was my time, Mary, my time!’ Breckinridge roared, splashing whiskey

into a tumbler and downing two shots in quick succession. 'Lincoln! Damn Abraham Lincoln! A washed-up lawyer with no discernible credibility or intelligence. A self-educated would-be from a backyard farm in Kentucky. Now the leader of the greatest nation that stands to emerge from this wasteland.'

A lone clap came from the dimly lit corner of the room. The portly figure of Jonathan Wilkes Booth stepped forward. 'Bravo, Mr Breckinridge, bravo. A career change is in order, I should think. Ever tempted by the stage?' he smirked and ducked to avoid the glass tumbler projectile, which smashed a lampshade behind him.

'Spare me your thespian shenanigans, Booth! Some of us knights actually take our responsibilities seriously. With honour,' Breckinridge sparked back, the threat of his staff all too clear. Booth stepped back, mirroring with a threat of his own.

'Enough, gentlemen,' Henry Worthington interjected. 'There will be no duel or swordplay here...not in the presence of a lady.' He doffed his hat to Mary and respectfully requested that she leave the room. Breckinridge huffed as she shot a glare of disappointment in his direction. 'As your good wife tried to tell you, Breckinridge, you have company here tonight.' Worthington took a seat behind the desk and put up his polished black boots.

‘I can see that, Henry,’ Breckinridge scowled at Wilkes Booth, his attention switching instantly to Lady Morgan Worthington, Palladium in hand and rose-red jewel pulsing above her breast. He sucked his belly in and lowered his staff. ‘Lady Morgan, you...honour me,’ he gushed.

‘I’m not sure I do, Sir Tristan—your temper is forgiven. I appreciate my husband, and I have not been entirely honest with you. Let us talk openly now, please. Take a seat...in fact, make room for two.’ Lady Morgan beckoned in the stern figure of James Longstreet, the knight of Sir Palamedes offering a hand of gratitude to Breckinridge and a subtle wink towards Wilkes Booth. ‘You are rightly thinking that this presidential election was yours to own, I’m sure?’ Morgan cooed.

‘Indeed, m’lady. For why else position one of your White Dragon knights in such a powerful position politically? Surely, this was our chance to secure success? The presidency and thus the whole of the United States at our...forgive me, your command. You have your new empire, your new world.’ Breckinridge pointed towards the carved feminine statute held close in Lady Morgan’s lap. ‘I am fully aware of the cycle, m’lady, that empires before rise and fall, and this could be no different, but...’

‘But why make it harder for ourselves? So true, Sir Tristan. But of course, you and your fellow knights know

what hardship means—resilience, fortitude, even loyalty,’ Morgan reflected. Breckinridge sat back, crossed his arms, awaiting an explanation. ‘The King’s Blade, Sir Tristan, lies with the Benson family, Berry Benson and the line of Sir Bedivere. Loyal to the Red Dragon, at least for now. Fate, however, has given us an advantage here, as loyalty can take many forms, and I’m sure you’ll be aware that the Bensons have their roots in the heartlands of South Carolina.’

‘One of the states you actually managed to win, in case you didn’t notice,’ Wilkes Booth said smirking while spinning his staff on the spot. Breckinridge seethed.

‘Quite. Now, entertain a scenario for me. You sweep to victory here in the election, win the White House and the presidency, try to maintain order in a divided nation through politics and hollow words...only to have our adversaries pull their forces together and switch the mind of Berry Benson to their cause. Excalibur is sought, and the House of Cards is blown down once more when its blade is buried deep into the earth. The White Dragon begins again, raising an empire and perhaps even having to manage its decline through this very necklace you see here on me now.’ Lady Morgan paused to admire the twinkle of the gem below her chin. ‘Many times have I seen it, the fickle nature of mankind when controlled by statesmen, the aspiring leaders of lands—limited in their control and ambition.’

‘And what would you say, my good lady, is the alternative in a modern democracy? Subjugation?’ Breckinridge challenged.

‘Those subjugated by force only try to rebel. Why, we’ve seen that on these new shores only too recently.’ Lady Morgan turned to Henry, her husband nodding in accord. ‘Try to shackle freedom, and men will contort and squirm until liberated. Their offspring, after time, then come to accept their struggle, making them equals.’ Lady Morgan clenched her jaw at the thought. *Equals*.

‘However...create a *war*. Have blood of their own families drip through their fingertips. From that, hatred is born. And hate, like blood itself, gets passed to each generation that follows. Born from the battlefields, not the ballot boxes,’ Henry interjected, sweeping past Longstreet and reaching for Lady Morgan’s hand. ‘The fragile mind of Berry Benson, the only hope for the Red Dragon and Sacred Band against our will, could see his entire family at the mercy of the North and its...politics. Livelihoods taken, driven into poverty, hell, even loved ones incarcerated. He’ll become an ally to us without reasoning, and the lesson will be passed on to every generation that follows in the Sir Bedivere line.’

Breckinridge sat quietly for a moment, eyebrows pinched. It was genius, if regrettable, on his part. Civil war was all but a certainty, and his efforts in the South had drawn a

division so strong that it could endure for decades, centuries, even. All he and his White Dragon faction need do is continue to fuel such a divide, even if the war only lasted a heartbeat or two. Shed enough blood, and the pain could resonate for a lifetime. Memories of those that perish enshrined in their children, and their children's children—no questions, no enquiries, only mankind's relentless thirst for revenge. 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend,' Breckinridge muttered to himself, not unnoticed by Lady Morgan, a glint of green in her otherwise pale-grey eyes marking approval. 'What would you have me do, m'lady?'

'Lincoln's election has already ignited calls for war. Your success here in the South is grounds for the severance of states...the secession of the Confederacy,' James Longstreet spoke. 'You are their figurehead now, John, and must act as such. Declare your intention to split...beginning, of course, with South Carolina. Throw down the gauntlet to the Benson family, and ensure their allegiance to us.' He gave a firm wave of his staff.

'I alone am to do this?' Breckinridge queried. 'Forgive me, m'lady, but although I carry Sir Tristan's blade, I am not known as a military leader amongst my followers...be they Northern or Southern.'

'Which is why Sir Palamedes here, alongside Jeb Stuart of Sir Gareth and Israel Greene of Sir Geraint, will

continue their bellicose ways on your behalf, John,' Henry said. 'Jeb and Israel have already forged close enough connections to the formidable military tacticians General Robert Lee and his aide Thomas Jackson, following Mr Brown's futile efforts at Harpers Ferry. Together, they will turn the tide of any affray to our favour. That and, of course...' He gestured to the lap of Lady Morgan and the Palladium.

'So. I am to be the face of a crusade? A military campaign?' Breckinridge soured. 'See no action? Just mumble jargon and diplomacy when the times require it?'

Lady Morgan lowered her eyes. 'Your sense of duty is unwavering, John. Perhaps a show of belligerence on your behalf is indeed required. A rank of general maybe? A title suited to war,' she offered, with an instruction to Longstreet and Worthington, who approved. 'Do realise, Sir Tristan, that we will all have roles to play in this arena, this...theatre. Not all will be rich with splendour and displays of heroism on the battlefield.' She presented Wilkes Booth with a smile before turning to her husband. 'Some must work the social scene, whisper the right words into the right ears, win both hearts and minds.' Her long fingers interlocked with Henry's, sharing with the group his efforts to win over the Northern votes to support Lincoln's candidacy and stoking the coals of war. A bitter anecdote or two over Shields Green then came, the rebellious Sacred Band leader and the discord that was

likely to follow across the United States for those slaves seeking emancipation—what would be demanded next? How many white liberties would be eroded before the minorities surpassed them in both voice and stature? A prediction that made even the most liberal of men squirm with discontent.

‘Forgive me, Lady Morgan. For as much as I have faith in our company, and our military capabilities, I must ask...’ Wilkes Booth got no further when Lady Morgan pushed Henry forward.

‘The ironclad warship? No, it didn’t sink, Sir Lamorak. Ye of little faith,’ Henry snipped. ‘*USS Merrimack* serves as proof such devotion to technology can pay dividends. The plans for conversion are all but complete.’

‘And anchored in Virginia? Questionable choice, Henry,’ James chipped in. ‘It has proven a marginal state with unknown allegiance. A declaration of secession and any threat to the seas will draw the attention of the North.’ he warned.

‘Heeded, Longstreet,’ Lady Morgan calmed. ‘Let them try to bring down iron with fire, even that of sacred blue. They’ll find it a greater challenge than wood.’ She playfully tapped the staff of Sir Palamedes. ‘No, the sharp plans of my dearest Sir Lancelot are ours, and will be

used to devastating effect. As she shared, a new age of warfare has begun. Control the seas...'

'...Control the war,' Longstreet uttered in agreement. 'And where will be finding our leader during this time of discord, m'lady?' he lightened.

'The queen lies patiently in wait, the second line of the board, my dear Sir Palamedes.' Lady Morgan gave a nod and then turned to Wilkes Booth. 'A theatre needs its director after all. When the time comes, I shall take the final curtain call with all of you. For now, win me not the crowd, but the beating heart of Berry Benson.'

Chapter 14

Hamburg, South Carolina

20th December 1860 AD

Gracie expected snow. It was snowing this time last year, her first white Christmas since arriving at the Benson estate. A few flakes had begun to dust the cotton fields, she and Nina balling up enough to throw at each other while the wardens weren't looking.

Blackwood caught them once, gave his typical grunt of disapproval, but refrained from formal punishment, his elder brother not six metres away the likely deterrent. The build-up to the festive season at least meant the slaves were given a mild reprieve from their duties, and Christmas Day was passed over as all from wardens to lords and ladies of the manor celebrated with family. A few Christian stories were told once by Nancy Benson to the children of the quarters, even fresh cornbread and crisp, roasted turkey slices offered. Jibes were made once her back was turned as to whether such generosity was in earnest or merely scraps from a higher table. Still, Gracie knew the heart of at least one Benson and knew it to be true.

This year felt different, mind. The chatter of unrest across the land, the new president Abraham Lincoln sworn in last month, adding heat to local words. A fear.

Blackwood could be seen arguing with Berry while going about their daily tasks, again when seen through the evening windows of the main house, framing a similar picture between parents. Father Abel struck his wife hard once across the cheek. Gracie witnessed her crumple to her knees, Berry charging at his father and pinning him against the table. Abel swung again, harder this time, the wooden staff snapping Berry's head back. She gasped, hoping Berry would find his feet and the courage to swing back. The son stood, his lower lip trembling but well held, his rigid stance stable enough, a warning not to dare attempt the same attack twice. Blackwood stepped in between them, and peace was restored. That same night, Berry knocked on the quarter's door, Gracie sliding out as she had done on so many occasions, Nina protesting as loudly as ever.

By the river, Gracie tended to the swollen side of Berry's forehead with her dampened headscarf, looking around for fungi to act as a remedy. Each hand she laid on his body appeared to cause discomfort. He rolled his shirt up, the skin a patchwork of purple bruises and sores. 'Goodness,' she fussed, urging him to step into the cooling river waters to ease the swelling.

'No. Not into the river,' Berry refused, wary of his fall last year, Gracie assumed, picking up on some incoherent mumble about voices, unpleasant and unwelcome voices he heard. She let it go, opting for a slop or two of

mud as the best makeshift ointment. 'Blackwood got a few hits in, too, y'know. Gave the boy as good as he could give, and then some,' Berry winced.

'You and your brother still fighting over Lincoln?' Gracie pulled Berry's shoulders back, encouraging him to lie down by her side. 'It is the way of power here, is it not? He who gets the most votes wins?'

'Depends on who you ask,' Berry sighed. 'And which way they voted. Not everyone around here agrees with Mr Lincoln and his ways.'

'Talk in the quarters says he'll make things better for all of us. The one they call Breckinridge, his rival, he don't like our people, our kind, they say.' Gracie snuggled against Berry's chest, causing him to wince more. 'Sorry' she smiled.

'It ain't as simple as that; you know it.' Berry readjusted his position. 'Folks down here got livelihoods, families to feed. If all that changes without time to adjust, there'll be a price. A heavy one.' He fumbled inside his pocket, pulled out a folded page of *Harper's Weekly* newspaper, and handed it over. Gracie tried to trace the text with her finger in the dim moonlight and tried her tongue at a few of the words.

‘What’s a sec...sec...secess...? Gracie fumbled.

‘It says *secession*. It means this State of South Carolina has decided to split from the rest of the United States, go its own way, if you will.’ Berry took the page back and stuffed it firmly back inside his pocket. ‘Doubt it will be the only state to do so once this is all done.’

‘Is that a bad thing? To want to go your own way?’ Gracie puzzled. ‘Is that not freedom?’

‘No darlin’...it means war.’ Berry held her tightly. ‘People who want different things but feel they’re not being listened to nearly always end badly.’

‘What do you want, Berry?’ Gracie turned and rested her chin on Berry’s chest. He pondered for a moment.

‘To be a good son,’ he finally spoke, eyes slowly starting to droop with fatigue. ‘That means protecting my family.’

‘So, you’ll do as your father commands,’ Gracie grunted her disapproval.

‘Less so than my little brother, but should it be required...’ Berry groaned, one of his sore spots flaring

up as Gracie moved. 'Remember what I told you about the Knights of King Arthur? Those legends? Well, loyalty to family is key to all of it. What sort of son would I be if I didn't obey my father?'

'One who did indeed choose his own way,' Gracie snipped back, reclaiming her headscarf and wrapping it back across her forehead. 'Your father gave you his staff, that waking stick you are so proud of. What is that, if not a sign, that it is your time to choose?'

'And just as swiftly took it back again. I know Mother would like to see him get rid of the thing, whatever its meaning may be, but could also encourage Blackwood to take up the mantle as head of the Benson Estate, should I not be obliging. Care to imagine what that might look like for your people?' Berry poked at Gracie's breast. She frowned, but conceded the argument, resettling on his chest and gripping his hand.

'War,' she whispered. 'Anger, pain, death. Haven't we seen enough?'

'No escaping pain and death. Not in this life,' Berry said trying to reassure her.

‘And death?’ Gracie said, a chill in her voice. Berry fell silent, hauled his torso up, and looked deep into Gracie’s rich eyes.

‘You sayin’ you’d actually miss me?’ he teased. ‘Your owner, monster of the manor.’

‘I call you no monster, Berry. You know that.’ Gracie flashed a smile and looked down with sincerity. ‘I know others might, but not me.’

‘Promise?’

‘On your life,’ Gracie lightened. ‘Assuming you hold on to it, that is.’

Berry let out a playful laugh and slipped his hand underneath Gracie’s loose garment, sliding it down lower below her waist just as their lips met. They rolled over a few times, ending with Berry on top, belt unclipped, heavy breath warming the frosty air around. Any thoughts of pain were masked by pleasure as Gracie dug her nails into the ridges between Berry’s shoulder blades, nuzzling the stray locks of his hair. What light they had faded as velvet blue clouds passed across the moon, extinguishing the sparkle of the river, Berry’s gentle breath Gracie’s only company, but enough.

Chapter 15

Fort Sumter, South Carolina

12th April 1861 AD

The ringing remained in Blackwood's ear like a troublesome mosquito. 'Jesus!' he barked, as the gunpowder smoke clogged his airway. He fought the acrid clouds away from his eyes, the horizon just beginning to burn, a flicker of raw red. That was the third direct hit on the fort, a square of stone on the mouth of Charleston Harbour, and seen as a citadel of control for South Carolina. Retaliation from the state had been swift, a mere two months after Lincoln's inauguration, and here stood Blackwood Benson and his brother, Berry, rifles in hand, witnessing the makings of their destiny—a stand against the tide of the lost cause. Another hit saw fire streak into the night sky, causing a roar from the soldiers around them.

'You appear to be enjoying yourself,' Berry said, hands tucked firmly under each arm.

'Is that such a crime, Brother? This is, after all, what Father wanted,' Blackwood replied. 'Why else would he have willingly passed that staff of his back to you if he

didn't wish for you to carry on the family name? Our legacy.'

'Because it was driving him mad,' Berry snapped back, keeping a watchful eye on the waters just below. He blinked several times, staff resting by his hip but almost too hot to touch. That voice again. Both smooth and sinister, overpowering any boom of a cannon or cheer from the crowd. The waves of the shore taunted him, inviting him to jump, as a siren would call to a ship... '*The King's Blade*' he thought he heard. '*A circle...the rise and the fall.*' He jolted as a firm hand landed on his shoulder.

'They won't hold out for long,' came the Southern drawl of a crooked-toothed soldier, breath reeking of rum. 'They've got no supplies, no food for days. Time's up!' His smile revealed more twisted, blackened stumps for teeth. Berry flickered an approving smile back, quickly turning away for fresher air.

'You think we'll see action tonight?' Blackwood asked.

'What do you think this is, little brother?'

'No—I mean real action.' Blackwood raised his rifle as if it were a toy popgun.

‘Don’t be so eager. Sure, old General Beauregard over there won’t wish for bloodshed unless absolutely necessary.’ Berry nodded towards the charcoal-grey suited officer, pacing up and down amongst the ranks. An occasional peek through his binoculars, searching for a white flag at the tip of the Fort, each time disappointed and ordering another salvo. The voice came again, Berry smacking his forehead to rid himself of it, no use.

‘Headache?’ Blackwood joked.

‘Something like that, yes.’

‘Don’t tell me this is all getting a bit too much for you, Brother. Might only be the beginning. Have to say, once other States of the South see what we’ve done here, we’ll get allies; we won’t be alone in this fight,’ Blackwood gave a cheer of his own as a fierce fireball ripped above the Fort, a magazine storage explosion perhaps, accompanied by a tattle of cries from across the harbour as residents began to gather with glowing lanterns, awoken by the action no doubt. ‘Father would be proud of us. We stood up.’

Berry pinched his brow. The silky voice was replaced by Gracie’s, crisp but warming. He patted his breast pocket, the small doll he’d given to her passed back as a good luck charm as the two brothers rode out for war, a

reminder of home, and her. He squeezed it through the fabric of his overcoat; it offered some measure of calm while enduring the hours of violence. He tried to imagine it was Gracie herself he was holding, as close to his chest as possible. '*The King's Blade*.' The eerie voice forced its way back in. He snapped upright, knocking his staff to the muddy grounds.

'Christ, there wasn't even a cannon shot then, Brother! You sure you're up for this?' Blackwood cast a quizzical look. A raucous cheer went up as General Beauregard gestured to his next in line to move forwards to the small boats moored in the harbour and make sail for the Fort gates. The crooked-toothed soldier returned, more booze on his breath, and pointed to the slip of a white flag sprouting from the pole in the Fort's centre. Blackwood let out a disapproving sigh. 'Looks like we're going to have to wait to pull the trigger, eh?'

'Indeed,' Berry said, scrambling to pick up the wooden staff while the shuffle of boots slid through the mud. 'And I really wouldn't be so eager to do so, little brother.'

The chalk-white sands of Fort Sumter proved welcome relief for Berry Benson, his boots too tight for his feet, cutting into his ankles. He rested on a slab of fallen

masonry, levered one boot off, then peeled the blood-soaked sock from his skin. Beauregard was seen to his right, cordially speaking to Fort Major Anderson, a few stationed soldiers standing a few yards back under the gleeful eyes of Beauregard's own company. A torn Union flag was handed to Anderson, formal bows and salutes made, and then the capitulation of Fort Sumter secured and settled.

'Would you look at that!' Blackwood took a seat next to his brother. 'Got our own flag and everything. How long before that's flying over the White House, do you think?' he beamed while gesturing up at the top of the pole. Dawn had just broken the skies with slashes of pink and orange, the rich blue and red fabric of the flag dancing elegantly in the breeze. 'Could all be as easy as this one, just a few heavy cannons, and the North runs for cover!' he continued to gush.

'That would make you happy, would it? A nation divided?' Berry frowned.

'Aw, don't give me that, Berry! We wouldn't be divided if it weren't for that fool of a president, Abraham Lincoln. He doesn't care about us, our way of life—we only have each other,' Blackwood spat back. 'Why do you think Father sent us both to war? He wasn't mad, he had faith. Knowing that his two Sons would carry on his legacy and that of our people, and...'

Berry placed a gentle, reassuring hand on his younger brother's knee. 'I get it, Blackwood, I do. He also asked me to do something before we left.'

'Oh? What was that? Don't tell me...' Blackwood paused, narrowing his eyes. 'Protect me. Protect me! Ha!'

Berry permitted himself a smile of his own. 'Of course he did. You know what he and Mother are like. They know full well you're the passionate, impulsive one of the family, and long may you be so...but they also know it can get you into trouble.' He waved the wooden staff under Blackwood's wiry stubble. Suddenly he caught sight of another one just like it poking out of the long coat of one of Beauregard's presiding officers. He did a double-take, the officer glimpsed Berry's momentary bemusement, then turned away.

'More trouble than sleeping with a slave girl?' Blackwood bit back. Berry's eyes pooled wide. 'Ah, trust me, Brother. I might seem ignorant, but not a complete fool. The way you defended that Gracie girl, the night Jepson brought her in for stealin', that wasn't just you being chivalrous there was it? There was more.' He poked a finger at Berry's ribs. 'Can't say I blame ya, many wardens I know have tried their luck with the slaves over the years. At least you have a prettier one.'

Berry twisted his jaw, gave a shake of his head, and then let out a giggle. 'Father, Mother...do they know?' he whispered.

'Nah, your secret is safe with me, Brother. Mother's only concerned about Father and his drinkin', not got time for much else. And Father, well, you know how his mind is workin' at the moment,' Blackwood tisked.

'Thank you,' Berry sighed, close to embracing his little brother in sheer relief, thinking better of it knowing how it would likely be rejected immediately as Blackwood desperately tried to project a tough-guy persona in front of his peers.

'Don't mention it. Now, get your rifle ready.' Blackwood took the barrel of his brother's.

'What? Why?'

'Aw, don't you panic, Brother. No executions. Not like John Brown and that Shields Green, not amongst us here. We're givin' a salute, a rally for those here in South Carolina to announce our arrival, and the change we're set to bring. Also, somethin' about honour to Major Anderson's men. I forget,' Blackwood chuckled, already on his feet.

The Bensons took their place in the fifty-strong lineup, backs to the flag pole, and rifle butts firmly lodged against their shoulders. The pinks of dawn had given way to creamy white as the sun rose. General Beauregard, shouting the order to fire high, raised his sabre, then lowered it with a bellow; puffs of smoke filled the skies. Berry was held in a moment of tranquillity, the voice that had plagued him all night silenced for a second, staff cool to the touch, the doll resting peacefully against the lowered rhythm of his heartbeat. It pulsed quicker, then quicker still—*thud, thud, thud*—he heard shouts from behind and to his left, the body of his brother collapsing before him. Blackwood lay limp at his feet. Cold sweat broke across his forehead as darkened blood oozed around his heels, Blackwood's eyes lifeless.

'Sniper shot!' Berry heard the crooked-toothed soldier scream amidst the frantic energy that had gripped the fort, rifles pointing in all directions, some letting a round or two fly. He knelt down and held his brother's heavy head in his lap, every muscle in his body bunched. Beauregard himself called all his soldiers to scout the high walls of the fort, the remaining Unionist fighters holding their hands high and pleading for mercy. They were defenceless, no one on their side could have fired, surely, Berry's mind raced. But how? How was it his little brother now lay dead in his arms? Tears began to flow down his burning cheeks, fingers wrapped around his staff, summoning metal, his focus on the open-palmed Unionists. The traitors. The...*murderers*. He yelled, bringing forth brilliant

white light that blinded those surrendered before him, without thinking swinging the knight's blade viciously into flesh, blood spraying across his face. Once, twice, then a third. He fell to his knees again, turned back to see the drained, pale face of Blackwood staring back at him. A voice came to him again—one unfamiliar—as if spoken by a man sitting right beside him. 'It was meant for you,' it whispered.

Berry shot his gaze forward. The cloaked officer he thought he'd seen alongside Beauregard was sweeping up the high wall steps, carved staff just visible, the figure vanishing as swiftly as it had arrived. His company of troops scattered madly behind him, thinking the flash of white light was a newly reignited arsenal somewhere, dousing all smouldering stores with buckets of water. The still-warm bodies of two slain Unionists slumped against Berry's haunches, the third still groaning in pain from the wound in his belly. Berry's eyes welled with tears as he let out an ungodly cry to the Heavens, louder than any sound that came before.

Chapter 16

Baltimore, Maryland

19th April 1861 AD

There was a shuddering groan from the train's engine, a jet of steam obscuring Owen's view. He rubbed the window free from fog and pressed his nose against the glass. The station platform was a mass of flat-capped heads, some distinctly military, others wishing to be so. Conscripts, Owen immediately thought. The crowds were flanked by the navy blue militia of the Massachusetts Infantry, which had slowly been pouring off the carriage in front, sharp bayonets resting on every shoulder, a sea of teeth. Some in the crowd waved papers, a permit to join the brigade in the war against the South—faces of every colour, spurred by the news of the loss of Fort Sumter that had spread through every state. President Lincoln's only response was to act with force, but the situation was delicate, as finely tipped as his own election. The slightest misstep and the favour of the masses could turn, even on the very steps of the White House. A black face shouted a blessing to one of the troops that passed, presented a picture of what must have been family still working the fields in South Carolina, and pleaded to take up arms, only to be solemnly rejected by the soldier. Owen scanned the blur of faces as he hopped off the train, duffle bag getting

caught on the door handle. Another black face freed it for him, a face that for a blink reminded Owen of Nelson, perhaps the gloss across the eyes or the pin-prick dark freckles down the left cheek. He was quickly disillusioned as the stranger brushed him aside to aboard the train. 'Want to be careful out there,' the stranger said. 'Going to be quite the ruckus once these troops make it across town.' He doffed his hat.

Meet me at President Street Station, Nelson had said, he and his family staying not ten blocks away as Mother Harriet Tubman had travelled dutifully to the city to liaise with a General David Hunter—or 'Black Dave' as Nelson had come to call him. An inside joke for the Tubmans, given Hunter's skin was as pale as a fresh lily. Owen continued to elbow his way through the crowds, picking up snippets of chitter-chatter from both supporters of civil war and those more weary and reticent. He fought his way to the main station entrance, relatively free from the crowds and the smoky stench of engine coal. Where was he? Owen panned from the corner of Pratt Street down the muddy tracks, the beat of soldiers' boots coming from just behind. Soon he'd be swallowed up again by the mass—and the thought of his blind partner spotting him first actually brought an ironic grin to his face. Then he saw the flare of blue fire bolt up into the sky from a darkened alleyway. That's one way of getting his attention, Owen smiled.

‘Couldn’t see you on the platform.’ Owen embraced Nelson warmly.

‘I couldn’t see you, period,’ Nelson quipped back playfully. ‘Heard the chime of the station clock tower, remembered you said about midday for arrival, took my chances.’

Owen locked his fingers with Nelson’s. ‘A lot of people here in Baltimore, and not just soldiers,’ he commented. ‘Fort Sumter has really kicked things off, hasn’t it.’

‘Only the beginning, Ma says,’ Nelson replied. ‘She and Black Dave want to see us stand and fight with the Whites, but Lincoln’s not having it—not just yet, anyway.’ The soft circle of blue fire ran around Nelson’s wrist in eagerness. Owen soothed it, noting that, should the time come, they’d both get their chance. A shot was heard, followed by a panicked scream and a series of shouts a little further down the street. A group of soldiers levelled their rifles, hesitant at first, then let loose a salvo at something Owen couldn’t make out. ‘What’s happening?’ Nelson pulled closer to Owen.

Several locals had already fled into nearby shops for sanctuary by the time Nelson and Owen had sprinted down the length of Pratt Street, greeted by a melee of soldiers, police, and city folk. Abuse and insults filled the air, projectiles hurled high, some landing on unsuspecting skulls, others smashing into shop windows. More pistol shots came, a few soldiers falling into the mud, grimacing while trying to regain their footing while nursing a fresh but nonfatal wound. A war within a war, Owen thought, the ugliest of scenes in a single street a mere taste of what was likely to come for the entire United States. ‘It’s a riot...’ Owen spoke softly to Nelson, keeping a distance from the affray. ‘Someone at the station warned me. Not everyone here in Baltimore approves of action against South Carolina.’

Nelson huffed. ‘It’s why my family are here. To be on the right side of history. A conflict that centres on us, yet we’re not permitted to fight for it ourselves.’ His anger boiled into blue flame once again, the hint of a spear just forming from his fist. ‘We should be enlisting the freed slaves, those my family and Frederick Douglass have fought hard to liberate—and imagine, Owen, what we as the Sacred Band could do to help win this war.’ His voice trembled with excitement.

‘Shields Green and Anthony Copeland thought that way, too, and look what happened,’ Owen reminded him. ‘Two of us cannot win this war alone. We’d need

more...perhaps even the full complement of three hundred that Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Samuel Gridley Howe keep mentioning.' He raised his blue flame shield, deflecting a rogue brick sailing their way. 'We should leave. *Now.*'

'Do the knights of Sir Galahad and Sir Gaheris even know where to find more of us? More like Shields and Anthony?' Nelson bit through his lip in frustration at having to skulk away from the carnage in the street.

'Green and Copeland struggled to get even slaves to join them, let alone the Sacred Band. The conflict between black and white has another dimension when homosexuality is added to the mix—perhaps neither side would necessarily welcome us,' Owen sighed. 'One nation, under God and all...'

'They're here with us, you know.' Nelson hooked his arm through Owen's for guidance.

'Who? Thomas and Samuel?'

'Indeed. Finally taking things seriously,' Nelson quipped, casually tossing a single blue spear back over his shoulder, searing off a hanging shop sign that neatly

landed on the head of a foul-mouthed yob spouting racial slurs as the pair passed.

‘Your aim is getting much better,’ Owen gave a mellow laugh.

‘Is it? I missed the son of a bitch, didn’t I?’ Nelson growled back.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson tossed the silver dime up for what seemed like the hundredth time. The cheapest of tricks from Sir Lancelot, Henry Worthington, and his games of secured certainty. Leaving nothing to chance. Perhaps this time, he and his dear lady Morgan le Fay had outdone themselves with the Palladium—a civil war where the only power strong enough to topple the emerging empire sat firmly behind White Dragon lines. The local press already hailed the efforts of a Berry Benson at Charleston Harbour, and the loss of his youngest brother Blackwood at the ruthless hands of Major Anderson and his retreating Unionists. A heart now filled with hate. A cruel but calculated move by his rivals upon the line of Sir Bedivere, foreseen perhaps by the sorceress’s skills, a dim future that sees a new global strength built on prejudice and malice—one race over another. First, it would be skin, then maybe sexuality.

Fear gripped Thomas as Owen Brown and Nelson Tubman tumbled through the house door to safety, immediately welcomed by young Gertie.

‘Gone mad out there,’ Owen reported. ‘Rioting on Pratt Street. Shooting and looting.’ He helped Nelson to the kitchen table.

‘And yet you went out anyway.’ Harriet Tubman seized her son’s arm. ‘Told you, it wasn’t safe.’ She clipped him over the ear.

‘Oh, and what you’re doing here right now is the picture of sanity,’ Nelson said with a curl of his lip. ‘Why bring us here if you don’t want us to make a difference?’

‘There’s a time and a place, Master Tubman,’ came the slow New England accent of General David Hunter as he pulled up a chair alongside Thomas. ‘Flare ups like this one draw attention, yes, but are fleeting. Don’t take your eyes off the main event. The president must be convinced.’

‘Don’t take my eyes off....is that supposed to be a joke?’ Nelson just managed his response to Black Dave before another firm slap came from Harriet. Gertie giggled as her elder brother rubbed his ear once more. ‘Ma, you

know Owen and I can fight, just as well as anyone else being conscripted. Why won't you let us?'

'Because you're blind, and your partner has a troubled arm and an even more troubled elder brother sworn to protect him by orders of his father.' Samuel Gridley Howe swept into the kitchen, cream-coloured paper screwed up in one hand. 'John Brown was reckless, we all know that, as well as passionate. Let's try and find a balance between the two for the sake of the Sir Gawain line, shall we?' He passed the crumpled sheet to Thomas. 'Letter from Gerrit in Chicago. He's tried to keep an eye on Henry Worthington. Little to report, still no whereabouts of Lady Morgan, mind.'

Thomas scanned the letter, then peeled off the thinner sheet behind the parchment. A more fluid handwriting, certainly not of Gerrit's making. 'And this?' he asked Samuel. His fellow knight leant on his staff and gestured to the second letter's signature, prompting Thomas to raise his brow and make excuses to leave the room.

'Miss Dickinson?' Harriet asked rhetorically. Samuel cracked a smile.

'South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida...' Hunter spoke aloud to himself, ticking through his fingers. 'Now Virginia, Arkansas, and Tennessee likely to follow, that's

a following of near three-thousand strong infantry at the command of this newly anointed Southern President Jefferson Davis and General Lee. Not promising,' he sighed. Owen nudged Nelson's arm in a told-you-so fashion—the opposing strength of the Sacred Band a mere three hundred. He whispered into Nelson's ear that at the Battle of Chaeronea, Alexander the Great had a force of perhaps thirty thousand, resulting in the Band's annihilation.

'Yeah, but he knew a thing or two about our tactics, him and Hephaestion. Also, he had that necklace your father kept going on about and...' Nelson's temper did not let him dial down his decibel level, and it was Owen's turn to clip him round the other ear. Gertie giggled again through her glass of milk.

'Something to say, Nelson?' Harriet sternly asked. Nelson huffed before getting abruptly to his feet and marching out to the living room, muttering his frustration at such procrastination, silenced by slamming his knee into a dresser. China plates tumbled to the tiled floor and shattered. He cursed loudly. 'My apologies, Mr Hunter. My son, if in a china shop, would almost certainly be a bull,' Harriet said, trying to lighten the mood as she bent down awkwardly to retrieve the shards, shooing little Gracie away.

‘He’s just like a big ugly bull!’ Gertie joked, backing down at a judging finger from Harriet.

‘I’ll go check on that big bull brother of yours.’ Owen pinched Gertie’s plump cheek.

‘In all seriousness, Hunter, what is the North’s plan? Will President Lincoln delay much further?’ Samuel asked.

‘Unlikely. All-out war is looking inevitable, even with states like this one siding with the president but wishing to remain silent on this issue of slavery. Everyone has something to lose should complete emancipation for blacks be passed—businesses, trade, hell, even families,’ Hunter groaned. ‘But...’

‘But freedom for all is the goal,’ Harriet chimed in. ‘And Lincoln will come to know that in God’s good time.’ Hunter bowed respectfully while casting an incredulous look towards Samuel.

‘Where will this General Robert Lee look to strike first, should the Confederacy wish to escalate matters?’ Samuel enquired.

‘Fort Sumter was a gambit. A clue also,’ Hunter replied, with a drum of his nails against the table. ‘Lincoln and his

advisors believe controlling the ports will be crucial, and have the US Navy on high alert to block any support to the South. With any hope, he can minimise the scale of any mounting conflict by choking off the supplies to General Lee and his followers. Neither side wants further bloodshed, I'm certain.'

Samuel let out a heavy sigh, recovered from his sorrow quickly as Hunter continued his debate with Harriet over the recruitment of much-needed black Americans and much-needed support of symbolic orators such as friend Frederick Douglass. He watched as black smoke began to belch from the rooftops of nearby buildings at Camden Street Station, now ablaze from the rioting. If only those in assumed power knew what they were *truly* up against.

Chapter 17

Amherst, Massachusetts

19th April 1861 AD

Letter from Emily Dickinson – 19th April 1861

Dear Mr Higginson,

I hope these words find you and your company in good health. Good health is something to be cherished in my household. My mother grows frailer by the day, sadly, and my duties for her well-being grow with her decline. I very much enjoyed our exchange in Chicago last year, and confess to being disappointed in myself for not having reached out to you sooner. I spoke with your close friend Mr Gerrit Smith, the rotund gentleman I saw you with that night of Lincoln's nomination. He shared a few fleeting details about your relationship with the industrialist Mr Henry Worthington, and most of his talk left me bemused. Perhaps it was Mr Smith's state of sobriety that caused my confusion—speaking of legendary knights of England and mystical goddesses, witchcraft, and magic. It all sounded very exciting, even if difficult to be taken as fact.

Such a wonderful imagination that you and your friends have. I have found myself in dire need of fantasy of late,

a need for another world other than this one, the United States at war with itself, so fresh in its freedom from colonialism, only to find foes on the same soil. I pray that you are safe in Baltimore, and whatever duty you believe rests upon your shoulders does not weigh you down or burn through you like a funeral pyre through your brain. My closest friends remain the hills and sundowns of Amherst, those, and my dear companion Carlo, the sweetest of dogs that never leaves my side. My father fills our home with dread at the sound of the drums of war—my brother William all too eager to snatch up a gun and join his fellow countrymen, my sister Lavinia suffering sleepless nights, she and I held prisoners by our fear.

If you are to take up arms against the Confederacy, my prayers are with you, dearest Thomas, and with Samuel Gridley Howe. From the briefest scenes I witnessed that Chicago night, I rest easy knowing your skills with a blade will serve you well and keep you safe—perhaps more so, should Gerrit's tales prove to hold any truth. I find solace in the many books my sister and I have gathered over these months, escaping into the peace in the written word, as well as finding our needed strength. Father curses me, anxious at the thought that such learning might addle my mind. But I'd sooner read the literature of fiction than the supposed facts of the reporters and the press, wouldn't you say? Tell the truth, but tell it slant, and thereby offer hope over despair. Thus, I trust you know I take greater comfort from the legends locked within your heart than the purest honesty on your surface.

I leave you now with my very best wishes and love,
Thomas. I also pray that the one Mr Gerrit calls Berry
Benson is found for you. A man whose heart I hear is
broken, and hence lost. For all the hearts that may break
in this war, if you should save a single heart, it is not a life
lived in vain.

With fondest love,

Emily Dickinson.

Chapter 18

Bull Run – Fairfax County, Virginia

21st July 1861 AD

The blade ran hot through Berry Benson's arm, drawing the rich iron smell of blood from its edge. A Unionist soldier threw himself forward with a bayonet—it was cut clean off at its base by the Sword of Sir Bedivere, its tip plunged deep into the belly of the soldier. The face twisted, mouth foaming red, and then slid free to the churned grounds below. Berry remained emotionless, quickly sounding off two rounds from his rifle, taking down two more Unionists with accurate headshots. Others ran back to the shelter of a battered, wood-slatted house on the peak of Spring Hill, drawing parting shots far from their intended targets.

'Look at them skedaddle,' the crooked-toothed Confederate companion shouted in Berry's ear, thankfully free from alcohol now. 'Take Henry's House, and this hill is ours,' he chirped while being pulled down by Berry to evade cover fire. He reached out and pointed downhill to the billowing smoke below. 'That's Jackson, that is, standing like a stone wall. Colonel Hunter hasn't a chance!' He began to pant out a laugh. Berry remained distracted by the ominous pulses of whitening light from

General Jackson's right flank—the fleeting familiarity of a face from the newly promoted Brigadier General Beauregard's acquired Army of Potomac, first seen at Fort Sumter—James Longstreet, he recalled. He walked with the aid of a stick not too dissimilar to Berry's staff, often hidden beneath his overcoat in an attempt to disguise any frailty, but never shy about vocalising his opinions towards fellow officers. And he was not alone, for Longstreet appeared to always have an ally in military tactics when occasionally overhead by the men just outside the tent—Jeb Stuart, the infamous server of justice at Harpers Ferry only last season, now a living legend for the Confederates and commander of the Virginia Cavalry. Knight of the Golden Spur, some called him, a title bequeathed by Jefferson Davis himself in recognition of his service to the South and suppression of John Brown's fruitless rebellion. He and Longstreet would often stand side by side, engaged in musings that could be heard beyond the officers' tent. Orders of their own, and often contradictory to those of more senior officers, making Benson wonder. Whatever glory was to be had upon the fields of Bull Run today, chances were Longstreet and Stuart would have been two of the pillars that propped up this laudable stone wall of Thomas Jackson.

'Get down! Get down!' yelled an unfamiliar voice from just behind. Berry and the crooked-toothed soldier flung their bodies forward as cannon fire rocked the earth beneath them, blasting corners off the Henry House and sending

splinters of wood high into the air. It was an impetuous attempt at forcing a Unionist surrender, much like much of the battle had been—disillusion and romantic notions of glory on both sides, but little in the way of strategy or coalescence in leadership. Pawns would die as they always did, the generals left to assess their mistakes and try to learn ahead of the next engagement. Berry had already grown tired of the poorly executed trial-and-error approach, a red-hot fire burning deep inside his gut as each Unionist adversary bore the face of his slain brother Blackwood. Mocking him, teasing him, reminding him of his failure to protect. Those words—*it was meant for you*—grew louder and louder with each life Berry took. He feared no amount of blood drawn would bring him silence, either from that voice, or the more ethereal one that continued to plague his mind. As he gripped the pommel of his sword, the latter spoke again, resonating through every bone—*the King's Blade*—hollow yet deep, forcing Berry to squeeze both eyes shut. He let out a scream, burying his blade into the earth, white light roaring forward and rattling the wooden slats of the house ahead. The windows buckled inward. Shouts from the blinded Unionists inside were heard, followed by their random volleys. Berry slumped down once more, cannons from behind taking advantage of the sudden commotion and fellow Confederates now charging up Spring Hill, fighting back the flames licking the Henry House. A sharp crackle, the roof of the house moaned and then collapsed in a plume of cinders. Some Unionist soldiers managed to flee out the back, quickly mown

down like wheat in a field by pursuing Confederates. The Hill was theirs.

Berry held back, body drained and breathless, watching his crooked-toothed comrade stumble forwards, letting loose bullets and screaming hysterically, now seemingly drunk on victory. Through the chatter of his teeth, he heard a calmer voice breaking through. 'Most impressive, Master Benson,' it said. Berry turned, wiped caked mud and blood from his eyelids. An officer stood proudly behind, staff to one side.

'Jeb Stuart, sir.' Berry bowed.

She was clothed in green guipure lace, like the scales of a serpent, Berry thought. 'Please, come forward, Mr Benson,' Jeb Stuart urged from behind the tarpaulin that had been erected against the ruins of the Henry House frame. 'May I introduce Lady Morgan Worthington, good wife and servant to Mr Henry Worthington and...'

'Please, General Stuart, no need for formalities. Not after the toils of today.' Lady Morgan moved forward and offered her hand. Berry leant forward and kissed it, blushing slightly, thinking he'd overdone his greeting. 'My,

my—such chivalry. This is why we fight, gentlemen, for the ways of the South and its customs, wouldn't you agree?' she charmed. Jeb Stuart turned to James Longstreet and shared a sycophantic chuckle. 'Alas, we three know much about chivalry, the way of knights and honour. It is to be cherished, would you not agree, Mr Benson?' Lady Morgan glided around Berry in a tight circle.

'I...I would, ma'am,' Berry croaked out a reply. 'Forgive me, ma'am, but General Stuart announced you as the wife of Henry Worthington? Is he not the famous industrialist and engineer? A long-time supporter of the Union?' he blurted without thinking.

'Ah, a man of many talents, my husband—not least having people believe what he wants them to believe. Quite ingenious—the ability to hide one's true self.' Lady Morgan shot a glance down at Berry's wooden staff, then across to the near-matching staves of Longstreet and Stuart. 'You know, Mr Benson, despite the carnage you may have witnessed up to this point, the turmoil of the lost cause of the Confederacy, it is about something far greater than mere land or power. It concerns a destiny, a destiny we three of the White Dragon have tried to preserve for centuries.'

'The White Dragon?' Berry raised an eyebrow. He had heard the odd word or two from his father back in South

Carolina, always swiftly hushed by his mother and dismissed as intoxicated ramblings. Something about a Red opposing faction, too, tied up with the tales of King Arthur of Britain. Bedtime stories, treats for him and Blackwood, triggering memories of his time spent with Gracie on the riverbank—his damsel in distress, his maiden. He was saddened at the thought of her all alone at the Benson estate, not knowing whether he would ever see her again. A pat on his breast pocket found the doll, a poignant reminder of what felt real and what was merely whimsical fantasy, bringing a tear to his eye. ‘What is the White Dragon?’ He tried to compose himself.

‘*Albus Draco*—your destiny, boy.’ James Longstreet cast an imposing shadow, twisting a silver ring around his forefinger. ‘Here with us, and on the front line for the soul of this blessed nation of ours. Our Lady Morgan Worthington here has plans for us all, and we can make this country into the grandest empire the world has ever seen, unrivalled in its dominance. Just think, you and your family never having to worry about fortune ever again, masters free to do as you please, holding the horn of the cornucopia, a legacy preserved for you, your children.’

‘And your brother, in his name,’ Lady Morgan cut in sharply.

‘Blackwood? You knew about...’ Berry stuttered.

‘Word travels fast amongst officers, Mr Benson. I was there at Fort Sumter that day when Unionist soldiers fired the cowardly shot that stole your young brother from you. We have kept watch over you ever since,’ Longstreet began to purr, a warming smile creeping up beneath his bristly moustache. Lady Morgan and Jeb Stuart turned towards each other and exchanged grins of their own before returning their attention to Berry.

‘Thank...thank you, General Longstreet,’ Berry stuttered once more.

‘Some even call me Sir Palamedes,’ Longstreet gave a quick chortle, patting the shoulder of Jeb Stuart. ‘Call this one Sir Gareth, should you wish.’

‘Sir Bedivere,’ Berry said, joining the frolics. ‘My father said he was related to Sir Bedivere? These staves, they are...’ He felt giddy for a moment.

‘More than just walking sticks? Why yes, yes, they are.’ Lady Morgan grew serious. ‘And yours, well, let’s just say it holds more importance to us than you know. I trust you’ve heard of the legend of Excalibur? The King’s Blade?’ Her grey eyes narrowed.

The King's Blade—the echo of the voice ran through Berry's mind. 'I've heard it. Actually heard it, ma'am' he answered without thought. Lady Morgan's face froze, petrified.

'Heard it?' Stuart interjected. Benson looked sheepishly at his feet.

'Sorry, sirs. I know it sounds mad...my father suffered the same afflictions. A voice in his head, bred from water, he sometimes said. Used to curse this here staff, beat both my brother and me, fierce with rage, even my mother on occasion. Just wanted it all to stop. That's all he wanted,' Berry's voice cracked.

'And I can help you, good Berry. For I believe I know what that voice is, what it wants from you, and how to control it.' Lady Morgan took Benson by the shoulders and stared deep into his eyes, hers offering a glimmer of green. 'It could lead you to something, somewhere special, maybe far from here. And when you find it, a legend could become true,' she riddled.

'The King's Blade? Excalibur is real?' Berry shook.

'Only you can answer that one, young Benson, knight of Sir Bedivere. And when you do, remember us here today,

what we stand for, and what we can accomplish together. For Excalibur is a mighty force, one that can only be wielded by those that know pain, love, and most of all...sacrifice.' Lady Morgan stepped back, caressing the bright red jewel that flickered in the modest tent light. 'If you were to bring it to me, oh, the wonders we could achieve.' She clasped her powder-white hands together in delight. She held her gaze for a moment, then broke off as Brigadier General Beauregard and General Thomas Jackson slipped into the tent.

'My apologies, gentlemen, and...Miss?' Beauregard paused and eyed Lady Morgan's sleek figure up and down.

'Worthington, Lady Worthington. Pleasure, Mr Beauregard.' Lady Morgan offered her hand again for a peck, the other pressed firmly against the necklace that appeared to captivate both senior generals. 'My apologies for the intrusion, but I simply had to witness such a glorious triumph for the Confederacy for myself. I know we women are meant to remain quiet by the sides of our brave husbands, but being away from them for so long takes its toll on one's heart, does it not?'

'Your husband is...?' Jackson darted between Stuart and Longstreet.

‘Oh, no. Not here, I’m afraid. Mr Worthington is back in Washington. You will both know him as the engineer, possibly a Unionist sympathiser, but as I’ve just informed brave Berry Benson here, looks can be deceiving,’ Lady Morgan answered. ‘I will leave you good gentlemen be...and my congratulations to your men, Mr Jackson...or should I say *Stonewall*?’ She winked back at Longstreet and Stuart. ‘Now there’s a name those in the North will come to fear, I’m sure. Mr Longstreet, a moment before I depart, please.’ She pulled on the arm of the knight of Sir Palamedes, leaving Beauregard speaking with Berry and complimenting him on his fortitude on the battlefield, a slip of paper passed from his pocket into Berry’s hand.

‘You did well, Sir Palamedes,’ Lady Morgan whispered when out of earshot.

‘My shot was clean at Blackwood, yes. Took the opportunity when it came,’ Longstreet said with a dutiful nod of his head.

‘And look what a prize it has won for us. Whether Benson discovers the location of Excalibur or not, is almost irrelevant now. He is washed clean by anger and hate towards the Unionists, towards the Red Dragon—whether he is aware of such deeper conflict or not,’ Lady Morgan reassured. ‘Hold on to him dearly. With every Confederate victory, his resolve will strengthen.’

‘You and Henry will see to that, I’m sure, my lady.’ Longstreet hinted towards the pocket in Lady Morgan’s dress, the Palladium safely inside. ‘What of Breckinridge and Greene? Are they to fight?’

‘Breckinridge still smarts from the election loss, so, of course, I will let the noble knight of Sir Tristan see action. Israel Greene appears a changed man since the execution of John Brown and the Sir Gawain lineage. My trust in him wanes. But it will be brought forth if needs be, just as anyone else loyal to our cause,’ Lady Morgan replied. ‘As for Wilkes Booth, let’s just leave the dramatist to his own devices for now—always a liability, his bloodline. Heavy is the hand that holds the sword of Sir Lamorak,’ she teased.

Longstreet cast a sorrowful gaze across the torn fields of Bull Run, trees stripped bare of their bark, pools of blood dyeing the waters, and bloated bodies of fallen soldiers punctuating his view. An empire born from the blood of its own, he pondered. ‘Will Henry’s efforts at sea come to our aid, my good lady? The forces for Lincoln are already massing in the North, some I hear coloured and keen to rally to avenge Shields Green and the Sacred Band. We must secure dominance over our eastern ports,’ he reaffirmed.

‘That we will—the ironclad is ready. As for the Sacred Band, forget the antiquities of Alexander the Great. Let us

make *Stonewall* a name the Lions of Leuctra will never forget,' Lady Morgan chilled.

Chapter 19

Boston, Massachusetts

1st February 1862 AD

Letter from Thomas Wentworth Higginson – 1st February 1862

My dearest Miss Dickinson

I am fully aware it has been several months since we last exchanged words—but trust me when I say you have remained in my thoughts over these troublesome times. I hope that you and your sister Lavinia have found comfort in each other, especially given the frail health of your mother. Has your brother taken up arms? From what I hear, the president has been calling up young men from across the North in support of the Unionist cause following failures at Bull Run and now Belmont. My dear late friend John Brown has a younger son, Owen, who has rallied to the call of Brigadier General Ulysses S Grant—a man who appears to carry more of a captivating sway for the troops than his predecessor General Fremont. The recent skirmish at Fort Henry provided a welcome, if unexpected, relief for me, Samuel, and Gerrit. It won't be the last naval engagement, I am assured, but hopefully a sign of tenacity from the Union.

I apologise, for I am most likely boring you with talk of conflict. Let me share my encouragement of your ongoing fancy with the written word, and please do send me your latest works. I am set to publish an article soon in the *Atlantic Monthly*—Samuel believing it to be a solid use of my skills to bring forward supporters for our cause through the use of the arts—and would certainly welcome contributions from the young at heart. Bring forward your pain, your anger, your hope if you will, for all is fair on the parchment, my dear Miss Dickinson, and few pleasures are as deep as opinion, so don't be timid.

While I relish any opportunity to spread goodwill amongst our men, I cannot deny I yearn for a chance at battle—and may be granted the opportunity to do so should a vacancy appear in the 51st Massachusetts Regiment. I shall be patient for now, but with Gerrit tiring and Samuel tied to his work with the blind at the Perkins Institute—putting his much-needed skills in sanitation to help minimise local outbreaks of cholera and malaria in our troop's camps—it does mean that I remain the sole member of my company prepared for battle. I hope this does not cause you alarm, for while I, like so many, fear death, it pales in comparison to the long discourse of suffering that could be brought upon our people—all the people who have come to call the United States of America their home. Besides, you have witnessed me wield a sabre and thus know I can take care of myself.

In hope that you will see that you take care of yourself— may I suggest an introduction to a fine gentleman by the name of Eben Jenks Loomis. He and his wife, Mary, paid me a visit while at the offices of the *Atlantic Monthly* earlier this month, and I found their passion for poetry and prose most enticing. They have recently welcomed their first child, a young daughter named Mabel I believe, and are keen to have her improve her own fluency in writing. Do let me know should you wish to make their acquaintance.

I will leave you to your every active mind, Miss Dickinson. To answer your question as to the whereabouts of our close friend Berry Benson, sadly he remains elusive...but the name carries on the winds of war, and if I am to engage in the bloodshed, my hope is that we join in arms rather than crossing swords. Tell me more about your sweet jaunts in the rolling hills of your home in Amherst, the colours of each sunset, and the joy it brings to you. If for only a moment, such a small crumb of pleasure is to be treasured in this storm, for eternity, if need be.

With fondness,

Thomas Wentworth Higginson

Chapter 20

Hampton Roads, Virginia

8th March 1862 AD

‘We are men of honour, James. Not cowardly *assassins*,’ Israel Greene said disapprovingly to his fellow knight. ‘Is this what the White Dragon has become? Murderers of innocent young soldiers to aid our cause?’

‘It’s what she requested happen, Israel. There is to be no more talk on the subject.’ Longstreet put the knight of Sir Geraint in his place for daring to challenge the will of Lady Morgan. ‘We needed Benson’s rage, and we have it bottled. Now let le Fay do the rest and win this war of empires.’ He strutted down to the banks of the Nansemond River, his waxy, soil-brown overcoat suddenly alive with a wash of bright sky lights, rich in reds and yellows. His lips parted, prepared to speak, but found no words to describe the awe of the scene far out in the swell of Hampton Roads. A rip of fire tore through the patchy blue spring sky, a Union warship stern at right angles, and bellowing smoke. ‘There goes the Cumberland!’ Longstreet gestured with his staff.

Greene joined his side, tried to peer through the stream of black and white cloud, the menacing metal façade of

the Confederacy's new pride of the seas. *CSS Virginia* ploughed through the wreck of the *USS Cumberland* like a hot knife through butter. Spitballs of iron shot from both the ironclad's sides, obliterating whatever remained of the severed warship. 'Dear God almighty,' Greene sucked in a deep gasp.

'God had little to do with this, knight of Sir Geraint...and whichever god you were referring to, it is certainly not almighty.' Lady Morgan Worthington pulled up close to her two knights' sides, Jeb Stuart in tow, a downcast Berry Benson a step behind, eyes popping wide. 'My husband has outdone himself, a near era of warfare, we said, and now here it is before us.' She parted her slim white arms, framing the scene. 'Command the waters, and command the conflict,' she concluded rapturously.

Jeb Stuart came close to applause, but his attention was drawn by *CSS Virginia's* turning towards a second Union warship. 'That's the *USS Congress*! Surely...' he paused as the iron monster let loose three hot shots upon its aggressor, two missing, but one landing square amidships, igniting a blaze. The Union warship tried to respond, but her cannonballs bounced off the smooth metal flanks of the rival and she was left spinning down into the waters. 'She'll sink it. Two in an afternoon,' Jeb continued, grinning.

The waters splashed up close to Berry's boots. He shuddered, taking tentative steps back. The cries from fallen sailors were carried on the waves, but those pleas were not what he heard—*the rise and the fall*—the near shriek of the familiar voice came. More burden, more burning, stoked inside for fear of the King's Blade and his duty. He wanted to turn and face Lady Morgan, blurt out each and every word spoken to him by this ethereal curse, but held back. Something didn't sit right, as if it were a language she could never speak despite her willingness to learn and interpret. 'Pardon me, Lady Morgan, may I be excused for a moment?' he croaked, bringing the judging stares of James Longstreet and Jeb Stuart upon him, Lady Morgan giving a gentle smile and dismissing the young knight. A boom like thunder raged across the skies, met with cheers from Longstreet and Stuart, only Greene remaining soundless as a ghost, the *USS Congress* exploding into wafers of wood and sail, the ironclad claiming its victim.

'If only your sister were here to see this,' Longstreet muttered into Lady Morgan's ear as Benson breezed past. 'Morgan le Fey, the real terror of the seas!'

Under a newly born starlit night, wounded red by the still-burning fires of naval war, Berry took out the folded letter from his chest pocket. He'd held it close to the carved

doll for months that seemed like an eternity. The only words he'd heard from Gracie since the winter before last, and they were barely even her own, he knew. A scribble of ink lay across the top, the less literate words of his love wishing him well and safety, trickles of black running down the page, made either by her tears, or his own, having read it so many times now, Benson could not remember. The remainder of the letter was in the neater script of Nina, Gracie's closest friend, and brought an acrid taste of bile into Berry's throat. The Benson estate, in chaos upon hearing of Blackwood's death, his father Abel driven mad by grief, his mother Nancy shirking all responsibilities and recourse for the slaves. Wardens allowed to do as they pleased, be it beatings or sickening sexual assaults. The toll of the civil war reaped the most rotten of fruits for those championing their freedom, the actions of the Union. His heart raced, fist closing down hard on his staff, mouth opened wide though no sound came out. For the letter contained what should have been a glimmer of joy, the most precious of treasures, a child in his name. He was both a slayer of men, and the bringer of one. A father. For that fact alone, he could summon no sound.

'I too have a distaste for battle,' Israel Greene said stepping up from behind, pale starlight revealing the shine of sweat on his balding head. He settled next to Benson, loosening the overcoat and leaning on both arms with a groan, both backs turned away from the carnage of the Hampton Road blockade behind. 'You'd

think after all my ancestors' efforts, I would be conditioned, wouldn't you? That is, after all, why we carry these cursed implements.' He transformed his wooden staff into its bladed form, Berry admiring its radiance, as if freshly minted from the forge not a day ago. 'A thousand years the knights of Sir Geraint have sided with the White Dragon faction, under our leader Sir Lancelot, and his beloved Morgan, of course.'

'Sir Lancelot? That's the bloodline of Henry Worthington?' Berry asked.

'Why, yes. My dear boy, did your father tell you nothing of our side? Of the feud that was the Round Table?' Israel's brow furrowed.

'Only the odd ramble. Blackwood and I always thought it nonsense, all of it.'

'Ah, the curse of Sir Bedivere—I'm afraid it strikes when your family is needed the most so often,' Israel tutted. 'The sword of Excalibur was trusted to your line, the honest and noble blood of Sir Bedivere, by King Arthur himself, when his own time came. As such, you are the only one that can find it...possibly even wield it.'

‘That’s what Lady Morgan wants, isn’t it? She said so when we first met. She knew of the voice, the voice I hear so close to the waters...’ Berry tumbled over his own words.

‘The Lady of the Lake, her sister,’ Israel added. ‘An ally of the Red Dragon, the faction your predecessors long supported and rallied to in their desperate need each time Lady Morgan came to control a global power.’

‘But...wait. A global power?’ Benson ticked through his mind the number of possible empires that had spread across the world. ‘Each one? Lady Morgan?’ he puzzled.

‘Older than she appears. Much more than the myths and legends that whisper her name. Forever young, many say, a living goddess say others, mistress of magic and for many, doom,’ Israel declaimed with drama. ‘Believe me, Master Benson, it does not bear thinking about for too long, if you wish to spare your sanity.’

‘My father must have thought that.’ Berry tried to lighten, only to find misery once again at the thought of home. ‘It’s my fault, all of this...I couldn’t protect my little brother, nor my family name. Now, I inherit the madness of my father and am no use to anyone,’ he wept.

Israel offered a reassuring pat on Benson's forearm. 'You do still have what is perhaps the most important card to play, Berry,' he advised.

'What?'

'The card of choice. I, for one, do not buy into the binary belief of Red and White, only the single heart of a man and their desires. Believe me when I say you are not the only one of the twelve remaining descendants of the Round Table to waver over what outcome is best for all. I shall remain loyal to our good Lady Morgan, for she has always protected my family and its offspring, but for you...' He stared down at the crumpled letter in Berry's hand '...you maybe have other aspects to consider.'

Berry fell silent for no more than a second. A rumble across the waters behind broke his brief reverie, a shout from Jeb Stuart laced with panic and disbelief. He looked directly into Israel's eyes. 'My brother, Unionists killed my brother,' he scorned.

'So sure, are you? From what I heard, it was a sharpshooter who claimed Blackwood. For what purpose, when Fort Sumter was lost and the Unionists in retreat? Perhaps you were not the only knight present that day, and the White wished to stir your wrath?' Israel stared straight back, unflinching. Berry's face drained,

skin cold and clammy, teeth grinding, every instinct telling him to strike down all of his immediate company in a fit of despair. A fool he was, and damnation was his punishment.

‘How do I find them? The Red Dragon knights?’ Berry gasped. ‘They fight for the Union?’

‘They do, and the honourable Mr John Brown was one of theirs—the knight of Sir Gawain, and close friend of their leader, Sir Galahad. I wish he had been spared here in Virginia, I truly do, that, and their brothers in arms...the Sacred Band of Thebes. I will let my opposites lecture you about them and their cause—for now, if you choose, I advise you to find Mr Thomas Wentworth Higginson, of the bloodline of Sir Galahad. He made an appearance in Chicago the evening Lincoln was named Republican candidate, but our latest sources suggest he makes his residence in Boston. For how much longer I do not know.’ Greene turned to spot Jeb jogging across the grasses.

‘And if I cannot find him?’ Berry spoke with urgency.

‘He will have friends, just as we in the White Dragon do. Many may not hold a staff, but will know its meaning, I’m sure.’ Israel stopped speaking as Stuart drew closer. ‘Go now.’

Berry managed to utter a few final words of concern as to the fate of Greene having shared what he had, dismissed by the knight of Sir Geraint—secure in the knowledge he would not be made an outcast for long. ‘You’re not going to believe this...’ Jeb Stuart heaved. ‘...the Unionist, they have an ironclad of their own!’

Israel feigned shock, but parted from Benson with a cheeky wink—more than one Knight of the White Dragon spilling secrets on both sides it would seem. ‘Looks as though we are in for a longer day tomorrow than expected, Sir Gareth,’ he said with a sly smile.

‘Where’s Benson off to...?’ Jeb tried to loosen Greene’s restraining hand on his arm.

‘To do exactly what he must for our good Lady Morgan. She’ll understand. Now, let us not keep her waiting for a moment longer,’ Israel closed.

Chapter 21

Boston, Massachusetts

30th March 1862 AD

‘You’re rushing,’ Owen shouted from the far side of the field, a decent fifty metres from Nelson and squinting in the low-hanging sun. The last three blue flame spears cast by Tubman had scorched the grass on the left, right, and in front of where Owen stood—close, but not close enough to cause the youngest Brown to summon his shield in defence. ‘You’ll need to be more accurate than this if you are to fight,’ he yelled.

Nelson huffed back at Samuel Gridley Howe, the knight of Sir Gaheris, pouting his lower lip, face wrinkling with incredulity at the thought of these two Sacred Band warriors seeing action in the war. Passion and loyalty to Shields Green and Anthony Copeland would only get them so far, that he knew, but to stand in their way, to deny them both the chance to fight, felt equally out of place. Harriet Tubman had given up her resistance against her son following General Hunter’s fall from grace at Bull Run. Nelson was now resolute in taking matters into his own hands. His partner had made up his mind many months ago, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson had given the blood of Sir Gawain his

blessing, even if the elder Brown brother retained his reservations. 'Perhaps I may offer a suggestion?' Samuel leant over Nelson's shoulder. 'You said before, when you...well, managed to spear your own partner, you felt something? A ripple, you said?' he ran his finger down the length of Nelson's arm.

'Uh-huh,' Nelson grumbled, desperately trying to recall the sensation he had the evening of the now-infamous chicken coop blaze. Oddly, it was the smell of roasting poultry that remained fixed in his nostrils, and that he always sensed first, that, and the bizarre mixture of both joy and pain Owen displayed while the two limped back to the Johnsons home. He hid a sly smile from Samuel, not wishing to let his composure slip in the presence of a knight. 'People here come across that sort of thing, have they? Your students?'

'In a way, yes. Not simply heightened senses...always felt that was a little misjudged for those burdened by blindness. But some here at Perkins School have mastered the subtle skills of listening to alternative sounds made by others; noises those gifted with sight wouldn't give an ounce of consideration to,' Samuel replied. 'Selective hearing, some might call it.'

'Oh, I know that feeling,' Nelson chirped. 'It's like that if Owen and I fight—fist on fist, that is. The closer he is, the easier it is to punch him. I used to think it was his

breath, but as bad as that can be, sometimes I realised that there was more to his movement. The sound of his feet on the ground, the twist of his muscles, the clicking of joints and bones. Made him an easier target.'

'Hey! My breath is fine. May I remind you, Nelson, that I'm not deaf,' Owen protested from afar.

Samuel moved to Nelson's right side and got him to raise his throwing arm. 'That's good—when in close combat. Such chances might be rare when Confederate soldiers are pointing guns at you both. A blue flame shield might deflect a bullet or two...but the strength of Shields Green is a rarity, even for a pairing of Sacred Band warriors.'

'How many did you know? You and Thomas?' Nelson queried.

'Not many here in the United States. Shields knew a handful more, all of different creeds, I gathered—some former slaves, others the sons of Founding Fathers, all connected in some way to the Sir Galahad and Sir Gawain bloodlines, as you'll no doubt be aware. Becomes difficult to keep track of after so many centuries,' Samuel replied, levering Nelson's arm higher.

‘But always three hundred, right?’

‘Correct. Not always fortunate enough to form pairs as in Ancient Thebes. Stands to reason, given they could have scattered to the four corners of the world by now. Wherever an empire born of the Palladium rises, a Sacred Band member would remain true to their oath to confront and seize it back.’ Samuel took a step away.

‘Done a fine job there so far, haven’t we?’ Nelson tutted. ‘Band of failures.’

‘Your failures are the Red Dragon’s failures, too.’ Samuel gave a pat of reassurance. ‘But you and Owen, you have forged a partnership—and with that comes a strength, a union. Tell me, when you did strike him that time, what was it you felt?’

‘Well, fear, I guess.’

‘Your fear, or his?’

‘Bit of both...mostly his, I’d say. Maybe his first, then mine, later. I don’t know,’ Nelson spat with frustration.

‘Very well.’ Samuel strode over to Owen, brought his staff up close to Brown’s throat, and transformed it from wood to blade, cool steel radiating through Owen’s exposed skin, the blood coursing through his jugular pulsing visibly in his neck. ‘Feel it now?’ he called back to Nelson.

‘You damn well better! knight of Sir Gaheris here might have gone mad!’ Owen rattled, eyes frozen. Nelson remained silent, his gaze fixed just over his partner’s head. Without thinking, he hurled a spear through the air, aim deadly accurate, swatted away by Samuel’s sword moments before its impact on Owen’s chest. The dazzle of blue sparks jolted the young Brown. ‘Jesus!’

‘What did I just do?’ Nelson panicked.

‘Nearly damn well killed me again, that’s what!’ Owen refrained from any compliment in his voice, fear having taken over entirely this time.

‘The spear was heading towards me, Owen, not you,’ Samuel corrected. ‘He targeted your aggressor through sensing your own fear. Quite unique.’

‘Still almost killed me,’ Owen huffed.

‘Not going to be perfect, but a definite improvement,’ Samuel said, shrugging. ‘A common instinct amongst predators in nature, sensing their prey’s fear. Might just have to learn to surrender to it rather than fight it. Contradictory to what you may think of the Sacred Band, I know...but fear can be useful.’

‘Love something more than yourself?’ Nelson clarified. Samuel gave a slight smile, a flash of a fable fixed in his head, the thought of Berry Benson, and his pivotal role in this conflict. The challenge he may face, and the uncertainty of all their futures. He gulped the troublesome thought down, turned his attention to one of his students treading carefully across the school lawn with her thin white cane.

‘Excuse me, Mr Gridley Howe, sir. Mr Wentworth Higginson asked me to give you this.’ The fair-haired student smiled, passing a Braille-punched paper to Samuel.

‘You can read that?’ Owen raised an eyebrow. ‘What does it say?’

Samuel ran his fingers over the dotted bumps. ‘It’s from Gerrit Smith. Believes there to be a manoeuvre coming in Tennessee, the Mississippi River. A target for the Confederates following the stalemate at Hampton

Roads, most likely.’ His fingertips flowed further down. ‘Breckinridge. John Breckinridge is set to be in attendance,’ he concluded.

‘A failed presidential candidate, now turned military general? Who’d have thought that?’ Nelson gave a shake of his head.

‘A presidential candidate who also carries a knight’s bloodline. Sir Tristan, right?’ Owen interjected. ‘We can fight, surely? This is our chance to get revenge—a knight for a knight. For my father, for Shields and Anthony.’ He snatched the paper from Samuel. ‘You and Thomas will come, right?’

Samuel raised his gaze to the top window of the Perkins School. Thomas sat sternly at a desk, monitoring the trio’s activities all afternoon, but not taking a break from his pen. More letters, Samuel knew—Miss Dickinson a small comfort in such dark hours. After his strained relationship with the knight of Sir Galahad of late, Samuel dared not intervene or question, only support his dear friend. ‘As your father told you once, Owen, your will is yours to command. Avenge, if you must, but know that attempting to spare a life can often carry more value than taking one.’ He caught the eye of Thomas, shared a nod of acknowledgement, and returned inside.

‘He and Mr Wentworth Higginson are still not on the best of terms, I take it?’ Nelson queried.

‘They each did what they thought was right. Even I’ve made my peace with that,’ Owen shared. ‘What say you, Mr Bull in a china shop? Ready for a fight, at last?’

Nelson clasped the hand of his partner. ‘To hell with it, let’s go kick a hornet’s nest!’

Chapter 22

Amherst, Massachusetts

4th April 1862 AD

Letter from Emily Dickinson – 4th February 1862

Dear Mr Wentworth Higginson, my friend.

Have my words reached you? I do hope so, for I eagerly await your response and critique. I have had my father seek a copy of the *Atlantic Monthly*, but would not feel too discouraged should you find my works not true, or too paltry to bear the weight of your cause. I will not deny that to write without an audience becomes tiresome, and Carlo, as dear as he is to me, merely drools when I read my verse to him, and is satisfied by a titbit from the table rather than my prose. A solemn thing.

My mother, as careless in her thoughts as she can be, does bid you good health. If you are to seek war, then my family prays for favour and protection wherever you and your friends may go. With such debate in the papers as to which side is advancing, I struggle to determine if it is the North or the South that holds the stronger hand at this time. When we first met in Chicago, I shared with you that

I knew you had secrets. The Beecher Stowe family had a glimmer of knowledge—nothing one could dare claim as true. Though aware of only a grain of what might be, dare I build upon that grain a battle that is beyond all the comprehension of most Americans. A wonder of monstrous proportions that embed themselves in myth and magic. I did consider the Beecher Stowes' time with the preacher Frederick Douglass, a man who once said he had no patriotism, no country—what choice would such a man have then but to create a world of his own? A maddening world of fantasy. Still, why not live in a blameless mystery in such times? If you were to take your place within the 51st Massachusetts Regiment, that company would have earned itself an honourable leader.

I must express my gratitude for the introduction to Eben Jenks Loomis—an educated gentleman and an honest ear for my works when time is a luxury for him. While his wife Mary speaks little, their daughter Mabel is a delight, and has spent many an hour listening to me tease out what tiny pleasures I can in writing. Perhaps even better, the young Loomis entertains my elder brother, Austin, a sibling so wedded to his academia he rarely lifts his eyes from arid textbooks devoted to law and order. A smile from him playing a game of peek-a-boo gives the entire Dickinson household joy. My father presses Austin too much I fear, for legislation may not be the life he would choose—more of a man for the stars. Oh, the green of envy I watched spread across his face when the Loomises brought their close friends the Todd family to

visit last month. Sereno Todd dazzled us with works on navigation that have assisted the Union in its swift response to Confederate naval blockades through nautical navigation, precise location using the map of the night sky. He was particularly interested in what he believes to be the upcoming transit of Venus—an alignment so rare and rich in history, dating back to the most ancient of civilisations and rituals. A bringer of fortune, a good omen. If Sereno's calculations are to be believed, though, it may fall to his son David—the 'little fox' as Mabel likes to call him—to decipher its value. Whatever enigma such a chain of celestial bodies holds, I'll be certain to share with you and Mr Gerrit Smith.

My mind tires now, and Mother is calling, as she so often does. I leave you with my love and devotion, as always. I did hear from Gerrit that the search for your valued friend Berry Benson has yet to bear fruit. May I offer final words of comfort as I watch from my bedroom window a lark perched high in a leaf-stripped tree. It has sung a tune without words all winter, without a moment of hesitation in the gloom. Perhaps, Thomas, hope is a thing with feathers rather than gallant swords, and if it should fly, it will always find its way home.

Think of me, your little wren with bold chestnut-blur hair, and take me as your own hope in your darkest of times.

Your scholar, Emily Dickinson.

Chapter 23

Hardin County, Tennessee

6th April 1862 AD

It looked embarrassing. A tatty strip of red cloth tied around his forehead covered his eyes, serving as salt in open wounds after Nelson was forced to adopt a disguise to slip into the Union ranks undetected. William ‘Bull’ Nelson—a jaunty concept from Owen, who himself had gone to great lengths to conceal his surname from Brown to avoid any connection to his father and the still controversial legacy. *Thomas Wood*—an honourable combination of the knight of Sir Galahad after Wentworth Higginson permitted the pair to do battle, and his own bloodline, traced back to eighteen century England—the foundations of the Georgian city of Bath, Mr John Wood the Elder—suggested by Wentworth Higginson himself, given his own potential lineage to a Mr Ralph Allen and the friendship shared between the two. Their disguises were constantly slipping, Nelson presented as a loyal aide to Owen, humiliating enough, but with the limited support for a black man in a battle, the only credible reason for his attendance. He was to carry the bags, clean the rifles, and ensure fresh coffee was brewed on the stoves for the Fourth and Sixth Divisions under the command of Ulysses S Grant, ego bloated from recent victories at Mill Springs, but seen as pinpricks in the

advance of the Confederacy across the Western Theatre. A stalemate would have been considered a victory, Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Samuel Gridley Howe had advised, that and escape from the conflict with their lives, for the power of the Palladium in the White Dragon's hands would continue to serve its master. All that could be done was to stem the flow of the tide, buy precious time, spare the Earth from the bloodshed.

The Sacred Band pair had failed. Two drawn-out days of bodies blown into fragments, skins skewered by bayonets, throats sliced from high on horseback. The Tennessee River ran red with the blood of both sides. There was some early glory earned by the Confederate strategy, the now revered General Beauregard spreading the Unionists thin across the soggy soils of the Shiloh Natives' lands. For each Confederate that fell to a bullet or bayonet, at least three of Owen's own appeared to crumple—mashed down into the mud, last gasps for air bubbling up as boots mercilessly stamped down on skulls. Owen returned after the first day a shade of himself, Nelson attending his wounds and washing his partner's eyes clear from sweat, soil, and tears. 'It's a massacre,' Owen wept, confessing to his own confusion amidst the furore, firing both shotgun and blue spear in an array of directions, hoping to hit the right target. Everything was a blur: Unionist and Confederate indistinguishable once the war cries were carried across the wind. Senior generals in a sea of contradiction,

seemingly ordering both advance and retreat at the same time. Men were at a loss, aware only of their imminent slaughter.

‘I should be there with you.’ Nelson rubbed Owen’s neck with an unpleasant mix of dirty river water and spit. ‘We’d be stronger if we fought alongside one another. You know that.’

‘It’s carnage, Nelson. We cannot risk it—I won’t let you risk it,’ Owen insisted.

‘But we’ve trained...’

‘Not for this, we haven’t. Believe me, this is unlike anything we could have trained for.’ Owen reached for a tin cup of lukewarm coffee, turning his nose up at its bitter aftertaste.

‘No point in me being here if I cannot fight. You said so yourself—we’re born for this,’ Nelson protested.

‘I’m not sure anyone is born for this, Nelson,’ Owen replied with a sigh. ‘Whatever new hell the White Dragon wished to create in America, they have certainly succeeded. We will need Benson. He’s our only hope.’

Nelson tightened his fists. 'What if he never comes to our aid? Remains loyal to the South? Shields and Anthony...their loss being for nothing? Worse still, brought about and aided by the one knight that is supposed to be our ally?' he sneered. 'No, Owen. I won't simply sit here and...'

'Watch?' Owen tried to tease.

'*Listen*. Every time, all the time, listening. Yells of anguish, of pain, of suffering, and remorse. Each time I pray that it is not you sitting here beneath the rustle of the trees that sing the same sorry song of war. You returned today, my prayers answered. But tomorrow?' Nelson fell to Owen's knees, his hands clasped. 'Is this how we are to be? A Sacred Band partnership that has one half stand back while the other steps forth?'

'I just worry is all...' Owen pulled Nelson up and pressed his forehead against his.

'So did your father, but that didn't stop you at Harpers Ferry, did it? I was denied my chance to be with you then. Do not deny me now,' Nelson rebuffed.

The second day, the sun fought through the steely-mists that capped the sunken road where the pair had camped that night. A heavy bugle horn had woken them both, followed by the thunder of cannon, spheres of hot metal showering from a Confederate battery line, landing only metres in front of Owen and Nelson, their blue shields deflecting the debris. 'Fall back! Now!' Owen barked.

'To where?' Nelson spluttered.

'The orchard we passed. We'll try to lose them there.' Owen tugged on Nelson's sleeve, stumbling across the slippery trenches and new craters from exploding cannonballs. Nelson racked his brains to recall the sweet smell of peaches ripe from the trees, displacing the stench of death. While Owen was leading and winding a safe passage through the stumps of trees, Nelson heard the rich Southern drawl of a Confederate soldier no more than a few metres behind. He dared not slow down or turn about for a clearer sound as he was panting in pursuit of his partner, but the words were unmistakable. '*Where's Breckinridge?*'

'Stay here,' Owen ordered, cowering down behind a fallen peach tree.

‘Owen. I heard the name Breckinridge. Is he here?’
Nelson flapped, keeping his head down as stray bullets splintered the bark.

‘Can’t tell,’ Owen replied, trying to peer across the log. He took his partner’s hand for strength and launched a blue spear into the heart of a Confederate advance. A few men tumbled, none seriously injured. ‘Damn it. Can’t get a clear shot from this position.’

‘Then, let me try,’ Nelson replied. Owen’s face creased for a moment, gave a resigned grunt, and scouted back across the smoke of gunpowder engulfing the line. An imposing figure sat on horseback in officer’s uniform, brazenly riding forward, the steam from his steed’s nostrils puffing loud and white. He turned to Nelson and gave the briefest of descriptions. ‘I can hear him, his horse, he’s getting closer,’ Nelson confirmed. He secured his red blindfold, admitting it aided his focus, channelled blue flame through his fist, and with a sharp twist, launched it from over his shoulder. A scream came from the officer, tossed from the horse. He was thrown back and to the ground, boot caught in a strap, infantry rushing to release him. ‘Did it land?’ Nelson stuttered.

Owen held his hand across his brow. The injured officer muttered to his company and insisted he was fine while remounting. But his tangled leg bled profusely. ‘That’s Johnston,’ he said out loud and in near disbelief.

‘The senior general? What about Breckinridge?’ Nelson asked, now growing jittery at their exposed location.

‘The knight of Sir Tristan must be having issues somewhere behind enemy lines. No other reason for Johnston to take the lead,’ Owen suggested, pulling on Nelson’s sleeve once more. ‘With any luck, your strike might just have dizzied the head of the snake enough to buy Ulysses some time to coordinate a counterattack.’

‘Why do I always feel we are on the retreating foot with this man?’ Nelson caught up with his partner, the two throwing random blue spears behind them without precision or thought. ‘Sure, another report back to President Lincoln of yet another push backwards will go down well in Washington.’ He tripped over a tree root, helped up by Owen.

‘Remember what we’re truly up against, Mr Bull in a china shop,’ Owen lightened as the rage of bullets began to fade into the shadows. The Confederates were slowing, a merciful break. ‘Confronting Breckinridge will be service enough if given the chance.’

The dawn of the third day cast honest light over the extent of the slaughter. A mangle of bodies knitted together like a tapestry made in hell spread unevenly, as far as the tips of the furthest borders of the forests. Battered trees were sticking up like blunt teeth, Beauregard having ordered an immediate retreat upon learning of General Johnston's death, the burden of grief now weighing on his troops. A general, however polished and preened, was still just a man, Owen thought. A Knight of the White Dragon would not be so easily deterred from duty—and the ignominy of returning to his fellow brothers and Lady Morgan Worthington having surrendered ground to the Union was inconceivable. A man once considered a presidential candidate, labelled a failure in peace and war? No. John Breckinridge would remain, even goad his opposing numbers in the Red Dragon forward into a dutiful last stand. And as Owen 'Wood' Brown stepped over one of the many fallen timbers that surrounded a simple log cabin church, the dominant figure of Sir Tristan filled the doorway.

'Knew it was Sacred Band. Had to be. Saw the flames I did, both from afar and up close,' Breckinridge growled, staff at the ready. 'Just the one, is it? No pairing or partner? Lady Morgan and Henry Worthington had warned me, warned all of us White Dragon knights that there would be vengeance for the taking of Shields Green and Anthony Copeland. It was a risk worth taking, be in no doubt—two coons hung. What is it with your kind? Never truly knowing their place, be it creed or

colour. What will it take for you to see the sense in what Lady Morgan wishes for us all? What epic wonders this world could witness?' He stepped out into the drizzling grey rains.

'Wonders for whom, exactly?' Owen wiped the sweat from his brow. 'For you? A pawn of a president? That's all you ever were in this fight, wasn't it? A beacon of hate for the South to rally behind, and you didn't even win that title. Must have eaten you raw.'

Breckinridge scowled at such temerity, staff transformed into gleaming steel, reflecting the bright blue of Owen's shield of fire. 'I know my place, young Band warrior. Question is, do you?' He lunged with a single sweep of his sword. Owen swerved clear and responded with the quick strike of a spear, split in two by Breckinridge. 'What age are you, boy? You appear both uneven and misguided.' He swung again, Owen dodging. 'Alone, perhaps? So few rallying to your cause, even when the venerable knight of Sir Gawain tried to call you all to arms. Weakness in such pitiful faith tied to love—all heart and no head.' A second lunge from Breckinridge went for Owen's throat, missing by a fraction, and leaving a thigh open for a clean swipe from a conjured spear. The knight of Sir Tristan grunted through gritted teeth.

‘I’m not alone,’ Owen shot back. Breckinridge raised his sword to deflect a spear thrown by Nelson from behind, sparks of blue petering out in the rains. The knight tensed, first in shock, and then let out a callous laugh.

‘No, surely not. The legacy of the great Shields Green passed on to the two of you?’ he cackled.

‘Why not?’ Owen joined his partner, stance ready for action, but voice beginning to crack.

‘Ha! Because you can barely talk, and he can barely see, boy.’ Breckinridge seized on the pair’s vulnerabilities. ‘Oh, how desperate Thomas Wentworth Higginson and the line of Sir Galahad must be to put you forward as leaders of the three hundred. Losing John Brown must really have hit home—now who is the pawn?’ The rain splashed off his blade as it parted Nelson and Owen, Tubman sensing the move and immediately raising his shield, beckoning Breckinridge forward. He got in close, close enough to throw punches, catching the knight off guard with two jabs to the waist and one to the jaw. Offended, Breckinridge charged with a swing of his sword, smashing the blue shield protection into fragments. Nelson was thrown hard into a tree trunk. Another swing came, read by Nelson, ducking tidily and hearing the crack of wood from above as the entire tree groaned and began to list. Fresh-scented sap oozed,

washed clean from the rain, Nelson in shock from the strength of the knight's blow.

Owen sprang from behind, spear grazing the shoulder of the knight, but clumsy in its execution. Breckinridge spun on his heel and cut a clean line across Owen's chest, drawing a streak of blood. A pulse of knight light blinded Brown, shield failing to circle his left hand in time, offering Breckinridge the gift of a kick to the mid-riff. Owen felt the hard stacked logs of the cabin meet his back and went to summon a spear in response, his sleeve suddenly pinned to the wood by an expertly thrown knife by Breckinridge. He tried to tug it free, shield preventing one blow from the blade of Sir Tristan, but the second would see his end. 'Very noble attempt, young sir, but not to be.' The tip of the sword was now steady on Owen's chest. His body flooded with fear—just the cue Nelson needed to launch a spear into the back of Breckinridge's knee. The lean knight buckled. Nelson rushed past and wrenched the knife free. The pair locked their fingers together, bold blue shield held by Breckinridge's knight light, but the powered partnership tossed their foe back a metre or two, sliding across the puddles unceremoniously. 'You OK?' Nelson found time to fuss.

Fury spread red across the knight's face, blazing in the ashen mists. The tree behind continued to list, groaning at its roots, the earth beginning to rupture. As

Breckinridge let out a cry of frustration, Owen bellowed in Nelson's ear. 'Aim past him, for the tree!'

'What?' Nelson puzzled.

'Just do it!'

Nelson switched his senses to the dying moans of the tree behind him, summoning the spear in unison with Owen, releasing in sync. Two blue bolts flew past the knight, exploding behind and prompting a mocking smile of relief and disappointment from Breckinridge. 'Still learning, I see. Shame.' The knight toyed. Then Nelson heard the crash of branches and the scream from Breckinridge that followed. Cool waters showered from the damp pine needles, soothing his panic-stricken face. There lingered a sorry groan buried beneath a tomb of broken branches and scattered cones bobbing in pools of rainwater.

'Is he...?' Nelson struggled to articulate. Owen took a tentative step forward, shield still high. The body of John Breckinridge had life, but no will, limbs pinned and skewered by the branches of the fallen tree, the blade a lonely loose staff once more, just out of hand's reach.

‘No. And we shall leave him be,’ Owen replied, taking Nelson’s hand. The words of Samuel Gridley Howe echoed in his head—a life can be spared, and the fear alone will have to suffice.

Chapter 24

Bull Run – Fairfax County, Virginia

28th August 1862 AD

A stall at Shiloh. Jeb Stuart paced back and forth with a lingering slouch. Brigadier General Beauregard forced into retreat, his pace became more of a canter. The Sacred Band...two relative unknowns taking down the knight of Sir Tristan, John Breckinridge. Bombastic fool that he could be at times, he was no easy foe, and yet now bound up in a Confederate hospital bed in the tent a few rows back, bloody bandages raw across arms, legs, and back cut by the fallen tree. Stuart at first mocked his fellow knight's incompetence, having always suggested he served better as a political statement rather than a hardened leader of men into battle. But the knight of Sir Gareth was put firmly in his place by Henry Worthington—how dare he question the authority of Lady Morgan. He turned to the chipped oval mirror, tried to smarten his collar, and polish the golden buttons on his coat, rubbing one so hard it popped clean off. 'Darn it,' he muttered while fumbling beneath the writing desk, a fingernail grazing the stubborn button when Robert Lee's husky voice flowed in.

‘Stuart. Are you decent?’ Lee announced. Jeb rose too quickly, head meeting the heavy oak desk above, a curse word blurted out, then a meek apology. ‘Good. I’ll have you lead the cavalry charge alongside General Jackson here. We’ll take Brawner’s Farm by sundown and keep General King’s troops entertained until Longstreet can arrive. I trust he’s making progress?’

Jeb continued to rub the sore on his forehead, nodded an unsure approval to Lee and Jackson, one eye on the tent entrance in hope Henry Worthington, or better still, Lady Morgan herself, might sweep in with greater certainty. He picked up on Jackson’s piercing stare, unnerving, Stuart being examined from head to toe. ‘What...what should we be expecting from General King?’ he tried to break the air of tension.

‘Little. Man’s already collapsed in a seizure. Might not even show.’ Lee helped himself to the oval mirror and tucked some stray strands of silver hair behind his ears. ‘Even if their men outweigh ours by twenty thousand or so, let them break on the Stonewall Brigade, eh?’ he turned and patted Thomas’s shoulder. ‘Sundown, gentlemen. Be ready.’ He donned his hat and turned, the bitter air returned.

‘Quite the reputation you now have, General Jackson,’ Jeb broke first.

‘My men carry the reputation. I’m merely the figurehead,’ Jackson replied with a wheezy cough, and pointed to the missing button thread on Stuart’s coat. Typical, Jeb thought, Stonewall not missing a trick. ‘There was me thinking you were the finest dressed officer in our ranks...pleasant it is to find a flaw.’ He smiled.

‘I’ll be sure to present to you my tailor in Richmond,’ Jeb defended in jest.

‘Does that same tailor also make walking sticks?’ Jackson picked up the staff of Sir Gareth resting against the desk. ‘Wonderful craftwork...I believe James Longstreet has one similar, does he not?’ he flicked his finger on its roughened surface. Jeb shrugged in deliberate ignorance. ‘Sure he has...never seen him without it, despite not appearing to be crippled in any way.’ Jackson placed the staff back and took the seat behind the desk. ‘At the first battle here at Bull Run, I saw something—a young soldier in our colours—quite magnificent. I swear as God is my witness that he brought down that shack on Spring Hill like a stack of poker cards.’ His boots rested lazily on the desk. ‘A bolt from the Heavens, some said, the Lord himself on our side. What do you think?’

Jeb cast a quizzical look at his fellow general. ‘Why ask me, Jackson?’

‘Because you were there, were you not? Right behind the charge upon that hill? Must have seen something?’ Jackson interlocked his fingers.

‘I saw but a strong, young Confederate soldier at his peak—gallantly pressing forward as if fury alone was enough to drive the enemy from its position. No more,’ Jeb hardened.

Jackson took to his feet. ‘Brilliant white lights,’ he seemed to mutter to himself. ‘As once shone bright in a moment at Harpers Ferry that fateful day—both brave men of Brown and Green in combat I saw. A power, unlike anything I’ve known.’ He spoke to his reflection in the mirror, greasy tar-black hair tidied. ‘Now, reports of fire, the colour of blue, chanted by the men at Shiloh and that damp coal of a man, Breckinridge. Delusional from grief, most thought...but,’ he paused and turned directly to Jeb.

‘Do you have something to say, Stonewall?’ Jeb stood firm, his throat beginning to tighten.

‘Nothing, General Stuart, nothing at all. For all the tales of this war, the cause of the South, there will be many, I’m sure, of gallant and strong young Confederate soldiers making their marks in history.’ Jackson smiled warmly. ‘Come now. We must inspect the line as per General Lee’s request. I tire of standing on this stony ridge for so

long, as do my men.’ He moved past in haste. ‘Oh, be sure not to let slip your staff there. I appear to bring good fortune to our efforts. I trust General Longstreet shall do the same.’ His smile twisted. ‘Perhaps one day, you’ll fashion one for me?’

Jeb collected his staff with a fervent grip. ‘Let’s start with the tailor, shall we, Stonewall Jackson? Please, you first,’ he insisted.

He was no failure. He stood his ground when Beauregard turned and fled, engaged two Sacred Band members—an unexpected conflict that he had risen to, without briefing or warning. ‘Brown,’ Breckinridge croaked from his bed. ‘One was a Brown, I’m sure of it—went by the name of Wood on the field, so I was told, but he was of Brown stock, that same tan hide, freckly skin....’ He wheezed and contorted in frustration.

‘John Wood, the Elder. Yes, he of Sir Gawain’s line. No doubt trying a little subterfuge to avoid any ill will amongst the Unionists following Harpers Ferry.’ Henry Worthington sat by Breckinridge’s side, still inspecting the wounds of Sir Tristan as Lady Morgan mopped his brow. ‘The other, you said, was...*blind*?’

Breckinridge began to summon a defence before Lady Morgan interjected. 'The present line of Sir Gaheris has some experience in such ways, my dear. Most interesting, a Sacred Band member overcoming a limitation and not hindering his partner.' She wrung the cloth dry. 'But only the two, you say, knight of Sir Tristan?' Breckinridge creaked an uncomfortable nod. 'Good...that only two would appear after so many months of war. The execution of Green and Copeland has not rallied any more lions into acts of revenge. Not just yet,' she reassured.

'What happens when the pride loses its alpha male,' Henry concurred, taking the hand of Breckinridge in comfort. 'And you need not explain any further, John, for despite Beauregard's unsavoury retreat in Tennessee, the battle still favours us—far more Unionist soldiers lost, and Ulysses Grant is not winning favour for such brash actions in the North, trust me.'

'But the ironclad...' Breckinridge strained. 'How...?'

'Unfortunate, but not entirely unpredictable. Despite my genius, I cannot control the lips of others...more my wife's gift.' Henry gave a reverent bow to Lady Morgan. 'And Hampton Roads matters not, either, for we still have the greatest power at our command.' The Palladium statue's head protruded from Lady Morgan's pocket. Breckinridge settled, still whispering to himself about the potential

disharmony within the White Dragon knights and room for treason. Israel, Jeb, James—could any within their ranks be secretly fighting two wars across a divisive campaign? Did the simple charge towards Unionist front lines by any one of them admonish them of such treason? What of those not yet with rifle in hand...Wilkes Booth circulating in society and proudly claiming the same title as Jeb, a Knight of the Golden Spur, despite being innocent to this day of bloodshed. Pompous as always, touting from his stage potential plots to kidnap or maim the president in some theatrical manner, delighting Southern sympathisers, but words hollow as his bones.

‘The Benson boy,’ Breckinridge groaned. ‘How goes the knight of Sir Bedivere?’

‘Israel has spoken of his intentions to find Excalibur,’ Henry replied. ‘A journey that will no doubt take him to farther shores.’

‘And is he loyal?’ Breckinridge responded with a wince.

‘We have no reason to doubt the word of Sir Geraint, John.’ Henry was quick to pardon. ‘And should he be successful in his quest, then we have earned the greatest treasure the Red Dragon have ever dare wield, and with it, our victory is assured.’ The knight of Sir Lancelot gave applause to his wife. ‘Just imagine us, John, in

possession of all three precious relics—the Palladium, the Necklace of Harmonia, and the King’s Blade itself. Could any other empire seen on this Earth stand as proudly or spread so profitably? All from here, in the United States of America. The land of the...’ Henry nearly choked on his final words.

‘...*Free*, dearest.’ Lady Morgan’s eye’s shone vibrant green in the moment. ‘Although, as we have spoken, freedom does come at a cost.’ She placed the moist damp cloth back on Breckinridge’s brow, remained lost in her own thoughts, then snapped back from her trance. ‘Let us not cloud the present with hopes of the future, my friends. For even if Berry Benson is now aware of his lineage, he may not carry with him the blade of Excalibur once his journey is complete. He alone in our circle is enough, and all the generations that follow present an opportunity renewed.’ She turned to the tent opening when the cavalry horn sounded. ‘Ah, that might be my cue. Henry dear, please take over my duty to Sir Tristan here. I would prefer a front-row seat for this victory.’ The Palladium was released from her pockets and held close to her chest, the Necklace pulsing red. ‘Longstreet best be on time, unfair to let Jeb and the knights of Sir Gareth take all the glory.’

Chapter 25

Salem, Massachusetts

1st September 1862 AD

Berry Benson stood in front of the impressive porched doorway of the Seven Gables Mansion. It looked gloomy, stone-grey, and sullen, but after several weeks of interrupted travel, moving from train to train along whatever available tracks were free from war, a roof over his head was a treat. A casual word via a fellow traveller in Boston had mentioned the location. The ears of a former slave turned free man who went by the name of John Andrew Jackson pricked up upon hearing of Thomas Wentworth Higginson and his presence in Chicago a few years past. Little more was said by the man, other than the frequented location that was this very place in Salem, although Benson felt the gentleman refrained from further pleasantries due to his rough South Carolina accent. Berry had been trying to disguise it as best he could in the Northern States, but never found the right pitch. He resorted to bluffing and disparaging banter towards Jefferson Davis, which seemed to work for most.

No sooner had his wooden staff got within an inch of the mansion door than the sharp edge of steel cut under his jaw. 'And you are, boy?' demanded a gruff voice. Benson

raised his hands in surrender, his instinct instructing him to cross blades with his opponent, but he held back.

‘Benson, sir,’ Berry replied firmly. The cool razor edge returned to wood. Benson immediately turned to meet the haggard face of Gerrit Smith.

‘I’ll be goddamned.’

The South Carolina tones jarred equally with Franklin Benjamin Sanborn and George Luther Stearns as they hovered their hands over their sidearms. ‘A Southerner that reeks of battle. We’re allowing him in this house?’ Sanborn protested, the Johnson family sitting stoically at their kitchen table as if posing for a portrait, Polly’s eyes flicking towards Nathan’s to prompt an interjection, her husband remaining unobliging.

‘Trust me, Mr Sanborn, Mr Stearns...he is not a true enemy,’ Gerrit attempted to reassure him.

‘Should not your entire company be present to make such a judgement, Mr Smith?’ Frederick Douglass spoke deeply, his suit jacket laid upon a spare chair, blocking out the new face presented. ‘For I too agree, a war-hardened Confederate we welcome here, and for what reason?’ He sat.

‘This is...well, Benson here is, one of us.’ Gerrit played cautiously with his words.

‘As in? White? Black? Somewhere in between?’ Frederick lightened. ‘No, wait, a sympathiser? A Northerner reborn? A Confederate with a newly found moral compass...?’ he continued to tease.

Benson’s head pounded, aching from travel and now weary of company. His patience snapped—staff gleaming to metal with a quick flicker of light. ‘That good enough for you?’ he sneered. Sanborn and Stearns jerked their heads back in unison, hesitant to draw pistols at first, then their reflexes kicking in. The Johnsons simply looked on in bemusement.

‘As I said, he’s one of us.’ Gerrit’s attempt to soothe the tension faltered.

‘A knight of Sir Bedivere, yes. As my father was before me. Not a Confederate, not simply a soldier, but a knight!’ Benson ranted. ‘I seek Thomas Wentworth Higginson of Sir Galahad and the Red Dragon, and something tells me a few amongst you know where I might find him? Hell, if I have been pulled down here to New Bedford for no reason...!’

‘Man is delusional!’ Sanborn quipped to Stearns. ‘We can’t let him near Thomas or Samuel. He’s here on a personal vendetta for the South for our favour to the Union or something akin. He’ll slaughter three of the Secret Six where we stand right now if we permit...’ His mouth dried up as Gerrit went on to reveal his own blade from the staff. ‘What in the world...?’

‘Sanborn, Stearns, my fellow friends Mr and Mrs Johnson. Would you permit Mr Smith and Mr Benson and me a moment?’ Frederick calmly ushered them, still slack-jawed, out of the room. ‘Trust me, all will be fine, Polly, Nathan. No sword fighting will take place in your fine abode.’ He forced a chuckle and slammed the door hard behind them, clunking the lock. He let out a sigh. ‘You know, despite how open my eyes may be to the sights and sounds of this world, I so often feel as blind as Harriet’s son, Nelson.’ He continued to chortle. ‘The tales Wentworth Higginson, Gridley Howe and your good self Mr Smith entertained us with. There were not merely tales, were they?’ Gerrit looked wistfully to the floor, sword returning to wood and prompting Benson to do the same. ‘Ha! Morgan le Fay, and the Lady of the Lake as her sibling and counterpart, surely...? Douglass pressed a fist to his forehead in near rapture. ‘Mr Johnson loved that poem, inspired the surname I now carry proudly. I travelled to Scotland and gazed upon the Walter Scott monument. Had I known of the truth of such stories and musings, I would have stayed longer. Searched and preached for more than basic advocacy against slavery.’

He paused for breath. 'Heavens, I wonder how much the Tubman family knew? Harriet was never a true believer, but Owen and Nelson, Shields Green and Anthony Copeland, their fealty to this Sacred Band that Thomas would speak of, now clear as daylight.'

'The Lady of the Lake?' Benson's interest was piqued. The plaguing voice had been silent of late, a sign perhaps that his path northward had appeased his tormentor. 'Does she...talk?'

'What do you mean?' Gerrit's forehead furrowed.

'I hear a voice sometimes. My father did also, my mother claiming it drove him insane. I hear it from the waters, when rage comes, when my little brother...' Berry's words began to crack, eyes welling. 'Gracie,' he managed to stutter, before slamming both palms against the table in a controlled lash of inner pain.

Smith placed a hand on the boy's forearm and sought the support of Douglass. The Bedivere curse, as so often described, now on full display—a man lost in grief, an entire family blotted by misfortune, and now desperate for absolution. 'Who exactly sent you here, Berry?' Gerrit enquired.

‘Greene. Israel Greene—one of the White Dragon knights, so he told me,’ Benson sniffled in response.

‘That he is, Sir Geraint. A fickle one, it would seem,’ Smith said turning back to Douglass, mind whirring over the ramifications of Israel’s sleight of hand within his own circle, and whether Lady Morgan and Henry Worthington were still ignorant of the move. What else had their rival factions shared through alternate channels? Where did each one of the White Dragon knights’ certain faith in this civil war lie? Or worse, was this errand a trick, a ruse in hope of manipulating the one Red Dragon member into tracing the King’s Blade, only to turn it over to the Worthingtons? Smith spotted a half-empty bottle of whiskey on the top shelf and resorted to drowning out his ambivalence with a healthy swig.

‘Gracie? Who is Gracie?’ Douglass asked. Berry’s forlorn face gave enough away. ‘Ah, and where is she now, this Gracie?’

‘At my home, a slave girl. Mother of my...’ Benson couldn’t bring himself to conclude.

‘Remarkable.’ Frederick bit his bottom lip to disguise a smile when the moment least suited one.

‘Oh, how so?’ Gerrit chugged the few remaining drops from the bottle, punctuated with a burp.

‘Love rules the court, the camp, the grove,’ Douglass said. ‘Another favourite of Walter Scott’s.’ Smith looked both lost and exasperated at the response. ‘Mr Benson, I cannot confess to knowing much about these many legends or their purpose, but the little knowledge I have, I will share with you. For if a voice is calling you to fulfil your destiny, to find the one blade, the King’s Blade—Excalibur, then you must answer.’ Frederick pressed both hands on Berry’s shoulders. ‘The Scottish city of Edinburgh has a granite mound, Arthur’s Seat. I trust you have heard of it?’

Berry’s eyebrows twitched, vague ramblings from his father Abel as he clung to the small doll some evenings, hurling curse words and spinning like a top as though fending off abuse from all sides. The mound was mentioned, he was sure, together with the words he too had come to learn—not just the blade of Excalibur itself, but those of a cycle, rising, and falling. He recited these few words out loud, Smith scoffing in the background and curdling on hearing the infinite chain of empires their ancestors had fought over many centuries. ‘Should I wait? Wait for Mr Wentworth Higginson, the knight of Sir Galahad? Your Red Dragon leader?’ he asked.

‘He would give you his blessing, that I’m sure,’ Frederick noted. ‘Time is very short, not just for us, but for the future of this nation. The knights of Sir Galahad and Sir Geharis are locked in conflict with their White Dragon counterparts, Thomas himself soon to take up arms with a regiment of his own, I hear?’ Douglass agreed with Smith and Gerrit, giving a nod full of sorrow. ‘I believe this to be a journey you must make alone for your family and your heart.’

‘But Scotland? How do I get to Scotland?’ Benson flustered. ‘And even if I do reach this Arthur’s Seat, what then? I assume this is not simply a sword stuck in a rock?’ his arms flung high.

‘Different legend,’ Gerrit snorted.

‘And sadly, neither of us can assist you there, knight of Sir Bedivere. But I advise that what you came to know as the maddened ramblings of your father might conversely come to serve you.’ Douglass tapped the small doll poking out of Benson’s shirt pocket. ‘Not the first time I’ve seen a doll like this. Several on display in Edinburgh, maybe some answers to be found there. A trip across the Atlantic, however, I’m sure between myself and Mr Stearns, we can arrange the voyage.’

Berry soured at the thought of several days surrounded by nothing but sea. 'She's always louder when...when in water.' he confessed.

'Then best listen.' Douglass gave a wink.

Chapter 26

Worcester, Massachusetts

25th September 1862 AD

Letter from Thomas Wentworth Higginson
25th September 1862

Dearest Emily,

As promised, my photograph. Not my finest, I'm sure you'll testify, but possibly the smartest I've looked to you in many a year. The 51st Massachusetts Regiment stands proud and prepared for action. Quite where we will be stationed first remains a mystery—but I'll leave such matters to Ulysses S Grant. There will be skirmishes into the South following our victories in Shiloh and the hold of Antietam, though our casualties I know weigh on the mind of Lincoln, and progress is slow. One might even be forgiven for stating that there has been no progress here, only death. I see a land divided, no matter what outcome presents itself to Unionists or Confederates, and it will be the will of our children that determines the honest future of the United States, if indeed such a title remains true.

It brings me joy that you have found the fond company of both the Loomis and Todd families. I had heard the latter's shrewd interest in the celestial as well as the nautical...centuries old, that particular partnership, of course, but planetary alignments are arguably older still, and my own family has had a story or two to tell of the sway the stars hold in fortune and destiny. Heartening to hear such talents may find their way into the futures of young Mabel Loomis and David Todd—your little fox. But do such astronomical matters interest you, dear Emily? I shed a tear or two that your head is filled with barbed thoughts of death and loneliness of late, in segments of your most recent works. Not the wonder of the heavens or the stars. I know we have been apart for so long now, but do not let our distance become a cause for futility. We spoke of Berry Benson, and Gerrit Smith informed me that the man had surfaced like our own slanted ray of light in shadows of despair. Gerrit, Samuel, and I will hold our breaths as the young Confederate soldier goes the distance to Scotland—deciding then whether he be loyal or foe. I sit here now with the trick of a coin shared with me by Henry Worthington that night, the metaphor of double sides—to dwell in possibility, it can feel like a curse.

Your life, however, is more than a mere loaded gun, Emily. For I may have need of you in a manner most unusual, if fitting for a woman of your talents. You may recall my dear friend, Theodore Parker, stolen from us all too soon in his life. He sired no children, no little foxes of

his own, and hence passed on a prized possession to his friends of the Barrett Browning name. As I now take to arms for our Northern brethren, I must ask the same of you, that should I not return from the jaws of war, you take from me my own staff and pass it on to whomever you see fit to carry the burden of my family name. It is my promise to you, if only that you remember me for what I stood for, and for that of Samuel, Gerrit, Theodore, and laudable rebel John Brown. Even if I do not fall in the field, I fear my strength may leave me at the end of such a brutal and unforgiving struggle, and a gentleman must learn when his time has ebbed. My hope is that I can present to you this gift in person upon the steps of your home in Amherst, cherished Mother and Father present and in good health, my own wish perched high in that tree of which you speak. If not, my hope is in these very words you read now, and my instruction.

Should I make this trail home back to you, then I promise to recount far more than you would have come to hear from the Beecher Stowes or the good servant Frederick Douglass. For now, at least, this remains my letter to you and the world, and my secrets. Please judge them tenderly.

With my love, Thomas Wentworth Higginson.
Captain of the 51st Massachusetts Regiment.

Chapter 27

Edinburgh, Scotland

1st January 1863 AD

Each and every bilious wave had been counted by Berry Benson during his voyage across the Atlantic; at least it felt that way to him as his wobbly sea legs reached the Scottish shores. The young man, used to the solid soil of a plantation, felt most out of place aboard a steamer that was constantly at odds with the ferocious winter ocean. Twelve days at sea, not including the brief stops in Newfoundland and Belfast. The company that joined from the foggy Emerald Isle provided relief as they toyed with Benson's South Carolinian accent, having him repeat words that held different meanings across the ocean. Underwear became pants, corn became maize, and the request for a fag by one stocky, flat-capped Docker when reaching Liverpool caused momentary bemusement across Berry's face. A fellow passenger aboard the train across the border kindly explained the colloquialism while lighting up a cigarette. Berry exited the carriage, wondering just how many times he'd made a fool of himself these past few weeks.

Edinburgh dazzled through dreary clouds in celebration of the New Year — *Hogmanay*, a word that Benson had

heard before from his parents, but as with so many of his father's ramblings, never quite sure of its true origin. The more familiar dulcet tune of Auld Lang Syne reminded him of happier moments from home and cast off any doubts or upsets from the year past, the Benson family huddled around the roaring fireplace, Father Abel and Mother Nancy embracing and waltzing in tight circles until they collapsed in joyful exhaustion. The flames of love, extinguished and fully past and gone, stung Berry's heart, lyrics heard aloud as he passed a lively tavern in the Royal Mile—a swift letter sent to Gracie before he set sail from Boston before fall's end, the written word so often failing him during the darkest of days. How to ask about a son he had never set eyes upon? Not even a name was given by Nina. He was left with only concern for his well-being, an innocent born into a land full of fear and hatred. A child of two worlds, perhaps never accepted by either one. The words of the Lady of the Lake came to him often when his thoughts weighed heavy, but instead of conflict, she brought a strange sense of relief, a newfound purpose and resolution the closer Berry reached his goal. The sage advice from Frederick Douglass, however well versed and intended, had not yet yielded the answers needed. The King's Blade and its location—the severe granite mound of Arthur's Seat casting a dubious shadow over the city. Berry's only possible clue and starting point.

'You lost, laddie?' came a local voice from behind, a haughty woman covered in a woolly tartan shawl and

purple mittens that certainly looked hand-knitted. She placed two tankards of beer down on an outside table by the tavern, a quick wave to her accompanying party, having claimed one of the few seats left. ‘Gets a wee bit mad here come New Year’s, every bar and pub full to the rafters with visitors. Wouldn’t surprise me at all if you couldn’t find yourself.’ She smiled warmly.

‘Thank you, ma’am. I am in fact a little lost...can you...’ Benson got no further before the woman beamed and blushed at the sound of his American accent. She beckoned her friends over with haste, Berry now an attraction as if in a museum. ‘Arthur’s Seat, ma’am—is that there rock, *it?*’ he pointed with his staff.

‘Oh, why of course, laddie. Not to be expected that many Americans would know the difference between peaks around here. Many assume it to be the one that holds up our castle there, but no, not quite so romantic. More of a bother to climb up, though.’ The woman laughed, then immediately turned to a portly gentleman in the party and introduced Benson and his ‘lower South’ American inflexions. The gentleman instantly switched to political topics of the United States and the direction of the war. Benson blotted out the background noise and tried to focus on the gloomy rock protruding up like a carp’s fin. ‘Now, now, Alfred—our guest here is not to be drawn into debates on the terrible civil war across the Atlantic. He wants to know about our country. Arthur’s Seat, in

fact.’ The woman took the opportunity to rub Berry’s ash-grey uniform, complete with a suggestive wink.

‘Ah, doesn’t everyone who visits during Hogmanay. Tell me, sir, you heard the legends?’ the gentleman grinned.

‘Legends?’ Berry’s interest switched back to the couple.

‘Aye. King Arthur and his knights. The leader of Britain slain and buried there in that mount, they say. Course, plenty of other lands across these islands claim the same—Glastonbury and the Isle of Avalon, always a popular one, but here in Scotland, we know the true place. As per *Y’Gododdin*.’ The gentleman splashed the foam from his tankard a little too merrily.

‘Yo-Godo...?’ Berry tried to imitate.

‘Aye, it’s an old poem, lad. About the tales of the one we now call King Arthur. Doubt any American has heard of it,’ the gentleman replied with a sip of beer.

‘I had a friend, well, more of an acquaintance—came here a few years back. Loved poetry, Walter Scott, apparently. Loved legends, too.’ Berry reverted to staring at the mound.

‘Scott? Sounds like a man of good taste. You must see the monument to him. Might have passed it already, in fact...canna’ miss it. A modern marvel of masonry, took a good four years to complete. Small in comparison to your Lady of Liberty standing so proudly over New York, I know, but delicate and detailed, not with the obvious carved beauty of a doll’s face, but look closely enough and...’

‘Doll? There were dolls found up there on the mound? Was that not correct?’ Berry interjected, remembering Frederick Douglass’s lesson. ‘On display here recently?’

The couple looked at one another in surprise. ‘Why, you are very well versed, sir. There were indeed some small statues dug up by local boys here a few decades or so ago, never sure quite of their origin. Little pretty coffins they were, each with a doll inside. How, how many were there, Alfred?’ the woman tugged on his sleeve.

‘Seventeen, I think. Most peculiar, they were. Not the sort of doll a young lassie would play with, that’s for sure. More sinister...like a tribute or sacrifice. I still think those two heartless murderers, Burke and Hare, had something to do with it, bloody body snatchers of the most heinous kind!’ Alfred growled.

‘Did they look like this?’ Berry produced the small doll from his inside pocket.

‘Well...can’t quite remember their faces, but Burke might have done, yes.’ Alfred squinted his eyes and dug into his tweed knapsack for some spectacles.

‘He means the dolls, you arsel!’ the woman snorted. ‘And yes...yes, laddie, they did, I believe. How did you come across this one? Is it a replica? Oh...in your part of the United States, are they commonplace? We’ve heard about your bizarre cults and followings, haven’t we Alfred. The sailors come back from the high seas of the British Caribbean with talk of spells and witchcraft, and Heaven knows what. Voodoo, they call it, or something like that. I wonder if it’s just the jolly belly washer talking but still...’ The woman brought a hand across her cheek while raising a critical eyebrow at Alfred’s deteriorating state. ‘Boys will be boys. All yarns and fairytales.’

‘Quite true, ma’am. Quite true.’ Berry cracked a smile.

A few lone souls jeered from atop the mound, proclaiming to the city that 1863 was rightfully theirs and that all past ills should be forgotten. One stumbled over

his own feet, caught underarm by Berry before he tumbled the long way down the sheer side of Arthur's Seat. 'Why, thank ye, laddie!' he blurted out. 'Strong arm ya' got there, lad. You an officer, a police officer?' his tongue tripped. Relief spread from ear to ear when Berry said tourist, sparing him a night in the cells for acts of debauchery. 'You take care now, laddie, you hear. Many a loose rock.'

'Indeed, sir.' Benson nodded, the breeze carrying the soft voice of his familiar lady. *The King's Blade—by whose hand loses all*. Clear as cut crystal now. He moved to the summit, sods of soaked grass squelching beneath his boots. The breeze cooled, died out entirely—the sound of one known lady was replaced with another, as the unmistakable words of Gracie rose up from deep within the earth. 'Gracie? Is that...?' Berry crouched, spread to all fours, picking at the grasses and stones. Gracie's voice came through stronger, Berry stricken with the implausible thought of his love entombed somewhere in the mound. It was illogical, impossible, but he clawed at the earth in a fit of desperation and madness. The doll fell from his pocket, landing between his knees. 'Gracie!' he shouted out in all directions, then the ground beneath him parted. He was swallowed up and fell for no more than a second, landing on firm, wet stone. He rubbed the ache from his shoulder and tried to adjust his sight to the darkness ahead, the obsidian stairway shimmering with a faint luminance. Gracie's voice faded away, the Lady of the Lake

resuming her tranquil tease, growing louder with each step. The stairwell spread out into a cavern, boulders high above tied by swollen tree roots despite the barren landscape atop. Berry took a tentative few steps forward, then leapt back in fright as pebbles trickled from the edge of a ravine down into the murky depths below. A thin stream of water collected them, Benson carefully crawling to the tip of the edge to inspect the distance. Several metres lay ahead of him, and no means to cross.

‘A leap of faith? Is that what this is?’ Berry called out to himself, hoping the Lady of the Lake would reply. ‘Aww, hell. You can’t be serious.’ He strode back and forth along the ravine edge, muttering lukewarm words of confidence and calculation. Too far to jump—wouldn’t make it, he concluded.

‘You’re home,’ the Lady finally spoke, voice carried on a wave of mist that covered Berry’s boots. ‘But is this your time, Son of Sir Bedivere?’ It was the first time the Lady of the Lake had asked such a direct and coherent question of Benson.

‘My...time? What do you mean?’ Berry’s eyes darted in all directions. ‘Show yourself!’ he demanded. ‘You

tormented my father, now you torment me too—show yourself, I say!’ his wooden staff shone into steel.

‘Must you see something to believe it is there?’ the Lady of the Lake cooed. ‘For that will not suffice, not here, Son of Sir Bedivere.’ The mist swept down into the ravine, forming a film between its sides and obscuring its depths. ‘So many seek glory, but glory is not true power.’

‘And what is?’ Berry held his sword to attention.

‘Sacrifice.’

‘Have I not had my share?’ Berry snapped back, still uncertain of his mystical companion’s source. He looked beyond the ravine; a single shaft of light shone upon a lone tree, a thorn of some sorts, decked in white blossom. A diamond in the dark. ‘What is that?’ he asked out loud.

‘If you speak honestly, then you may see it for yourself,’ The Lady of the Lake chilled; a near-corporeal presence tingled down Benson’s neck. He wanted to turn and face her, but refrained. The thorn remained the centre of his focus, the mists swirling into a reflection of a dream. Blackwood’s face appeared like a mirror held up to Berry’s mind, disappearing as quickly as it arrived. A

bullet aimed for the elder brother, finding the younger, by accident? Or on purpose? Berry was never sure, the twisted words of a White Dragon knight still resonating — *it was meant for you*. Blackwood's passing was, true enough, a sacrifice to Berry, intended or not, and with that comfort, he stepped forward, his footing finding not hollow mists, but firm ground once more. The ravine was now behind, not in front. The pastel white blossoms of the thorn scattered around a sprig that stuck out high from between its bulging roots. Clean as morning dew, newly sprouted.

Benson risked a hand, grazed the sprig lightly. A flash of Gracie stunned him back, rich-coffee eyes, and cocoa skin. The gentle cry of a baby boy, soothed by her smile. Berry's eyes welled with tears, and he crumpled to his knees. 'What am I doing here? Please...?' he begged.

*'Those that know love, but feel its true pain,
Shall watch their empire be born once again.
Those who are cursed, but destined to lead,
Will first taste desire, followed by greed.
So goes the circle, the rise and the fall,
Spare the King's Blade, by whose hand loses all.'*

Two smooth palms lay on Berry's back in comfort. He gathered all the strength he could muster to stand, but was found wanting. His grief was still overbearing,

chaining him to the floor. 'You ask too much, m'lady. What is it I shall lose? My dearest love? My family? My son?' he feebly croaked.

'Nothing you and your ancestors have not already lost, Sir Bedivere,' The Lady of the Lake spoke. 'Your sacrifice has brought you this far, but the King's Blade will not bring itself forth to one that seeks only its power.'

'Like...your sister?' Berry had a brief moment of clarity. 'Lady Morgan Worthington? Morgan le Fay?' he twisted around, but saw no one.

'She is but the circle, as we all are, in our own way,' The Lady of the Lake announced in an echo around the chamber. 'She seeks the adoration of others, to be worshipped as we both were, once, but cannot give back what she craves to receive.'

'But ...she wants the sword. Excalibur. She said so to me. She...' Berry stuttered, wiping tears from his cheeks. 'The empires of the world, Israel Greene said to me, her power. How can I stop her? She is too strong, too powerful for all us knights, surely?'

'The power she wields is part of three: a rise and a fall she owns, but not what weaves itself in between,' The

Lady's voice focused as if coming from the thorn tree itself. 'So many see only the sunrise and sunset, not the beauty of the day itself, struck blind. Just as you, Sir Bedivere, only see one side of that ravine, and not the other - finding what lies between is how you will cross,' she riddled.

Berry scratched his head, drew a deep and hearty breath, reached out for the sprig once again. Gracie's features flashed before him as before, but he sought the pleasures of them being there, not the fear of losing them. Gracie's glistening smile lingered as his grip tightened around the sprig, Berry's eyes pooling. In an instant, the small root was plucked from the thorn, and all was plunged into darkness.

A flash of bold white bolted from Berry's hand, the shortened sprig now a slim sliver of steel, glowing like no other blade he had ever witnessed. Heat ran through his arm and into his chest, his heart racing, beating harder and harder. He screwed his eyes shut and tried to calm the beating drum inside. The heat receded, flowing back through to Excalibur, and the shortened sprig reformed into a polished small staff, almost sharp to the tip. He emptied his lungs, pale blossoms raining all around, the thorn suddenly stripped bare. He instinctively snapped a low-hanging branch clean and put it in the pocket where he had kept his doll. He could not explain why.

‘No empire upon this Earth may stand in the way of love, Sir Bedivere,’ the Lady of the Lake whispered. ‘What binds us is so small and so easily lost, yet we see it on each day of our journey, and it will never truly be conquered. Remember this, and may your mind be at peace knowing that to save one heart is glory enough.’

Chapter 28

Boston, Massachusetts

23rd May 1863 AD

‘This will hit ‘em hard.’ Gerrit Smith tossed the front page of the *Harper’s Weekly* onto Samuel’s desk, hobbling back to a squeaking leather armchair with the aid of his staff, each step a chore. ‘So much for Stonewall, eh? One head of a snake lobbed off!’ he wheezed, helping himself to Samuel’s whiskey decanter.

‘Not quite, Sir Bors.’ Samuel picked the sides of the paper, screwing up both eyes and trying to readjust his sight. He gave a frustrated sigh.

‘Need to learn to read the written word again, Sir Gaheris. Not just all those little bumps on paper that your students submit,’ Gerrit belched.

‘Braille. It’s called Braille.’ Owen Brown confidently strode into Samuel’s study, snatched the paper away, and studied it closely. ‘Pneumonia, it says, caught just days after Chancellorsville.’ His voice ran surprisingly soft, a moment of chance success for the Union spoilt by having a skilled general taken in the least military of ways. A man destined to die on the battlefield, instead

struck down by nature and passing away on a hospital bed. The feeling sat uncomfortably, as it would for any Sacred Band warrior. Robbed of a glorious death. It was only when prompted to read on by Smith that the actual cause of death became clear—a wound to the arm, an immediate amputation. As morbid as the subject was, Stonewall Jackson had made his stand, and would undoubtedly be remembered despite any lost cause he followed. The second paragraph in the obituary Owen read through twice, then a third time—a simple statement of commendation from a fellow Confederate soldier closest to the infamous general at the time of his mortal wounding. *Old Blue Light's eyes shone brighter than ever, that much God Almighty would have sworn.* Highly romanticised without question, but question it Owen did...*bright blue eyes.* He vividly remembered the gallop of horses down to Harpers Ferry four years ago, Robert Lee out in front, Thomas Jackson in tow with a swarm of Marines set to quash his father's rebellion. From the window, he snatched a glimpse of Jackson's face, a steely glare, cold as a fresh morning winter frost, implacable on his steed even when the hostility of the situation rose. When his father was finally apprehended alongside Shields Green and Anthony Copeland, shepherded away by the knights of Sir Gareth and Sir Geraint, it was Jackson who permitted John Brown to nobly hand over his staff to Owen, his tearful son having fought his way to the front of the crowds that roared words of shame and disgrace upon the subdued rebels. A Sacred Band member turning against his own? Perhaps it wouldn't have been the first time throughout

the ages, Alexander the Great and his lover Hephaestion bearing more than the Necklace of Harmonia upon the fields of Chaeronea—never empirically proven, but logical, should their fabled Well of Ares have been shared innocently and unknowingly with such noble guests of Thebes. The bright blue eyes maybe hinted not at Stonewall himself, but at the briefest stare of another, the death of Shields Green prompting more Sacred Band warriors to come forward, but leaderless, reduced to stabbing wildly in the dark. Some methods have their moments of fortune, Owen recalled, Nelson’s rash actions bringing down Commander Johnston and forcing both General Beauregard and his unwilling underling John Breckinridge, knight of Sir Tristan, into retreat. Gridley Howe had noted more of their kind, the Sacred Band’s infamous three hundred. Brown had to wonder just how many had found their way into this conflict, scared to speak out, only to have their hand forced by the crushing tides of the Confederate advance.

‘The battle of Chancellorsville was still a defeat, Gerrit.’ Thomas Wentworth Higginson soured any mood of elation, guiding Nelson Tubman through the doorframe into Owen’s arms. ‘And a key strategic one for the Confederates at that. General Robert Lee and Jefferson Davis won’t hesitate to mount a second incursion into the North now—during the Maryland Campaign, the Union had numbers of its side, the Battle of Antietam a stalemate as a result. But despite the White Dragon knights making all the usual and foreseen moves, their

queen was not present. This time...?’ he slouched against Samuel’s desk, messing up his school papers, Gridley Howe shooing him off with his staff.

‘Lady Morgan will make a more significant play this time, you think?’ Nelson asked.

‘Having heard some of the reports from the second Bull Run battle—James Longstreet covering what would have been inexplicably difficult terrain with relative ease, Jeb Stuart launching a final surprise cavalry charge that could have nearly doubled Union losses in the narrows of the Creek that should have near been impossible to coordinate, a stone bridge many decades old collapsing while our men retreat—I’d say the queen has made a move,’ Thomas sparked. ‘This time, she’ll want centre stage, not leaving command to her knights alone, not after Breckinridge.’ He gave a nod of acknowledgement to Brown and Tubman before slumping into the leather armchair opposite Smith. ‘Enough blood has been shed now on both sides, and should Berry Benson be bitter as damn hell by now, then why would the knight of Sir Bedivere look to side with us?’ he scrubbed his face hard with his hands.

‘That’s not how Benson sounded. Not to us.’ Smith leant across and patted his fellow knight on the head. ‘He was sincere, Thomas. There’s more at stake with him and the

Benson family than we realise now. He may see this through.'

'Tricks. The White Dragon are plentiful, old friend.'
Thomas ran the double-sided dime of Henry Worthington across his knuckles, tossing it up before snatching it in mid-air and pocketing it. 'How goes Frederick Douglass? Has he made any political ground with Lincoln in freeing his people?'

'The Emancipation Declaration is an honourable first step, gives the Union the arms of those born into slavery from the Confederate South, at least, but he still dithers on those of colour in the North,' Gerrit replied. 'He'll keep trying—and certain as the sky, the threat of another invasion North will give Frederick the firepower he needs.'

'If it's not too late.' Thomas slouched back, head tilted up, mournfully gazing at the ceiling. His friends remained silent, exchanging looks as if pleading for any words of encouragement to the knight of Sir Galahad, leader of the Red Dragon, now appearing to be void of gumption and spirit. Thomas pulled the double-sided dime back out from his pocket, toyed with it further while distracted by the song of a lark through the window. A faint smile cracked his face. 'Hope is a thing with feathers,' he muttered to himself. His company continued to exchange looks. 'My apologies, gentlemen, I do not mean to hang

so heavy. Many thoughts on my mind, most I struggle to articulate. Please, Gerrit, keep us all informed on the latest from Frederick Douglass and his efforts...you too with your mother, Nelson. The Tubman family name adds credibility to Douglass's cause for the men of colour. The hour has come for all who believe in a free America to make a stand.' He marched over to the Sacred Band pairing. 'Let us pray that more of your people hear our rallying call, in the name of Shields and Anthony—might remain our best chance against the White Dragon and the power of the Palladium.' He gripped both their shoulders.

'And Benson? Should Berry return with Excalibur, but not of favourable persuasion?' Samuel asked.

'Then we will all, in our own way, make a stand,' Thomas responded stoically.

'Thomas, you know my loyalty, and how my mind has worked over these years to try and keep our people safe. Not always to mutual accord, I know. But unlike John Brown and the knights of Sir Gawain, I cannot put my students, this institute I've helped build, in harm's way throughout this war. The children here have lost enough, sadly none with the blessed gifts of Nelson here, and as such, I must make my stand here. In study and education, not on the battlefield.' Samuel rose from his

chair, a visible tightness forming in his throat as he spoke. 'I trust you understand, knight of Sir Galahad?'

'I do, Sir Geharis, old friend. And I would have it no other way. Indeed, the most courageous knight of Sir Bors here should heed the same caution and restraint ahead of imminent acts of war, for age is not an ally to any of us, and just as John Brown passed his legacy to John Brown Junior, we should all prepare for whatever future our kin are set to inherit. The cultural war for the United States will be far from over, I very much fear.' Thomas lifted his wooden staff, pointing to the framed map of the state lines hung above the mantle place.

'So...you, Thomas? What will you do? Go fight Lady Morgan and her White Dragon knights alone?' Gerrit grumbled, inching closer to the edge of his seat, only to wince, as worn hip and knee joints flared up once more. 'You know Longstreet and Stuart will be by her side, hell, maybe even hoity-toity husband Henry...still a worthy opponent nearing my well-weathered age. Israel Greene, granted quiet of late, won't likely miss any finale, and as for the rat, Wilkes Booth...!'

'We put our faith in Sir Bedivere, Gerrit. I have never had a reason to doubt your instinct, however soaked in spirits it may be.' Thomas gave a sly wink. 'Besides, I am not alone.' He pointed to Owen and Nelson. 'I walk with lions, do I not?'

‘Two. Two lions,’ Gerrit tutted.

‘Three hundred of us were brought down by the gallantry of two, history suggests.’ Nelson pushed forward to Thomas’s side. ‘People have underestimated me my whole life; that was until the people in this room taught so many otherwise. To think less of someone is a weakness on its own, and leaves those who believe it far more vulnerable. Exposed to the element of...surprise.’

Owen joined his partner, clasping his hand and brushing his cheek. ‘If this young country of ours has proven anything, it is certainly full of surprises.’

She really was quite beautiful. Berry Benson took the time to study closely the satin-smooth face of Lady Liberty as his ship chuffed its way into New York harbour. He took out his penknife from his boot and began to carve away at the thorn tree bark he’d collected, taking sips of inspiration from the revered statue as he sailed past. The bulbous clouds blossomed pink in the morning sun, a potent reminder of the bloom that danced down from the tree—the spring bound tightly to Benson’s waist by his uniform belt seemingly bringing a most unexpected tranquillity to the Atlantic Ocean. Its waters perhaps no longer struck terror into the young

man's heart, as they once did, more a sense of peace and duty walking a destined path. The voice of the Lady of the Lake was not entirely silent, however, her words remaining, but more like a pleasant tune whistled on a breeze, not the maleficent wail of a banshee that brought such sickness to his father. Its lingering still served a purpose, Benson knew, as the tow ropes were thrown to the dock hands and the ship's engines heaved to a stop. A crowd of faces appeared dry side, some waving brightly coloured handkerchiefs and fancies as passengers disembarked, arms wrapped around loved ones returning from the European continent after many months. Berry's thoughts turned to Gracie, and a letter hastily posted back to the Benson estate home in Hamburg a day before his voyage back to America. Had it reached her in time? Had his instruction to meet him here in New York on this day made it through amidst all the carnage and chaos of civil war. Was she even able to travel? Were she and his son even...?' the final thought, too crushing to complete.

An African American hurried past Berry on the departing plank, straight into the arms of three others. Cheers and tears of delight dripped from all eyes, words of relief spoken in accents not dissimilar to Benson's own, explaining how Lincoln's declaration had gifted free will to the South in a time of unprecedented crisis. For the first time, generations of former slaves could be reunited without prejudice with those who had long since fled out of desperation to the North or indeed, beyond. Now

reunited as true equals, some even proudly sporting military attire. The sight fanned a flicker of hope deep inside Berry, the notion that many born into lives of incarceration had made it this far...surely, surely Gracie could have...?' His reverie was interrupted by a tap on his shoulder. An older woman, shawled, and a little dishevelled, placed a crinkly-skinned hand on his.

'Excuse me, dear, but a young lady over there believes she knows you. Odd, I know, she is black as coal, but...' the woman croaked, but Berry had already bolted for the fringes of the crowd, shouting Gracie's name. He was answered with his own, Gracie's beaming smile piercing through, and before the couple had even realised the space between them had evaporated, their lips were pressed firmly upon one another's. There were odd looks from the audience close by, a uniformed Confederate enamoured of a young black woman, a few quips heard from the ignorant, drowned by the whoops and applause from several others.

'I wasn't sure. Whether my letter...' Berry prised his mouth from Gracie's for breath. She slid the folded parchment between them.

'Arrived not a week ago. Nina translated for me, I did understand, but...' Her hazel eyes drooped down.

‘What?’ Benson asked.

‘Nina. Since Blackwood’s death and your prolonged absence, the Benson estate has spiralled into despair. Your father and mother cannot cope, Abel Benson refusing to take control of the plantation, locking himself away while the wardens run riot. Nina...’ she seized up. ‘This war, it has brought out the worst in every one of us—the wardens despise us slaves. They saw Nina trying to protect as she always has done, but just like the young boy before, the wardens, they punish hard, so hard that she...’ Her face broke with tears. ‘I ran as you instructed the very next day, along with...’ She stepped to the side, and a boy barely the height of Berry’s knees stepped forward. His eyes a richer hazel-brown than his mother’s, if that were possible, hair springy and taut, but slightly fairer, his skin tan, not like the soil but the sand. He stood respectfully at his mother’s side, fixated on the gentleman who now stood before him. ‘Malakhi, meet Berry, Berry Benson. Remember? The man I told you about, the knight in shining armour?’ she forced a smile through her grief.

‘Hello, young man.’ Berry’s whole body shook as he offered his hand. For all the words that could have been spoken, he would have begged to have just one come to his tongue at that moment. Malakhi politely took his father’s hand before pointing to his wooden staff.

‘Sword?’ he mumbled, while checking with his mother. Gracie confirmed, lifting him up and wrapping his legs in a beige blanket.

‘He don’t speak all so good, sir. Will take a while.’ Gracie mocked a little.

‘It’ll come soon enough,’ Berry’s words returned. ‘And why yes, young sir, this is a sword, should you want it to be.’ He quickly chortled with a juvenile slant, which sounded phoney in his head. ‘But that will always be your choice, y’hear?’ he switched to a warm but serious tone.

‘What’s that?’ Malakhi spotted the small sprig poking out from Berry’s belt. ‘Stick?’ He again sought approval from Gracie.

‘What if I told you, that too was a sword? Would you believe me?’ Berry pinched Malakhi’s dimple, bringing a toothy grin, but a shake of the head at such a thought. ‘No, nor would I have at first, but trust me, it too is a sword. A very strong one, but looks can be deceiving.’ Malakhi’s eyes grew wide with wonder.

‘You’ll be needing rest, Berry,’ Gracie insisted. ‘Come now. A group of us have taken refuge just outside the

city. We cannot stay there long, but you can at least get food and a bed until we sort out more permanent quarters. I know many have found both shelter and work in white family households and...'

'How goes the war down South?' Benson interjected. 'What news?'

'Berry, darlin'. No. You cannot ask us to travel back South, your home is all but gone. No place for us there; maybe not even you any more,' Gracie begged. Berry looked over her shoulder at a torn poster plastered crudely on the brick wall behind. Bold black print—*Men of Colour. To arms! To arms! Now or never!*—its origin a name that triggered an urgency in Benson.

'Not South, Gracie. *North*. To Boston—and the good man Frederick Douglass.'

Chapter 29

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

1st July 1863 AD

Nearly eighty-seven years to the day, Lady Morgan calculated. Eighty-seven years since she stood in the bustling halls of Westminster, London—a spectator of the madness spreading from crown to common folk. Exactly how she always wanted to be seen, a mere spectator, a guise for the puppeteer for the acts of men. Each greedy grasp a tribute to her; every envious look another platform for her to rise higher than any empire the Palladium of Pallas Athena would grant. Then, once stretched to breaking point and yet so close to the summit, she would wash all hope away, like castles built of sand at odds with the tide. Men who believed their forges would fire forever, but only she would persevere—Morgan le Fay, sorceress of the Earth, turned mistress of misfortune. So many other deities worshipped from afar, but never bold enough to intervene even when their time had come. There should be no such time, not for their kind—and the enduring gifts from the Ancients were proof enough of this, she thought. A mackerel-mottled sky shone its first light on the plains of Gettysburg, their mellow green peppered with encampments of Union and Confederate soldiers seeming no more than a metre apart when seen from

Oak Hill behind the latters' line. A counterforce to her desires, a decent thirty thousand troops stronger by James Longstreet and Jeb Stuart's assessments, but it mattered not. She had executed her plan to perfection—a river of blood gushing from North to South stemming from latent hate of one another, perceived rights versus wrongs, freedoms against futures. This was arguably the greatest land she had ever set foot upon, an indomitable people filled with both pride and lust for profit. Such a potent mix worthy of the title *superpower*...and if two behemoths born of the same substance were then forced into war, once the victor emerged from the ashes that phoenix would soar higher than any other—and she would be its commander.

'7.00 am,' Jeb Stuart announced from behind. Lady Morgan turned, the red jewel of her necklace sparkling lightly in the first rays of dawn. 'General Lee has ordered an advance on the Union lines at 7.00 am, a little under an hour, m'lady.' The knight of Sir Gareth checked his watch. 'General Ewell appears the most optimistic and practical of all the underling generals here, whereas General Rodes over there I know little of, m'lady, but came highly recommended by Stonewall Jackson after Chancellorsville so you should be safe with him...' He gave a slighted muted cough, suddenly aware of exactly whom he was addressing—the constant bickering of battle-hardened generals over these past few years starting to impress upon the White Dragon knight a

didactic quality. He stared down at his boots. ‘Apologies, m’lady, you are of course aware of the situation.’

‘No need to sound so contrite, Sir Gareth,’ Lady Morgan brushed aside. ‘Proceed as any senior generals have requested, and be sure to tell the same to Sir Palamedes. I will be quite fine here.’

‘What of your husband, m’lady? Should Henry Worthington be here to witness your great triumph?’ Jeb boasted. ‘Surely the knight of Sir Lancelot should...’

‘My husband is right where he needs to be, Jeb. Worry not. For when the Confederates turn this war, we shall need a diplomatic hand in negotiations for the presidency, and ears in Washington. Henry has proven quite the persuader of late—the charm of a businessman, not a belligerent. Lincoln will see sense, as will Jefferson Davis—there cannot be two kings.’ Lady Morgan requested the aid of Jeb’s binoculars to scout the distant Union lines.

‘But a queen...?’ Jeb teased. Lady Morgan turned a slight smile on him before unveiling the Palladium from her pocket. ‘What of Israel Greene? You chose not to summon him?’ A hint of suspicion clouded Jeb’s words. Lady Morgan gave a light sigh. ‘Do you still trust him?’

‘I’ve never been one for absolute trust, Sir Gareth,’ Lady Morgan confessed. ‘But one must start somewhere, even those blessed with my powers. Let the knight of Sir Geraint engage elsewhere in this war for now...it will help soothe the ills that have arisen between him and Longstreet of late. Gettysburg might be the defining battle of this civil war, but it will by no means be the last. I’m convinced our opposites over there in the Union flanks will be of a like mind.’

Jeb Stuart nodded, unsure whether to press further the underlying pinch he felt concerning a potential plot of treason against the White Dragon’s motive. Two ironclad ships at Hampton Roads, a Sacred Band duo part of an outflanking manoeuvre that almost cost them the blade of Sir Tristan at Shiloh, a suspicious and uncharacteristically silent Jonathan Wilkes Booth of Sir Lamorak, and finally, the mystical wanderings of Berry Benson—the knight of Sir Bedivere—yet to fully reveal his colours as friend or foe. Hope is a chance, Jeb weighed heavily, and neither he nor Longstreet cared much for chance after all the two had endured. ‘I’ve seen only a trace as far as the Red Dragon knights are concerned, m’lady,’ Stuart offered. ‘A word or two that Thomas Wentworth Higginson has taken control over the 51st Massachusetts Regiment that broke some ground in Goldsboro back in December last, but hardly a statement of intent by Sir Galahad.’

‘He’ll be here. Of that much, I am certain,’ Lady Morgan replied sternly. ‘As will the Sacred Band partnership that Breckinridge spoke of...for neither will want to let history pass them by, be it in the favour or not.’

‘If James Longstreet and I are committed to the battle, good Lady Morgan, then neither of us will be able to offer you further protection,’ Jeb respectfully reminded.

‘Indeed, I would have it no other way, Sir Gareth,’ came the confident sorceress’s response. ‘Let any knight or Sacred Band warrior approach me, should they dare, for it would offer them the opportunity to witness in the flesh my resolve. Now, put your blade to good use, Sir Gareth.’

It was a harvest of death come nightfall. Thomas Wentworth Higginson staggered with laboured breath up Cemetery Ridge, each foot a lump of lead barely lifted over the Union bodies scattered like felled lumber, pairs of eyes cloaked in blood staring directly at him each step he took over them. A sickening scent of iron and gunpowder filled every inhalation. He retched several times, doubling over and clutching his innards. Stray cannonballs pounded the field around him. He brought his blade forth from his staff and surrounded himself with

a brief flash of knight light. Pursuing Confederates backed away, dazzled, only to snap back to their senses and cry with gritted determination. One came close enough for a bayonet, stabbing wildly at Thomas's torso, the knight retaliating with an equally wild swipe of his sword, splintering the rifle at its centre and with it allowing a clean strike to the soldier's belly. His adversary's mouth foamed red, bubbling through white teeth. Thomas immediately closed his eyes to shield him from such final, agonising moments, drawing his blade free from the flesh. Two more Confederates rallied, letting loose bullets, comfortably deflected with a second knight light that shone briefly but brightly. A sweep of the blade's edge to one's thigh, then another to the hip of the second, showed mercy, even if the two soldiers' pained faces begged otherwise.

He continued to stagger higher up the hill, shades of green grass moving in peculiar fashions as if lit up by unnatural light. Fellow Unionist soldiers shouted in complaint over demons and devils at play, the ground shifting around them like quicksand. A makeshift reprieve via the unfinished railroad cutting, heading back to Gettysburg town, produced a warning bellow from the knight of Sir Galahad, the rubble on each side of the slit glowing vivid green and enveloping the retreating Unionists. This was the work of a foe neither side had ever experienced, with confusion and panic mounting on both sides. Lady Morgan was close, as was the Palladium that had sparked this war, but just how close

remained a mystery. Thomas frantically panned the horizon for a glimpse of the sorceress, even of one of her acolytes—James Longstreet, Jeb Stuart, Israel Greene. No obvious signs of Arthurian knightly prowess had appeared just yet. Also disheartening was the absence of Sacred Band blue fire, as both Owen Brown and Nelson Tubman were held by Unionist General Hancock to the south of the town, lying in wait of Longstreet's forces. The gentle glimmer of encampment torches lit up the base of the hill in warming amber, its stillness contrasting with the carnage atop. Thomas wanted to yell a lungful of fury to scold such passiveness from so-named Hancock the Superb, a stance that would embolden any Sacred Band fighter amongst his ranks. His energy had drained though; an explosion of soil erupted from a cannon shell to his side and sent the knight spinning down. The world was a whirl, a myriad of colours indiscernible from one another. Through the fog of fear he tried to stand, blade nearly bending under his weight. Through the soot and smoke around him, he saw her—the she-hawk watching her prey from the highest northern perch with only a jumble of town huts now swallowing fleeing Union soldiers seeking refuge from the relentless bombardment of General Rodes. A bold beacon of green light specked the skies beyond Oak Hill, a beacon that had now become the target for Wentworth Higginson above all else. 'Where are you going, General?' a young Unionist shouted, the quiver in his squeaky voice fitting for his tender age. 'General Reynolds has ordered a retreat back to the town. The Confederates won't push through the night.'

‘Don’t be so sure.’ Thomas twisted his sword three-sixty degrees in a fluid motion. ‘And General Reynolds is dead.’ The youth’s face drained to grey, limbs limp. The song of a cannon shell grew louder and focused on their position. Thomas threw himself forward and tackled the fear-stricken soldier to the ground just as the lump of earth exploded. An over-eager Confederate charged the two, throat veins bulging, met with Thomas’s sword tip striking firmly from below, his jugular spurting a fountain of fresh blood. He struggled to lift the dead weight of the Confederate off his blade, leaving his back exposed to another attack. The knight turned just in time to witness the young Unionist plunge his bayonet into the guts of his adversary. The two opposing figures stared in shock at one another, a perplexed exchange of remorse before the Confederate fell lifeless before the victor’s feet. Thomas placed a comforting hand on his ally’s shoulder. ‘Thank you.’ The only words the knight of Sir Galahad could muster, wishing for something more satisfying when he noticed the age of the dead Confederate just slain. Wars do not mean to discriminate, yet it is always the meek minds of the young that are left to burden the deepest scars. ‘Please, son. Retreat, and live to fight another day. That is an order,’ Thomas pleaded.

‘And...and you?’ the young Unionist stuttered.

‘Me? I, my boy, will look to cut the head clean off this snake!’ Thomas replied.

Chapter 30

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

2nd July 1863 AD

A single shaft of green light shone from the summit of Oak Hill, flickering intermittently like a candle lantern's wick nearing its end. Owen peered through the cracks of the lumber breastwork, a clumsy pile of timber stacked neck-high in defence, tree sap still flowing fresh—its smell triggering the memory of the rain-drenched night sparring against the knight of Sir Tristan, the scalp of John Breckinridge bringing neither him nor his partner Nelson much sense of retribution or satisfaction. General Jeb Stuart remained, a tantalising duel that would surely appease the pair's anger, the blood of Sir Gareth drawn from a blue spear of Sacred Band flame. Brown's heart murmured at the prospect, Shields Green avenged, and a tale to tell to all three hundred Sacred Band warriors, should they ever be granted the honour of addressing them. A new movement could be born throughout their homeland; as one people become liberated, so could another. One step at a time, Nelson would urge, giving way to the slow and steady sensibilities of his mother and Fredrick Douglass. Win over hearts first, then minds. A bugle horn broke with the dawn, Nelson snapping to attention by Owen's side, having dozed off for a few desperately needed moments of sleep. 'What did I

miss?’ he uttered through a half-yawn. ‘General Lee on the move again?’

‘Not that I can see.’ Owen settled his partner with a ruffle of the tight curls of his black hair.

‘Hmm. What can you hear?’ Nelson smiled.

‘Probably far less than you.’ Owen twitched an eyebrow. ‘Don’t tell me. That’s the secret. Right? Listen, don’t just look.’

‘Never done me any harm, but then again, I have little choice in the matter,’ Nelson quipped, fidgeting with the grubby red band tied around his eyes, then burying his head into Owen’s chest. He yawned again. ‘Hancock, going to suggest we make the move this time, you think?’

‘Would make for a pleasant surprise.’ Owen played with a spark of blue fire woven between his fingers. ‘Get the impression he’s more of a counter-attack, General. Might live to regret that tactic.’ He twisted his head back over his shoulder, the faint beam of green light beginning to pulse stronger. ‘I doubt the White Dragon and Lady Morgan will allow much room for afterthought. Not here.’

‘You’re frightened,’ Nelson whispered gently. Owen grunted in disagreement. ‘Your heart, it’s beating faster—could hear it at the far end of the flank if I had to.’

‘You think it makes me weak?’ Owen growled.

‘Far from it...it makes you *human*.’ Nelson shifted his position, muscles tightening suddenly, alerted to something Owen wasn’t. ‘You hear that?’ he lowered an ear to the ground. There was the groan of aching joints from Union soldiers having spent the night propped up against tree stumps and the occasional click of a rifle, but little else Owen could discern. ‘The earth...it, it moves,’ Nelson insisted.

‘What are you talking about?’ Owen puzzled, suggesting both he and his partner were likely feeling the effects of too little sleep these past forty-eight hours.

‘I’m telling you...something strange afoot here. Not like at Shiloh—the earth itself speaks. Or rather, someone is speaking for it.’ Nelson began to pick at clods of soil, smelling each pinch. ‘Lady Morgan, the sorceress, she’s here, isn’t she?’ he concluded. ‘The light you spoke of early last night...’

Owen opened his mouth to speak, promptly interrupted by the bark of a fellow Union soldier. ‘Woods! You and your aide Wild Bill-Bull-whatever best look lively. Hancock has spotted Generals Ewell and Rodes moving up on Cemetery Ridge, our forces there, retreated during the late hours of yesterday back into Gettysburg Town. Humiliating. If we have any hope of winning this battle, we’ll need to engage immediately and...’ a sharp whistle cut the air like a knife, ominously deepening in its pitch, ‘...Get down! *Down!*’ the soldier cried as the cannonball tore through the treetops above and crashed into the breastwork station behind. ‘Form up! *Form up!*’ the order came just as a torrent of Confederate uniforms flooded through the forests in front. A sea of grey smoke obscured Owen’s sight. He let off a few adrenaline-fuelled rounds, but might as well have shot to the skies.

‘Might as well be you having a go at this!’ Owen barked at Nelson, a blue shield summoned as a last resort. Nelson jerked his throwing arm over Owen’s head, spear let loose and catching a Confederate just below the knee. Brown sneered at his partner’s modest improvement by comparison. ‘Lucky strike. Fine—we’ll play by our rules, shall we?’ he winked.

‘Couldn’t agree more.’ Nelson locked his back to Owen’s. ‘Move with me, and tell me when...’

‘Now!’ Owen interjected, a spear of his own now sailing through the air with sharper accuracy, two Confederates taken down. He rewarded himself with a smug grin, then grimaced, shaking his shoulder loose.

‘You hurt?’ Nelson panted, a second spear thrown and hitting a rocky outcrop, harmless at first, but its shoddy foundations crumbling to free the shallow roots of a few lone trees perched on top, their trunks falling hard and halting the Confederate advance. Owen pivoted ninety degrees around Nelson, shield blocking gunshots from his left side.

‘Just my duff arm playing up,’ Owen winced.

‘Great damn help you are,’ Nelson scoffed, the two rotating quarter circles and blending spear and shield in tandem. A Confederate came in close with a bayonet, close enough for a blue spear in hand for Tubman, slicing through the collarbone, a spurt of warm blood catching his cheek.

‘I’ll remind you who inflicted it!’ Owen growled in response, sweeping the feet from beneath another approaching Confederate, spear plunged into the chest of his opponent, relinquished rifle skilfully kicked up to his hands, and fired without hesitation, a grisly headshot

snapping back the neck of an unsuspecting second soldier on the advance.

‘I didn’t ask you to stand there with a bucket!’ Nelson continued to bicker, slamming a spear into the boot of yet another soldier too close for comfort, a firm punch landing on his temple as an unsettling whimper was snuffed out, followed by the thud of a limp body.

‘Really not the time, Nelson. Not the time.’ Owen pulled a taut face, shield melting the steel of a charging bayonet, a punch of his own thrown squarely on the jaw of a new opponent. The pair circled again in their ruthless dance, two more spears buying precious moments as enemies sprang up from behind every tree stump. ‘We can’t stay here. There are too many,’ he confessed. ‘Work your way back down the ridge, head towards the town. We can regroup, hopefully with Wentworth Higginson. Try and hold on until...’ He felt his calf muscle burn, a searing, focused pain took hold.

‘Owen!’ Nelson cried.

‘I’m all right,’ Owen insisted, hobbling on one leg and not daring to look down at whatever injury he’d sustained. He tried to balance once again, the pain increasing with each right-footed step. He tried to smother any sounds of

anguish, but knew his partner would sense the fear welling up from within him.

‘The hell you are!’ Nelson snapped back, throwing Owen over his shoulder with surprising ease. ‘Be my guide. Get us out of here!’ He began to sprint, Owen hung around his neck like a sack of spuds.

‘What! Jesus...go, go forward. Just head straight forward!’ Owen ordered, holding his shield as high as he could and deflecting debris raining down from cut branches and showers of soil, the explosions of Confederate cannons booming on either side. ‘Duck!’ he ordered again, a tree collapsing to the ground, sawn clean off in the middle by a hot metal sphere landing metres in front. The crash sent up an eruption of pine needles, momentarily blinding their pursuers. Owen tried to roll over while hanging off Nelson’s shoulders, sending a blue spear into the heart of the fallen trunk, its dry bark sparking into flame to create a wall of fire, the wails of their adversaries offering some relief. The town huts of Gettysburg were in sight; they could make it... Just then, Nelson paused.

There was a tremor within the earth. Nelson’s feet tapped in rhythm, his breath slowed. A regular beat of

hooves—clunk, clunk, clunk—grew louder. ‘What is it?’ Owen struggled to choke out words from his awkward resting position, belly bent inwards. ‘We can’t stay here, Nelson...we’re still within range of...’ An explosion came from behind, throwing the pair forwards. ‘Nelson!’ Owen shouted, his solid foot sliding down into the fresh crater of the cannonball. He stumbled backwards and landed heavily on the lump of lead sizzling in the earth. The skin of his palms was burnt as he pushed himself away from the incendiary device. A horse at full gallop shot past his head, with its rider locked on Nelson. He summoned a spear, his vision still blurred and disorientated, the rider shimmering in his confusion, and let it loose, watched it sail through the smoke, smashed into cinders by the brilliant white of a knight’s blade. He froze, Jeb Stuart sneering back at him, cold eyes offering no solace as his attention turned to a fumbling Nelson, righting himself. The easier target, the knight of Sir Gareth must have thought, set to mow down the Sacred Band warrior just as he was standing up, like chopping the head clean off a flower. His horse gained speed, his staff switched from wood to steel as he rode closer and closer. Owen tried to shout out a warning to his partner, screeching ear piercingly high, but Nelson remained on his feet, exposed. Stuart’s blade drew within a hair, and Owen clenched his eyes shut, not able to watch, missing the Nelson’s cunning manoeuvre, swinging his torso low as the sword swept inches above his forehead. A stunned Stuart continued to gallop, forcing his steed to slow to a canter. The knight alighted, fury spreading across his

face, sword twisting with his wrist as he marched back. 'Damn coons don't know when to die,' he muttered.

Nelson sensed Jeb's approaching footsteps, plodding heavy and easy to read. He evaded his first swing, striking the knight hard with his elbow into the rib cage. The next strike of the sword came, a blue shield holding long enough to blunt its force, but having Nelson crumple to the ground. Tubman threw two punches to the midriff, repulsing Stuart, the stern boot heel of the general thumping hard into his chest, throwing Tubman back, spread eagled. 'Not this time, Band warrior,' Jeb spat, sword held aloft and pommel gripped with both hands. 'Go join your two coon brothers in that blue fire of hell you came from, you...' His final blow was interrupted, as Owen launched a quivering blue spear, poorly targeted and latching on to the knight's yellow cavalry sash, ripping it from his body. Stuart's efforts were redirected, blade uppercut towards Brown and slashing a shallow gash through the uniform. 'Ah hell, Breckinridge was right...a bloody Brown! Think John would have learnt, not risking his eldest, I'm guessing? Smartest move the fool made—make those that curse almighty God with their ways become the fodder. Pass the sword of Sir Gawain on to another, more capable pair of hands, eh boy? Pathetic.' He hauled Owen to his feet by the scruff of his collar, the edge of the sword held close to the throat, teasing with a light pressure across the jugular. 'No rope for you this time. Consider that a mercy.'

Nelson was back on his feet, top lip curled back, shield and spear glowing bold blue, red ribbon stripped from his cloudy eyes, dead pupils now alive with matching blue streaks. ‘Drop him, Stuart!’ he commanded.

‘In a position to negotiate now, are we?’ Jeb cackled. ‘A Blind-Band coon, I’ll give you some credit, boy, but enough games. You’ll join your partner soon enough.’

The trample of Confederate troops from behind, fighting their way through the remaining Union lines and exiting the forests of the Ridge, distracted Nelson’s attention. The familiar heartbeat of his partner drowned out by the hazy noise, the fear he felt made him unable to remain fixed enough to channel an accurate throw. He pictured the school fields of the Perkins Institute, created his own picture of calm, imagined the burning chicken coop of the Johnsons family home just beyond Jeb, a scenario reversed where he could assume command. A flash of an unfamiliar memory came courtesy of a twitch in Stuart’s arm, an old scar yet to fully heal, inflicted by the same fire he now held—the spear of Shields Green. That scar became his target, all elements merging in his favour as he set his spear free. Nelson cast his head down the moment the fire left his fingertips, nearly certain of a miss, already trying to push out the thought of his partner lying dead in his arms, unable to stop the cruel cut from Sir Gareth’s blade. The seconds of silence were excruciating. A wave of relief washed over Nelson

as Owen wrapped his arms around him. ‘Best throw you’ve ever made.’ Brown followed through with a wet and grateful kiss on Tubman’s cheek, a wincing Jeb Stuart left cursing the pair as the knight clutched his right breast. They should have finished him. Nelson knew that’s what Owen wanted, but just as Breckinridge was spared that night, the notion of an-eye-for-an-eye sat ill with the pair. As the toll of war between two sides of the same county spilt around them, the Union brigades from Gettysburg Town rallied to force a stalemate. The sound of the bugle brought bloodshed to a close, and weary soldiers drained of both spirit and substance retracted their claws and crept back to their fortifications. A flustered Jeb Stuart was aided away by his men, the spit of damnation his parting gift to Brown and Tubman.

‘Forever a cycle, this will be, won’t it?’ Nelson held Owen’s hand tighter than ever before. ‘Them against us, no matter how much we forgive one another.’

Owen ushered Nelson back down towards the beaten tracks of Gettysburg Town. ‘Maybe. But there’s only one of us that has the power to break a cycle. Let’s pray to whatever God sits on our side that that person finds his way back to us.’

Chapter 31

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

3rd July 1863 AD

Let them come, be it knight or Sacred Band. Let them come. Lady Morgan dug both heels of her leather boots into the parched earth, this third dawn already ruptured by the roar of cannon, Ulysses S Grant desperate to recoup the losses inflicted, spending his night licking his wounds and writhing in his bed at the thought of having to explain yet another ignominious defeat to President Lincoln. All these small weights of humiliation dragging men's pride down into the mud—her lips pursed, pleasantly. For she and her sister had endured through the time of men, while women sat attentively, idly perhaps, there to cheer their victories or soothe their pain, be it in war or peace. She had spent much of her night clutching the treasured Palladium, studying each carved curve carefully, the smooth and simple face of Pallas, Athena's dearest friend, portraying such childlike innocence, but beneath it the fiercest power of protection, that only the Greek goddess of war and wisdom could imbue it with. From the sanctuary it granted, so came the seed of an empire—the very essence of what it was to have both war and wisdom in the palm of one's hand.

But what of love? Lady Morgan would twist and turn at such a feeble thought scratching its way into her mind, even penetrating her dreams. Last night was no different, as she stood high upon a coastal Cornish cliff, the welcome and familiar breeze of King Arthur's birthland refreshing her senses, soon to turn sour. The waves below would crash violently, the Necklace of Harmonia turning from ardent red to a sullen, murky brown, drained of life. The skin on her face would begin to tire, the age of the centuries taking their toll in one instant, her body would begin to sag, bones protrude, her joyful laughter now a hideous cackle. She would cry and scream out to the seas for the Palladium to return to her, both hands stretched wide in supplication. The waves below would bellow louder—then the chuckle of a young, mousy-haired girl would creep in from behind. A gapped-toothed grin would spread across this child's face, every giggle a tease—but beneath her fiery-amber eyes there was power, Lady Morgan felt it through her frail frame. This was more than a mere child who goaded the sorceress.

'I'll never tell you,' the little girl would smirk. *'I'll never tell you.'* Lady Morgan would summon whatever strength she had left and hurl bolts of green energy in fury at such impertinence, each fizzling out into harmless clouds of mist before impact. The girl's eyes would burn twice as bright when she went to seize the throat, violently shaking the smaller body and demanding to know the treasured Palladium's location. 'It's mine. And I'll never tell you,' the girl's answer would come, the voice becoming richer and

more mature, Lady Morgan repulsed by a ring of bright orange flame that encircled the child. The great Morgan le Fay was reduced to a crawl, scampering back to the edge of the cliff tops to flee the rising flames. 'She loves me, and I love her. What we love always comes back to us.' The girl grew ill-tempered, stridently moving closer, each step eating up precious space between Lady Morgan and the doomed jagged rocks below. 'What do you love?' would be the final blow, as the edge would give way beneath the sorceress's feet, a rush of ocean air as she fell.

She would bolt upright, a thin veil of sweat cast across her cheeks. The Palladium still clutched tightly, the Necklace glowing gentle red as it has always done—the same spark of a connection between the two fabled objects working in harmony...but a fragile harmony. To part with one could be to part with both, and with that came the harshest of lessons—never truly let go of what you have come to love most. She coiled her arms around the carved statue and settled back into a light slumber. What seemed like mere moments later, the tarpaulin flaps would be tossed open, James Longstreet marching in and reverently bowing to his superior. The report would then follow on Jeb Stuart's wounds, the two Sacred Band fighters that brought the knight of Sir Gareth down, her best cavalryman now stricken in a hospital bed. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, honourable Red Dragon knight of Sir Galahad, standing proudly within the Union flanks, blade ready to avenge as always.

‘General Hancock’s artillery is impressive,’ Longstreet conceded, stroking his bristly black beard. ‘General Lee is determined to overpower the Union line and secure Cemetery Ridge for good. We have three solid divisions, General Pickett’s being the strongest I would say, and over one hundred cannons to soften the opposing line...’ He lowered his head, words fading to a mumble.

‘You’re unsure of such a move?’ Lady Morgan stepped closer, hand on her knight’s, sliding a finger across his silver ring inscribed with the lasting words—*Albus Draco*.

‘M’lady. We are still outnumbered by over two thousand Unionists. These past forty-two hours have taken their toll on our troops. The bloodiest battle of this entire war. I fear that should this charge, however grand in scale, become a failure, we may not recover.’ Longstreet spun his wooden staff between his boots, trying to hide an all too noticeable tremor in his voice. ‘Without Stuart in the flanks as well, this...’ he tried to defend his reasoning.

‘They have a single knight—Thomas Wentworth Higginson. We have two!’ Lady Morgan grew cold and commanding. Longstreet went to challenge, since no word of Berry Benson’s imminent arrival had yet reached him or any other soldier within the Confederate ranks. He resisted, keeping his head low. ‘Two Sacred Band...boys? *Boys* I’ve been told? Desperate. Desperate is the poison that weeps within the Red Dragon front.

‘Those *boys* have handled both John Breckinridge and now Jeb Stuart, m’lady.’ Longstreet found an ounce of riposte. One chilling stare from the flashing green eyes of Lady Morgan silenced his rebuke.

‘I have witnessed engagements where tens of Sacred Band warriors have stood against me and my knights. For as godly as they appear, the only true power of their gods lies here in these very relics that I command!’ Lady Morgan spat, Palladium and Necklace on full display. ‘Enough of the weaknesses of men, I say! Charge on foot, on horseback, on knees if you must, but you shall stand, Sir Palamedes, as your ancestors have always done. And men will follow in your example.’ She turned her back in silent fury.

Longstreet could only let out a sorrowful sigh. He nodded his approval, uttered half-heartedly the words *Albus Draco*, and retreated from the tent. ‘Lady Morgan, despite what you may believe of me, I have been a soldier my entire life, I have engaged in fights with couples, squads, companies, regiments, and divisions...and as such should know what a good soldier can do. It is my good judgement that no matter how many men we have arrayed on that battlefield, we cannot take this position, not without great cost.’ He felt his barrel chest tighten. ‘May it please m’lady, have my words shared with your husband Henry and the knights of Sir Lancelot. For I

would not wish my kin to believe I fell without desire or purpose.'

Nelson Tubman's shoulders were pinched on both sides, Owen Brown shuffling best he could to alleviate the strain in the tight Union formation that for the past two hours had been blasted by both Confederate cannon and the high midday heat of the summer sun. Each cannonball had overshot its target, still prompting them to duck, and calls for cover further down the flank, soldiers shaking in fear that the next projectile would find its mark. Some began to flee their posts, head back to the safety of Gettysburg Town, swiftly turned around by generals barking orders and reminding them of their duty to the nation. A dozen Union flags could have flown high that day to inject pride in men, each matched by the opposing bold blue cross of the Confederate banners. It still would not have extinguished the flight or fight response that sits in judgement in every man who holds a gun in times of war. Owen craned his neck to scout behind for signs of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, checking for any orders contradictory to that of General Hancock. He was nowhere to be seen. The chatter of teeth came from the soldier to Nelson's left, a rattle that spread through to his rifle just as a bugle horn sounded from the far side of Cemetery Ridge, an introduction to a barrage of boots from the Confederate front line, yelling at the tops of their

voices and splitting the skies. The earth beneath them began to quake. Owen needed not the sensitivities of his partner to feel this one, for this was a charge of absolute intent to turn this battle. A final push to rid the plains of Gettysburg from the Union grip once and for all. At its front was a raised staff, a faint trace of polished bark that transformed into steel. A Knight of the White Dragon for certain, but in the haze of aggression and flurry of Confederate caps, Owen couldn't make out which. Jeb Stuart recovered from his injuries and set on revenge? John Breckinridge lunging for glory once more? The prized name of James Longstreet proving his worth in front of his troops and leading a phalanx like many a great general before him throughout history? Or, maybe worse...the blade of Sir Bedivere, Berry Benson, a man transformed from Red to White, wielding a weapon not one of them could match.

Nelson snatched the hand of his partner, blue fire flowing between the pair, eyes flashing the same hue. The two dared not face any other direction than square towards the oncoming horde, a slight hesitation between the summoning of shield or spear—their own flight or fight response. An order to take aim came from a lower-ranking officer. Owen at first reached for his bayonet to avoid suspicion, but was as ready as Nelson to strike with a force unfamiliar to those around them. As the charge came within the range of a rifle, the heavier cannon fire slowed, and the pops of gunpowder began to ring out along the front line. The front row of Confederates fell,

their seconds tramping over them like broken twigs, meeting the next volley, poorly aimed and ineffective. The charge continued, moving to within metres. Owen's hand became clammy and slipped from Nelson's, his wrist seized by Tubman, suddenly rooted to the spot, unflinching. The palm of a stranger landed firmly on Owen's shoulder, a flicker of blue just in view—certainly not the soldier that stood next to him a moment ago, but somehow more comforting. A voice directly behind the pair whispered through the cacophony of the Confederate barrage approaching—*we are lions*.

Each step was a struggle. What was at first a sprint became a marathon, the rugged terrain of Oak Hill stretching out before Thomas Wentworth Higginson, as the shimmering beacon of green light became a siren for the knight. He was so eager to turn back, face the charge of General Pickett alongside his fellow men with the same valour and fortitude, the stand alongside Owen Brown and Nelson Tubman—the Red Dragon and Sacred Band in their rightful place, dutiful to their shared cause until the very end. This was an opportunity, though, a chance not just to alter the outcome of this orchestrated empire but to shatter the tyranny of Lady Morgan and her White Dragon knights forever. Unsure of the intricacies of his ancestors, and just how many knights of Sir Galahad had stood so close to the great sorceress Morgan le Fay while in the

eye of the storm, it mattered not at that moment. He could see the Palladium, held down by the waist of Lady Morgan, close enough to make out its fine features, a hint of gold sparkle catching the rays of the sun, glistening like still waters. Just wrestle it from the witch, he thought, that could suffice...buy the Unionists some time. Only this single battle, possibly, but enough. His life could be forfeited. Samuel Gridley Howe and Gerrit Smith would stand ready to continue the fight, his own staff bestowed to Emily Dickinson and a new knight of Sir Galahad chosen to lead in the name of King Arthur. They could endure, with time...and with hope.

A boulder the size of a cartwheel flew in his direction. Thomas swerved, watching it sail past and break into shards of rock and ribbons of green. He switched course, Lady Morgan tracking his every move, hurling another moulded mass of stone his way, his transformed blade slicing through it, following a hefty swing. He was getting closer, near enough to catch the fervent green of Lady Morgan's eyes—the soil beneath erupting, birthing the uncoiled serpent within, formed of both brutal stone and magic. The same lambent green eyes shone from its head, lurching higher, forked tongue made of flame and hissing at an ear-splitting pitch. The serpent's head lunged low towards Thomas, the knight rolling to the side in an immediate evasive move, its body of rock swinging heavily to its side and knocking him hard back into the worn, burnt stub of a tree trunk. Winded, he bent a single knee, bringing forth knight light to shield the next strike

from the snake. A relentless storm of green energy channelled against his blade's counterforce. The brilliant white light slowly ebbed under the superior strength of Lady Morgan's conjuring until it faded entirely. Thomas was tossed further back as the tree was uprooted. He rolled over several times before coming to a halt, his wrists instantly clasped by the unforgiving power of the sorceress, pulled down to the ground with the buckling of both knees. He tried to wriggle free, managing only inches of movement towards his sword a few feet in front, but helpless as Lady Morgan walked slowly towards him.

‘As bold and as determined as ever, Son of Sir Galahad. Such a waste,’ Lady Morgan tutted on approaching him. ‘I must congratulate you this time, though, for the spirit of the Red Dragon has undoubtedly seeped into the hearts of many men throughout this war. Look, even now, at the very end, so many stand with passion and believe.’ She gestured to the bitter affray unfolding upon Cemetery Ridge, two swarms of soldiers soon to collide. ‘But you never learn, do you? I remain one step ahead each time, and understand the means of men so much more than you ever will. A language of hate that you have always underestimated, even within your own ranks. Now, all is laid bare for you to see...how brother can turn on brother, sister against sister, countryman against countryman, no matter how united they may appear. Create the theatre of revenge, and it will always survive long after the curtain falls, with each generation inheriting the pain and suffering. It matters not that they share the same lands,

follow the same beliefs, or even sit at the same table...take away just one single person's rights, their wealth, their sense of equals, and you have war. A lasting war that is buried deeper than here on a battlefield but lingers in the soul and heart. Why, look at us both, right now—Red again White, locked in conflict for near one millennium, neither preparing to bow. It is, Mr Wentworth Higginson, as much a delight for me as it is an honour. For as long as we fight, mankind will feel its pain, and will lash out in vengeance. To feel vengeance is to feel pride, Sir Galahad, and pride can fuel control over the most stubborn of enemies.' She paused to bask in the majesty of her bellicose creation, thousands upon thousands of Americans prepared to tear each other apart for the sake of perceived destinies. Both sides had grown stronger from their suffering, but only one would be worthy of inheriting this world, a new empire unrivalled for generations to come.

'I'll grant you the credit you deserve, Morgan.' Thomas bit his lower lip in the struggle against his restraints, sliding two fingers into the pockets of his officer coat. 'A civil war is always ingenious, and indeed the inception of our very making today...a Round Table severed.' He twisted some more, delving deeper into the pocket and wincing as the green ties began to cut through his flesh. 'Forgive me, but there is always a flaw in such a plan, is there not?'

Lady Morgan narrowed her eyes and leant in closer to the stricken knight. 'Enlighten me, noble knight of Sir Galahad.'

'Change,' Thomas croaked, his fingers finally finding the desired object within his pocket.

Lady Morgan gave a brief but dismissive chuckle. 'Ha! I do stand corrected, Thomas, for you are quite right, there is always change. Change, however, is determined by the victors, just as history is written by such. Tell me, who doesn't wish to be on the victorious side of history? Even a once Red Dragon knight by the name of Berry Benson, most noble line of Sir Bedivere. He knew what was at stake during this war, and he made his choice to stand with me. His abandonment of you will give him profit; his family will grow wealthy once more. All too easy to manipulate and control the hearts of men.' Her summation was interrupted by the flick of a coin that caught her on the forearm, landed by her feet, and spun in a few neat circles before settling. She bent forward and inspected it, a freshly minted double-sided dime. Curiosity spread across her ashen face.

'Change can work both ways, Lady Morgan. I believe your husband, Henry, knew that better than any of us.' Thomas let slip a modest smile of his own. 'But in the end, we are merely two sides of the same coin.'

From the far summit beyond Cemetery Ridge, a lone figure stood. Thomas had to squint hard at the shadowy frame as it separated into two forms, one holding the wooden staff of a knight, together with a child, and the other a splendid sword shining brighter than the nearest night's star. Wentworth Higginson breathed a sigh of relief the instant Lady Morgan widened her eyes and ground her pearl-white teeth. Berry Benson, standing side by side with a slave girl and her child...his child. 'No,' she jeered. The double-sided dime as good as a dagger in her frozen heart at the thought that even her husband had acted duplicitously all this time through the sharing of secrets across borders, the mechanical intelligence to rival the vanguard thinking of ironclad warships, and a new age of warfare. Just as she sought to twist the minds of her favourites, Sir Lancelot had done the same, with all those who should have been loyal but prepared to listen. Israel Greene, the knight of Sir Geraint, followed his own path upon weighing up the evidence, and now, the prized line of Sir Bedivere substituted certain glory for unforeseen love of the coloured inferior race. 'No!' she exclaimed as Excalibur was raised high into the air.

Whatever the force that rippled across the plains in front, Owen Brown and Nelson Tubman cared little. The charge that faced them was suddenly stuttering, a falter of feet as if disorientated by a blow to the head—the menacing

blade of James Longstreet, now clearer to the pair, reverting to its wooden form, the knight veering wildly off course on his mount, nearly thrown from the saddle as he wrestled the horse back under control. The Confederate soldiers darted back and forth, awaiting orders from generals who were rendered inert, shouting contradictory orders and flapping helplessly. A General Pickett was the only one to regain some measure of composure and resume command, but his line was in disarray. From behind Brown and Tubman came spears of blue flame, a good dozen or so Owen espied, all launched in unison at the uneasy formation. ‘Shields!’ Nelson shouted without hesitation, his partner quickly responding to the order alongside each Sacred Band warrior that had joined their flank, a firm streak of blue pushed in front and repelling the casual off-mark fire from the Confederate Army. In a blink, the Unionist lines retaliated with both rifles and cannons, twice the force of their opposition. The blue shield held, any Confederate getting close stuck like a pig by a spear of blue flame. Most began to retreat, an injured Longstreet announcing the command himself while nursing a weeping gunshot wound to the calf.

‘Hurrah, boys! We’re giving them hell!’ one Union soldier proudly proclaimed as the enemy scattered to the four winds, spurts of soil, and sods of earth flying high as cannonballs continued to rain down. The Sacred Band warriors withdrew their shields, reverting to the traditional rifle fire of their comrades, but always advancing one step ahead of the flank. The same soldier grabbed Nelson’s

arm just as he and Owen began to move... 'Hey, did you just see that? The blue light? Gift of God, I'd say.'

Nelson patted the soldier on the shoulder and exchanged a smile with Owen while looping an arm through his. 'Good sir, I cannot attest to what you might have seen...for it is clear, is it not, that I can see nothing.'

Chapter 32

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

4th July 1863 AD

Gracie trembled at first, waving away the more intrepid hands of young Malakhi, so eager to feel the sharp sides of the sword. The blade looked heavy, too heavy for a single man to hold, let alone a child—but the moment Berry Benson plunged its tip into the ground, it was clear this was no ordinary sword. A spotlight from the heavens shone upon them, the world attentive to their every move, if only for an instant. There was the hum of a tune, an ethereal song that called out across the battlefield and arrested like the hypnotic chords of a siren. Men turned, horses reared and bucked, and then the tides of war shifted. A rallying cry from the Unionist forces, once on the back foot, now marching proudly forward, a flash of blue light eclipsing a veil of green. It all happened so fast. The churn of war returned, with guns, spikes, and cannon fire—but something felt *different*, Gracie knew as much. Despite the horrors that played out before her, there was optimism for the first time, a sense of purpose for every person who fell on the fields that day.

‘Go ahead, Son, you can touch if you want.’ Berry crouched before Malakhi, the youthful, coffee-coloured eyes bright as ever.

‘Stick?’ Malakhi asked inquisitively.

‘No, Son. *Sword.*’ Berry joked. ‘But watch...’ He released his grip from Excalibur’s pommel, holding the blade upon the palm as it transformed back into its smooth thorn guise.

‘Stick!’ Malakhi beamed, tugging at Gracie’s skirt. ‘Sword and stick!’ he elated.

‘Great. Now, look what you’ve gone and started.’ Gracie pulled Malakhi close. ‘He’s now going to think all twigs and thorns do that!’

‘You need to teach him only one.’ Berry said playfully, pointing to his own staff in Gracie’s hand. Her face became stern. ‘Yes, Gracie...you.’

‘But...but I know not a thing, Berry, a thing about what it is to be...’ Gracie protested.

‘Nor did I. Not really. We laughed once at what it was to be a Knight of King Arthur’s Round Table, how such men were born into nobility, wealth, and glory. Truth be told, you need only have your heart be true, and understand the value of another’s. That is what all knights should uphold, and any man, woman, or child has that in their blood, no matter who they may be,’ Berry replied, passing the smooth thorn sprig to Gracie and watching it transform once again into the vibrant blade of Excalibur as soon as her hand wrapped around its end. She gasped.

‘How...? How can I?’

‘One heart is enough,’ Berry reminded. ‘Nina was prepared to give hers for you and Malakhi, and her sacrifice left its mark with you. Just as I must rest with the loss of Blackwood, so must my whole family.’

Gracie lowered Excalibur, watching it revert to thorn wood. ‘We’ll come with you, back home to South Carolina. We can change the Benson estate, make good in your father’s name.’ She drew close, lips touching Benson’s stubby chin.

‘I’d like nothing more, my love. But this war ain’t over. God knows, it might not ever be over. It’ll take time, time to heal these wounds across America. I ask that you

make the most of your newfound freedom, you, and our son. Maybe on shores beyond our lands, for now at least? Then, when the moment is right, we can be together.’ Berry embraced Gracie warmly. ‘Please. Don’t make me put you both at risk for my many, many mistakes.’

Gracie squeezed Berry’s shoulders, weeping gently into the nape of his neck, knowing his argument was just. While the civil war raged, they would not be safe—a white Confederate and a black slave girl from a seceded Southern state was the grim reality that would stick like a stubborn fishbone in the throat of so many across the nation. But, given time, minds could change, just as Benson’s had done. ‘Swear to me.’ She sniffed, ‘Swear you will come and find us, wherever we may be.’

‘I swear, Gracie.’ Berry kissed her forehead. ‘Now, you must first swear to do something for me.’

A raucous atmosphere greeted Gracie as she was chaperoned towards the generals’ tent propped up upon Cemetery Hill, Union soldiers dancing arm in arm, ale splashing from tankards, and some questionable renditions of the Star-Spangled Banner howled out in celebration of America’s birthday. She cowered slightly,

the two soldiers on either side grumbling in discontent at still being on duty, while others frolicked. 'Wait here, Miss,' one ordered, sweeping the tent fold back and entering. A firework exploded into sparkles of red and blue high in the violet evening sky, Gracie jumping in fright—the soldier next to her immediately reaching for his rifle, knuckles white. Long after the spark had fizzled from the air, he held his position, Gracie calmly lowering his weapon for him.

'It's OK, good sir. No enemy here.' She twitched a half-grin. The soldier looked her up and down, coughed dismissively, his compatriot returning and ushering her inside. She nodded her approval, tried to adjust her sight to the dimly lit interior and make out the haggard faces of the two impressively dressed officers present.

'General Ulysses S Grant, General Hancock, sirs. This here coloured woman wishes a word with you.' Gracie's escort introduced her with a formal salute. Grant sat slouched in a wingback chair, seemingly uncomfortable as his portly frame spilt over each side, Hancock chewing the end of a cigar butt, its rich scent filling the tent.

'Thank you, Officer. Return to your duties.' Hancock waved what remained of his cigar before stamping it out on the table in front of him. 'So. To what do we owe the pleasure, Miss...?'

‘Just Gracie, good sir,’ Gracie stuttered between a curtsy and a bow.

‘Just...Gracie? You owned?’ Hancock quizzed.

‘Not anymore, sir. No.’

‘Ah, freed from the South. You see, Grant, Lincoln said they’d come. They know which side is worth fighting for.’ Hancock gave a playful punch to Grant’s upper arm. ‘So, you here to tend to our wounded? Feed the sick? We could do with some extra hands down in Gettysburg Town hospital given the overflow of good men that now lay torn open by these last few days of hell...’

‘No. No, sir. I ain’t no nurse,’ Gracie squeaked.

Grant slouched further back and locked his fingers. ‘What are we to do with you then?’ his grey eyebrows arched.

‘I...I have a gift. And, if it please you, good sirs, a message.’ Gracie moved a hand to the inside of her scratchy brown coat, a move that triggered an alert from both generals, Hancock readying his pistol. ‘No, no trick, my good sirs. I promise.’ She continued, pulling free the sprig of thorn and placing it on the desk. The two senior generals looked at each other, bemused. ‘Now, my

message. A Confederate soldier, a day ago, stood on this great battlefield of the war. The world will little note, nor long remember him...nor should they, for he was one of thousands. But, on this day, the birth of America, he became a man reborn, and by his own heart came to realise that people should forever be equal, and act in the name of liberty. For those that have fallen over these past years of struggle, they should not have died in vain, but rather to bring new life to a new nation—a nation that through every last full measure, can recognise change for the good of all.’ Her breath began to fail her, tailing off with the sting of tears.

Grant and Hancock remained expressionless, but cast their gaze to their feet. Grant was first to raise his head – ‘And where is this Confederate soldier now? Why is it not he who presents to us tonight?’ he queried.

‘He has served his purpose, sir. A cycle has been broken here in Gettysburg, and would such an address appear more sincere coming from him, or from a woman such as me?’ Gracie found renewed confidence in her response, chest swelling, wrists turned outward to reveal the scars of her shackles. Grant pondered for a moment, then grunted towards Hancock. ‘Very good, Miss Gracie. We accept your token and your candour. You are dismissed.’

‘Oh, but sir. I must conclude...for that thorn branch you see there, it must be returned.’ Gracie pointed firmly at the sprig.

‘Returned? Returned where?’ Hancock pinched his brow, fatigued.

‘To the waters in which it was forged.’ Gracie stood resolute, praying there were to be no further questions pertaining to myths about which she knew so little.

‘Waters in which...? Oh, for Heaven’s sake! Fine. If that’s all, Miss Gracie, consider it done. And my thanks to your noble Confederate friend for his sincere words. Touching, truly. We have work to do and a war to be won, so please...’ Hancock began to escort Gracie from the tent, a sharp voice sounding from the shadows behind that drew the generals’ focus. They snapped to attention, Grant raising unsteadily from his seat and quickly smartening up his blazer.

‘Forgive the intrusion gentlemen, Miss...Gracie, did I hear?’ the slightly hunched figure drew in from the exit flap behind, the mellow gold light of the lamps highlighting the creases on his brow and sagging skin from his cheekbones. ‘My hearing grows frail,’ he chuckled.

‘Mr President, sir. Winfield and I were just entertaining this fine young lady and her token of appreciation for all your efforts.’ Grant hastily stepped forward, nearly tripping over his own feet.

‘No concern, Ulysses, no concern,’ Lincoln soothed with a wink. ‘Tell me, Miss Gracie, this token you leave behind. Why do so?’

Gracie stammered, words slipping from her tongue incoherently. ‘It’s...well, you should have it...Mr President, sir. My love, he...’

‘Your *love*? More to this Confederate than you let on, I begin to believe,’ Lincoln teased. Gracie fought back tears once more, her lower lip visibly shaking. ‘You see, gentlemen, this nation of ours never ceases to surprise me, and each time it does, I am met with relief, not displeasure. ‘Why, what can we all fight for, if not for love?’ he concluded. Gracie swiftly wiped away a fresh tear. ‘I will do as you request, and throw this thorn into the rivers of the Potomac upon my return to Washington. You have my word,’ Lincoln reassured her, glancing down to the wooden staff by Gracie’s side. ‘Hmmm...I once knew a man who carried one just like that. My wife and I were most saddened to hear of his passing in Italy, the good man Theodore Parker. Understood he survived an attempt on his life by some wretched fellow whose name now escapes me...Grant?’ he snapped his fingers.

‘Wilkes Booth, sir. Junius Wilkes Booth,’ Ulysses confirmed with a loud cough.

‘Ah, indeed. Heard it was staves at dawn between the two, quite the duel. Details were hard to come by, but I understood Mr Parker held his own.’ Lincoln turned his back and inspected the thorn sprig closely. ‘Odd choice of weapon for an assassination attempt, isn’t it?’

‘There’s maybe more to them than meets the eye,’ Gracie splurged without thought.

‘I’m sure there is, Miss Gracie. As I said, this nation is forever surprising me.’ Lincoln gave a crooked grin.

‘Promise me you’ll return it. The thorn.’ She pleaded one final time. ‘My love will know if you have not.’

‘My dear, I confess to having many flaws, but dishonesty is not one of them,’ Lincoln affirmed.

Chapter 33

New Bedford, Massachusetts

20th November 1863 AD

Some hot fat splashed on Harriet Tubman's arm. 'God damn!' She dabbed the spot with a damp dishcloth, neglecting the chicken breasts sizzling to a burnt brown in the pan. 'Good Lord!' she rushed back over and turned the heat down, coughing on the smoke. Her fried chicken was never overdone, never. This was not the time to break perfection—not on such a momentous day.

'Smells...good?' a curious inflexion in his voice greeted Harriet, Frederick Douglass inspecting the charred remains of the breadcrumbs. 'Nothing wrong with well done. The crispier, the better, for me,' he smiled.

'Don't start, Frederick.' Harriet scraped her failure right into the garbage bag. 'Can you get the boys to bring me in another?'

'They'll cook it for you, if you like,' Douglass winked. Harriet scoffed, eyeing her son and partner Owen through the cracked window, engaged in some sort of combat training demonstration in front of a small audience of

men. Different ages, different heights, and different colours. A bolt of blue fire would flare from Nelson's hand, shoot past Owen, miss the Johnsons' chicken coop by mere inches. She tutted with a shake of her head. 'They can do more than just fight, after all,' Frederick comforted.

'That's what worries me.' Harriet folded her arms. 'All this...magic. This power my son holds. How? You're saying he was born with it? Hid it his entire life from me? From you? Wentworth Higginson, Gridley Howe, Smith—the others from the Secret Six. They were clueless, also?' she stared incredulously.

'Well, they were called the *Secret Six* for a reason, I suppose,' Douglass replied. 'A few myths and legends shared, as you well know...but.'

'But what, Frederick? This is beyond anything associated with this war, this country, our movement for our rights. This...this is so much more. People will be afraid, very afraid. You know what fear can do.' Harriet wrapped her arms tighter.

'Perhaps then, it is best to keep such things a secret, Harriet. Let's be honest—we're both pretty well versed in such acts,' Frederick sniggered.

‘But I don’t want to live in a world of secrets, Frederick. Of lies, or shame. I certainly don’t want that for Nelson—he has enough challenges.’ Harriet hung her head low.

‘Nothing he hasn’t proven already he cannot overcome. And my dear Mrs Tubman, this world will always be full of secrets...and would be all the duller without them. Owen will take care of Nelson, and the pair will guide their newfound brothers to achieve great things for the Union, and, God willing, the United States of America.’ Frederick reassured her. ‘Who knows, maybe your son isn’t as alone as he once thought. As alone as Shields Green and Anthony Copeland thought they were. As alone as we, too, once believed we were, when John Brown insisted others would come to Harpers Ferry. It just takes a little patience.’

‘And perseverance,’ Harriet finished. ‘Yes, I too have been listening, Frederick.’ She beat the fresh batter in the bowl hard. ‘What time are the others arriving? I’ll need a good hour to refry and...’ A shot of blue flame carried across the sky, fading as quickly as it came. The edge of the Johnsons’ chicken coop was once again ablaze. ‘Oh, for Heaven’s sake....Frederick!’ she stormed.

‘I’ll speak to them.’ Douglass patted her shoulder. She flung the window wide open.

‘Nelson! Nathan and Polly are not going through this again! Put that fire out right now...the pair of you. Owen, your brother will be here any minute now and God help you if you think you’ll be spared his wrath, y’hear?’ Harriet barked.

‘Sorry, Ma. Lions in training.’ Nelson couldn’t help himself as he smirked while Owen filled a bucket of water, little sister Gertie beside herself with laughter.

‘Lions that are about to go starving if you don’t put that out. All of you! Gertie, get inside now!’ Harriet fumed.

Gerrit Smith threw the day’s copy of *The Springfield Republican* onto the kitchen table. ‘Perfect little gem!’ he grinned, slumping into his usual seat and helping himself to wine. ‘The Gettysburg Address, they’re calling it. Might well be Lincoln’s finest hour,’ he claimed whilst pouring.

‘Or Theodore’s.’ Samuel Gridley Howe ran a finger across the page. ‘*Four Score and Seven years ago...* has Parker’s words riddled throughout. Still, if it gets the job done.’

‘Oh, I believe it has, Mr Gridley Howe,’ George Luther Stearns confirmed, stealing the bottle from Smith. ‘Many, many more orders for everything from pikes to pistols, all from new recruits across the Northern States. The success in Gettysburg will drive recruitment like nothing else gone before, even the firm words of the good Master Douglass. Why, if only John Brown were alive to see this moment, to relish what is unquestionably a turning point in this war.’

‘I’m sure he’ll know, Mr Stearns.’ John Brown Junior stepped into the room, staff close by his side, doffing his hat to his company and warmly embracing Sam. ‘My late father was never a man to take his eye off the prize, not one as precious as freedom. Be it here on Earth or in the Heavens.’ He took a seat by Smith. ‘Forgive me, George, might I request a moment alone with Samuel and Gerrit?’

‘Why, of course.’ Stearns looked puzzled for a brief moment, retiring to the kitchen, his interest piqued by all the commotion coming from Harriet and Frederick.

‘No Thomas?’ Junior enquired.

‘Taking care of some personal business down the road in Amherst. Will join us tomorrow, he says,’ Samuel said, twitching an eyebrow.

‘Poet?’

‘Poet.’ Samuel gave a tepid grin. Junior tutted playfully. ‘And what of the Brown family? Set to retire up there in Ohio? Cannot see your little brother agreeing to such terms, nor Nelson Tubman.’

‘Owen will follow his heart, as he’s always done. This victory in Gettysburg is a turning point, as Mr Stearns claims, yes. But not absolute. Plenty more to be done, gentlemen.’ Junior tapped his staff on the tiled floor. ‘Perhaps more importantly, what of the Benson family, the line of Sir Bedivere? Can we trust Berry’s newfound allegiance?’

‘I believe so. Far more so than the ever-fickle loyalties of the knights of Sir Lancelot, an honourable twist from Henry Worthington and his apparent double-agent status, but we know of the sway Morgan le Fay has long held over that bloodline. The Palladium will rise again.’ Gerrit wiped his mouth clear of wine with the back of his hand and suppressed a belch. ‘Besides, Mr Benson appears quite taken with this former slave girl of his, enough to travel across the Atlantic and retrieve Excalibur. More than his father ever managed.’ The belch worked its way through.

‘Which is what concerns me, Gerrit. The cruel curse of the Sir Bedivere line...a curse that spills from one generation to the next. Drink, poisons, misfortunes. What if this game of chance does not always find itself in our favour?’ Junior pressed. ‘Do we even know Berry’s whereabouts right now?’

‘At Boston Harbour. Old Franklin Benjamin Sanborn has managed to work his network of influencers well and got the girl Gracie and her son travel permits to the island of Jamaica. Stearns knows the shipping magnates and will oversee the travel, make sure there’s no ill business or profiteering to be had from the liberated black South.’ Smith snatched the wine bottle back.

‘That’s what Berry Benson wanted?’ Junior asked. Both Samuel and Gerrit nodded. ‘Hmm...wise in such times, I suppose. But not without risk. We may have a need of his heir sooner than we might expect.’

‘Just as you have taken your father’s mantle, John Junior, so will young Malakhi Benson. We are also in close contact with the Barrett Browning family in Italy, and will trace Theodore’s passing on of the Sir Kay sword—their young son, Robert, is set to pursue an education in England. Should his staff fall into the wrong hands, we’ll find it somehow,’ Samuel reassured. ‘Until such time, the Six will need to be Four...and build on the good work of recruitment Smith and Douglass have done not just for

those that can now call themselves free, but for the Sacred Band. Clearly, the legacy of Shields Green has lived on; your father's wish is fulfilled, if not the way he imagined.' He transformed his staff into its brilliant blade and held it aloft. 'In the absence of the good knight of Sir Galahad, our rightful leader of the Red Dragon, let us three here— me, alongside the knight of Sir Bors and knight of Sir Gawain—commit to this new birth of freedom, and, as the president states, the proposition that all men are created equal. In the name of King Arthur, and those that stood at the Round Table and...' The grand speech was interrupted by Stearns just as Gerrit and John Brown Junior drew their blades from wood, the unsuspecting guest slack-jawed once more, pointing a hesitant digit in their direction.

'Sirs, this is the second time I swear I've seen...' Stearns squinted in disbelief. 'That Benson fellow, Smith, now you...'

The blades returned to wood. 'A trick of the light, Mr Stearns. Nothing more. We have become accustomed to carrying implements of defence around with us now— never know when they might be needed. A sword within a staff, sir, that is all,' Samuel blundered at first, but recovered. 'Some prefer a pistol, we three, well, we are somewhat traditional,' he covered with a smile.

‘Right. Very well. Harriet Tubman is almost ready to serve. And your brother, Mr Brown, he appears to have set the Johnsons’ coop on fire again. In case you are wondering why we have overindulged in the fried chicken.’ Stearns shifted his gesture towards the kitchen.

John Brown Junior seethed. ‘Father would have been so, so proud.’ He shook his head in resignation.

Malakhi was bundled up warm and cosy by his mother, the ship’s gangway settled on the dock by their feet. ‘This way, m’lady. Be sure to show your papers upon arrival in Kingston,’ Sanborn urged. Gracie took a hesitant first step along the plank, the step in itself bringing back a haunting memory of her family’s arrival on these shores so many years ago, stricken with fear and grief. She touched the scars on her wrists and formed fists with her hands. ‘It’s quite safe, m’lady. Please trust me,’ Franklin Benjamin repeated.

‘Ben!’ Malakhi blurted. ‘Mr Ben!’

‘No, dear, Franklin Benjamin. Sorry, Mr Sanborn. He is still learning,’ Gracie apologised.

‘Quite all right, young man. I prefer the name Ben if it’s all the same.’ Sanborn ruffled the tight black curls of Malakhi’s head. ‘Be sure to remember me, and come pay Mr Ben a visit sometime, won’t you,’ he smiled.

Gracie took another step forward and froze the moment the wooden staff clipped the gangway’s side. She turned and looked back at Berry, even though she had promised not to. Benson held his hand over his heart, mouthed simple words of affection, and then gave a gentle, slow wink. As brutal as it was to bear, he was right in his actions—for a single battle would not have won this war, not yet, and his family name, though shifted in its nature, was still associated with the Confederates. His inherited estate was stained with the blood of the chained. Just as she was taking her first step of true freedom, he must now take the step of reparation. He promised he would see her again and instruct their son in the ways of the true knight of Sir Bedivere, in a better manner than his father had done. Should she and Malakhi ever return to South Carolina and the Benson estate, they would find it transformed—a plantation that offered plenty for all. That would become his legacy, and of more value than any mystical blade he could summon from a far-flung land.

‘Quickly now, m’lady. Dare not miss this chance,’ Sanborn urged again.

Gracie took Malakhi by the hand, staff and carved doll in the other. 'Quite, Mr Sanborn, sir, for we get so few in this life.'

Chapter 34

Amherst, Massachusetts

20th November 1863 AD

He looked hesitant but unharmed, Emily Dickinson thought, as Thomas made his way up the stone stairs towards their front porch. His uniform was crisp and well pressed, slashes of gold finery across the shoulders and cuffs, belt-buckle gleaming, boots polished to a mirror shine. Each step he took became shorter as the door approached, wooden staff almost anchoring him with its tip dragging behind. He removed his cap, patted the parting in his wavy blond hair, and reached for the bell chain. He didn't pull straight away; his hand paused mid-air for a good minute or two before summoning the courage to grip it. The door opened before the bell could be rung. Mr Wentworth Higginson was put out of his misery. Emily smiled as she rushed for the reception room.

'Hello,' the young, smartly presented boy greeted him, barely tall enough to reach the door handle.

'Good...good evening, sir. I was hoping that Miss Emily Dickinson would be home,' Thomas replied jovially.

‘Are you a soldier?’ the boy asked, a buck-toothed grin spreading from ear to ear.

‘I am...was. Err...yes. Yes, I am indeed a soldier, sir.’ Thomas awkwardly puffed up his chest, relieved when the boy was swept up into the arms of his mother.

‘David! What have we told you about opening the door to strangers,’ Rhoda Todd judged sternly. ‘Apologies, sir. Whom shall I say is calling?’

‘Thomas Wentworth Higginson, ma’am.’ Thomas gave an informal salute. ‘I hope I am no stranger. I know Miss Dickinson and the Jenks Loomis family, and was hoping to...’

‘Goodness! Thomas—it’s really you! Thank the stars that you are safe and well...we were all worried. Eben and Mary have told us so much about you.’ Rhoda stretched an arm of welcome around Thomas’s shoulder.

‘Not too much, I hope.’

‘Of course not, a man of valour and mystery,’ Emily interrupted, stroking David’s porcelain-pink cheeks. ‘Thank you, Rhona dear. I can see Mr Wentworth

Higginson in. Do let Eben and Mary Jenks Loomis know he's here. They'll be delighted.'

Thomas scuffed his boots clean on the mat and entered, studying the dark wooden furniture and neat oval-framed family portraits. The air was stuffy and stale, weighed down by the overbearing warmth of the roaring fireplace. It was a comfort he had not been used to for over a year now, cold mud and clouds combined with the stench of gunpowder seemingly all he could remember. A slight groan from an elderly woman could be heard from the floor above. 'My mother.' Emily rolled her eyes. 'She's actually enjoying a fine day, better than most. Still, she likes to seek pity.'

'The Jenks Loomises are here?' Thomas sounded surprised.

'Oh, yes. As I said, wonderful company for me and my brother. That was Rhona, wife of Sereno Todd—and my little fox, of course.' Emily smiled, taking Thomas's uniform coat and spotting the wooden staff by his side. 'Am I to take that as well? Or, now that you have returned in the flesh, no longer mine?'

'It's yours, if you want it.' Thomas held the staff in its middle, gifted it to Emily.

‘Hmmm...if I take care of the staff, am I also duty-bound to take care of its rightful owner?’ A pensive gaze struck Thomas unexpectedly, a riddle within a question he couldn’t quite fathom. Was this an invitation? A courtship? Or a rooted doubt of the heart? The curious mind of a poet is at once both charming and defensive.

‘Would I be such a burden?’ Thomas broke their gaze and turned to the floor.

‘Never. Never a burden, my dearest Thomas—how can such a friend be a burden?’ Emily protested, hand cupping his bristly chin. ‘But if it is true love you seek, I may disappoint as a woman to a man. This much I have come to know over our correspondence and fleeting time together. And if I was not to be the wife or companion you desired, should my wild nights become the bringer of misfortune to you, then I fear your tongue would be blocked by your tears and mine. To rob this world of your words would be a tragedy, Thomas.’

Thomas plucked up the courage to look into Emily’s eyes once again; they held a different meaning this time. No less personal. A lifelong ally, a confidant, a friend in a time where honest friendship was rare, loyalties twisting like seasonal winds. This was to be treasured. He pulled the double-sided dime from his pocket. ‘Shall we flip for the staff?’ he joked. ‘Lady Liberty or wreath?’

‘Wreath,’ Emily laughed. The dime spun high, slapped to Thomas’s palm, Lady Liberty staring up at them. ‘Alas, not to be. A lucky dime for that fellow you met in Chicago, clearly. What was his name? Henry...?’ She took Thomas’s arm.

‘Henry Worthington. A man of many talents,’ Thomas said. ‘I would very much like to share more about them sometime, my dear Emily. They might be of interest to you and your work.’

‘I have always had the feeling you and your closest friends seem too well-wedded to some of these mystic tales of Arthurian folklore. That Gerrit Smith of yours, a few drops in him, and his passion could be misconstrued as truth.’

‘Truth told slant,’ Thomas replied with a wink. The two shared a chuckle, Carlo whining at the rear door, desperate to be let out. ‘My competition I assume?’ Thomas patted the dog on its hindquarters.

‘A battle already lost, Mr Wentworth Higginson. My sincere apologies.’ Emily opened the patio doors, Carlo bolting straight for Eben Jenks Loomis and wife Mary settled on a tartan blanket, the temptation of cheese and biscuits getting the better of her four-legged friend. ‘What

of one of your closest companions, Thomas? Berry Benson? Where is he?’

‘Safe and well. Found his way back to us, as we knew he would, eventually.’ Thomas’s words almost stuck in his throat. Emily gave a quizzical look.

‘So, where was he all this time? This Benson?’

‘Matters of the heart. Just as Gerrit suggested’

‘Ah, well. Let us hope that he has now been spared grief. That is, as I once said, enough.’ Emily whistled Carlo back to her feet.

‘More than enough,’ Thomas nodded.

Senero Todd aligned the telescope, tilting it back and forth as young Mabel and David jostled and shoved one another for a view through its lens. Emily’s brother Austin forced his way between the two and insisted they sit down quietly as he buried his head in his law book. Todd twisted the focus, raised a finger in a eureka moment.

‘There it is. Venus!’ he announced. ‘Brightest object in the sky. Guided ships over the millennia.’

‘Been like this every evening the Peck-Todds come over.’ Eben leant in and whispered in Thomas’s ear. ‘Still, it entertains the children.’

‘Quite. I hear there is a transit coming up, Senero?’ Thomas asked aloud. Senero’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. ‘So I’ve been informed, anyway.’ He cast a grin towards Emily and her mother, now rid of her irritable mood. She shook her head with a thin smile.

‘Why yes, yes, there is Mr Wentworth Higginson. Our estimates would concur on 1882. So, we may have to leave such a discovery to the next generation,’ Senero replied.

‘I’m confident they won’t let us down.’ Thomas acknowledged his company and raised his wineglass. ‘To a future as bright as the stars,’ he toasted.

Mabel Jenks Loomis found her way to the telescope and peered eagerly down the lens. ‘So many, so many stars!’ she chirped. ‘How many are there?’

‘Oh, my dear Mabel...many,’ Senero answered. ‘All different sizes, though, some far off, others much closer.’

‘More than on our flag, then?’ David began to point to each and count in his head.

‘Yes, yes there are, Master Todd. But ours are all equal,’ Thomas smiled.

Epilogue

It is the year eighteen hundred and sixty-five and the fifteenth day of April... odd, given I always felt such an act should have taken place on the Ides of March. For that would have been my knight of Sir Lamorak's inimitable dramatic style, not a traitor as some will no doubt call him, but a loyal subject to the Confederate cause—well, as it shall be framed. In truth, this was an act of devotion to me, my purpose, and my belief in our people in this world. Word has already reached me of Abraham Lincoln's deteriorating condition, a pistol wound to the skull, merciful perhaps on the part of Mr Wilkes Booth, but I would have considered the blade of a knight more noble. Whispers on the winds tell me that a certain Major Rathbone, the company of the president and his wife at Ford's Theatre this bleak evening, felt the force of the Sir Lamorak sword instead, in desperate defence. What these people will be prepared to do for those in presumed power can never be underestimated.

Newspapers and publications will speak tomorrow of an ordinary man with a united vision for America. The mourners will come, bound by their grief for both the North and South of this nation, a nation that without question will have its moment once again. For even I, Morgan le Fay, despite my gifts and having trod this

Earth for so many centuries, failed to foresee the love that one man held deep inside for what should have become an enemy. Berry Benson, the blood of Sir Bedivere, a troubled mind trumped by a pure heart. If a human enslaved can come to forgive their capturer, and the capturer can come to understand their perceived inferior, then the sands are shifting. Empires are never built on these notions, and while I remain convinced that the hatred born of blood between mortal man and man within America will endure despite these fleeting moments of reconciliation, I must take caution in my selection for a new age. A radical country, one bent on glory and domination, one that would be prepared to follow in the footsteps of a single voice that sings proudly of its own superior place above all others. When its people are down, buried beneath sorrow, all hope appears lost, but mouths yearn for more, that is when to strike. But I must think on a grander scale, not just a single nation and its myopic ambitions with its borders—all lands, all people. The first truly global empire born of the Palladium, my hand on its racing pulse. Let those of the Red Dragon move forward, break the cycle with the King's Blade as they have done so many times before. Soon, the advancements of technology in warfare witnessed in this civil war will move too fast for even the descendants of Sir Bedivere to combat such power. The power of all peoples that must join in a chorus of war—a flood that no one knight can hold back.

I spoke of loyalty, the words *Albus Draco* shouted from Jonathan Wilkes Booth's mouth as the president's body hung from the theatre box. This is to be cherished. While the ticking of the hours shortens the knight of Sir Lamorak's time with me, his final words written to me addressed me as Mother, a title I never would have entertained. I will have no children, and am forever dependent on those sired by Sir Lancelot, the family name of Worthington proving decidedly frail in its devotion to the White Dragon, with its purposeful betrayal of secrets. I will pray to the Moon and her divine wisdom that Henry's son, Charles, will step forth and become a more predictable ally. Let the line of Longstreet and the knights of Palamedes do business as ambassadors within the fragile alliance of lands that is the Ottoman Empire, and see if one is worthy of the staff he carries. My beloved and valiant Jeb Stuart fighting to the very end, the line of Sir Gareth guaranteed for another generation, John Breckinridge fleeing under my wing to British shores and tasked with the continuation of the Sir Tristan line, the intelligence of Israel Greene, and the knights of Sir Geraint wavering, but not lost. The pieces are in play, I must remind myself, the silver rings they carry no less potent than the day they were forged.

On the final day of Gettysburg, I watched the wave of blue flame bring down the finest cavalry charge ever conceived. A raging torrent dampened to a whimper by a mere handful of the once three-hundred strong Band of Thebes. If this was the might of only a few passionately

paired men, then the thought of what the entire Band could achieve chills me. The lines of Sir Galahad and Sir Gawain will echo this success of equals and shout loudly across all continents, however far their seed may have spread. I sadly do not have the luxury of herding them into a single battle and meeting them all head-on, like Alexander the Great and his father Phillip of Macedon. However, that single voice once again, moulded by my instruction, could channel the venom of the masses against that which they consider different, creating an enemy that does not exist. A lesson has, in fact, been learnt from these United States that people can still come to fear what they do not understand.

A fresh dawn breaks, the sun shining boldly on a new day. I am reminded that this day is Easter, when the resurrection of the Lord's Son is celebrated. I too celebrate, for to me it brings the good tidings of spring, the Goddess Eostre, and her gift of life after the barren months of winter, the opportunity to start anew. A time when festivals were held in my and my sister's names, when the richness of the Earth was revered more than the Heavens above. You would have forgotten that much, I am sure, but there are those who remember...and as long as a single soul keeps the Old Ways in their minds, we shall not be forgotten. I shall not be forgotten.

*Tell all the truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—*

- *Emily Dickinson*

**THE SACRED BAND: UNION
THE END**

UK Copyright 2022
Reg. 284745529