

THE SACRED BAND

ARMADA

James MacTavish



Red Dragon

Sir Galahad
(*Sir Francis Drake*)

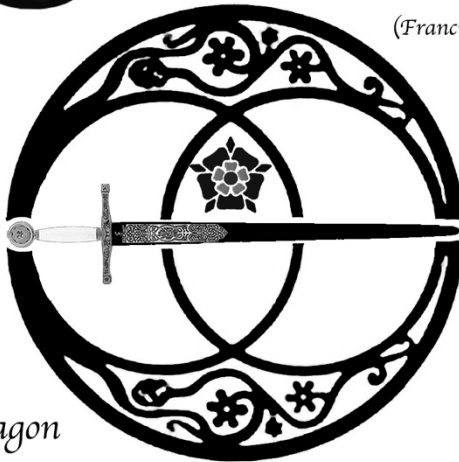
Sir Gawain
(*Sir Walter Raleigh*)

Sir Bors
(*Robert Poley*)

Sir Kay
(*Gilbert Gifford*)

Sir Gaheris
(*Francis Walsingham*)

Sir Bedivere
(*John Dee*)



White Dragon

Sir Lancelot
(*Duke Alonso Perez de Guzman*)

Sir Tristan
(*Alexander Farnese, Duke of Parma*)

Sir Geraint
(*John Ballard*)

Sir Gareth
(*Admiral Juan Martinez*)

Sir Palamedes
(*Admiral Miguel de Oquendo*)

Sir Lamorak
(*Anthony Babington*)





The Sacred Band
Lions of Leuctra / Sons of Ares



John Norris
David Rizzo
150 male partnerships



*Knights of the Round Table
Red and White Dragon united*

*Sir Galahad
(Luke Allen)
Sir Bors
(Violet Butcher)
Sir Gaheeris
(Gary Willis)
Sir Geraint
(Geraint South)
Sir Palamedes
(Aisha Hussin)
Sir Lancelot
(Jonathan Worthington)*



*The Sacred Band
Lions of Leuctra / Sons of Ares*

*Adam Allen
Jonathan Worthington
Alex Allen
Christopher Wood
Milo Conti
Tommy Brooks
The 150 male partnerships*

Prologue

To be the Thirteenth is to be the damned, the wretched. Yet, I believed I was pure, pure of both heart and soul. On the day our great King Arthur summoned us all to his high hall of Camelot, we were all of young but noble blood. I remember jostling with Sir Bors the 'Younger', as we came to know him, a brute so massive his girth filled most of the large double-door entrance. We were all certain that he deliberately slowed his pace to appear more majestic upon arrival, a patient queue of the remaining twelve having to drag their feet behind him. 'Probably the gout playing up again,' Sir Gawain chuckled. 'Plagued his father, one would think the son would have learnt to lay off the mead once in a while.'

'I'll let you tell him that when we next joust,' snipped Sir Kay. Although always the quickest with his sharp, forked tongue, he had a jovial way with words that frequently allowed him to squirm his way out of any conflict and keep his sword in its sheath, although on occasion he brought water to the boil quicker than needed. Between us scampered the sly feet of our most juvenile member, his father Sir Lancelot growling from the back of the line, 'Galahad! Get back here'. The twelve-year-old had never set foot inside the castle before, having to make do with bedtime stories often dryly told by his earnest parents, loyal and dutiful, almost to the point of being devoid of life's pleasures. The growl became a

reproachful tutting as Galahad slid between Sir Bors' weighty thighs and bolted for the Round Table, squeaking with wonder. 'Why didn't we think of that?' Sir Kay rolled his eyes.

'Most eager is your son, Sir Lancelot,' Lady Guinevere greeted, ushering the boy back into his father's arms.

'My lady.' Sir Lancelot bowed, brushing her chalk-white fingers with the briefest of kisses. 'The king tells me you have not been feeling quite yourself of late? A spell of darkness fills your dreams?' His eyes narrowed with concern.

Lady Guinevere clenched her hands, and her rosy cheeks grew pale. 'Just a worrisome mind during worrying times, Sir Lancelot. Nothing more, Merlin has assured me. You know how the deep bellow of the Saxon horn from across the seas awakens fear in our king, and as he lies awake at night wrestling with his future, I do so with my eyes closed.' She forced a light smile.

'Merlin! Where's Merlin?' Galahad sparked, head darting around for clues.

'Oh, he'll be along very shortly, young knight,' came a chill of a voice. Footsteps so light that they barely resonated through the hall, Lady Guinevere's cream satin gown shadowed by one of earthy green, slim arms

covered to wrists encircled with a trim of gold, and a bosom less modestly covered than the queen's, causing even the incorrigible Sir Tristan to blush. 'And please, do not tire yourself with worry for our good Lady Guinevere, Sir Lancelot, for Merlin and I will see to it she is well cared for.'

'Thank you, Morgan le Fay,' Sir Lancelot replied with a bow, less reverently than before.

'But where is Merlin?' Galahad flustered. 'I heard he doesn't live here in the castle with King Arthur or Lady Guinevere, but high up on a mountain somewhere...no, no, that's not it. In the cliffs by the seas! No...wait, Father? What was it?' he gestured wildly with his hands.

'Everywhere and anywhere, young knight. He does like to travel.' Morgan le Fay gave a sly wink. 'But the sooner we are all seated at the table, the sooner he will reveal himself.' She clapped her hands. 'Please, good knights, may I ask that you relinquish your swords.'

'What?' Sir Tristan puzzled. He turned to me for support. I simply shrugged.

'Who is she, a meddler in witchcraft, to tell us when we should lay down our swords?' Sir Gareth whispered into my ear. I shrugged again. 'I'm beginning to wonder who exactly is running this fair kingdom of ours.'

‘Please comply, my good knights. For it is the wish of the king, and Merlin himself,’ Morgan le Fay insisted. I moved first, unsheathing my blade and laying it clean at the feet of Lady Guinevere, and bowed to our queen, making certain to turn my back on le Fay. ‘Why thank you, Sir Percival. Always the first to set a fine example.’ One by one, the remaining twelve laid down their blades, even the small sewing needle of a sword granted to little Galahad, prompting a chuckle from the group. ‘Splendid. Now, if you please...a seat for all of you at the Round Table. Sir Percival, please take the seat directly to the right of the king. He would like that, I am sure.’

‘Really?’ I blurted out without really thinking, seeing jealousy twisting the face of Sir Lancelot, a knight who considered his bloodline so revered he even found a place for his son at the Round Table, now seemingly spurned by the witch.

‘Oh, yes, after all, you did lead by example,’ Morgan le Fay gave a slow wink, certain to catch the eye of Sir Lancelot, who had already rushed to the seat directly left of the king. We exchanged cordial glances for several moments before Arthur made his entrance, Lady Guinevere gently guiding her husband to his chair, no fanfare or ceremony, no sounding of trumpets, the way he always preferred it. A cohort of equals, the king marked only by a minimalist circle of gold perched atop his long greying hair, the embossed Red Dragon emblem just visible through loose strands. He thanked and

blessed his wife as customary, before revealing the gleaming metal of Excalibur before us—our signal to stand—and thumping its pommel three times upon the table. We stood still until the call was answered. The heavy double doors creaked slowly open without force. The wizard Merlin had arrived.

I can still recall the lectures, the debates, the threats, and the rivalries of that evening. King Arthur became wearier and wearier with each breath. Lady Guinevere placed a comforting hand on his shoulder each time the odious White Dragon – symbol of the Saxons - was uttered. The usually taciturn Merlin appears to be locked in a separate debate with his apprentice Morgan le Fay. The sorceress turned sour at the wagging of a finger from Merlin, straining to keep her turmoil contained as he swept his storm-grey cloak free from beneath his feet and sharply turned his back on her, much to her evident chagrin. He leant in and whispered into the king's ear as he so often did, Arthur immediately raising a palm for silence. 'My good knights, our guide and counsel, Merlin, has gifts he wishes to bestow upon you all—treasures forged by his own magic and true, to uphold our Kingdom of Britain, just as you have all sworn by oath.'

'I knew it! We're all getting new swords. Magic swords, just like Excalibur, aren't we?' Sir Galahad bounced gleefully.

'Sadly no, young Sir Galahad, for there can be only one Excalibur. Perhaps one day, it may find its way to you, indeed any of you fine knights, but for now...' the king paused as Merlin moved counterclockwise around the table, pulling from his robes what appeared to be no more than simple walking staffs, polished but still knotted in places. Sir Lancelot received two, prompting Sir Bedivere directly opposite to enquire as to why, when the rest received just one. The king replied, 'When you bring your child before me to swear an oath at such a tender age, I'm sure the same will be granted.' An answer that silenced the honourable Sir Bedivere while Sir Lancelot smirked, his position as favourite to the king seemingly restored, as he proudly saw his son Sir Galahad receive his own staff.

'Most beautiful, Merlin. The craftsmanship.' Sir Palamedes flicked the smooth bark and inspected his gift, sarcasm lacing his voice. 'And what exactly are we to do with these sticks, should the Saxons, or indeed anyone else, come plundering our shores? Poke them in the eye?' Sniggers erupted around the table, just as I received my own staff, the thirteenth, with a noticeable raise of an eyebrow from Merlin as he parted with it. I felt a warmth in my hand the moment I touched the wood, a familiarity, as if it were my own sword that I

had carried and trained with most of my adult life. Without hesitation, I went to swing at an imaginary foe, as if the king himself were in danger, my eyes screwed tight shut, a hefty weight behind my strike. When my eyes opened, it was no staff that I held in my hand, but a brilliant blade, shimmering white, held motionless, its edge a foot away from my king's chest. Arthur smiled, his body appearing cloudy, as if seen behind glass. The remaining knights' mouths were agape, not a word spoken.

'Be careful with those,' Merlin commanded, dropping his conjured shield from around the king, 'for they are not what they appear.' He said no more.

'Wow!' Sir Galahad beamed in wonder. 'How did you do that, Sir Percival?'

'I'm...I'm not sure. My king, I'm truly sorry...I was not attempting to harm you...I was imagining...' I stuttered.

'Must have been a passionate strike, good Sir Percival. Perhaps that is how you must all come to wield these mighty gifts that Merlin has deemed you worthy of. Belief in a cause, what is right in your heart, that is the way of my knights. The Knights of the Round Table.' King Arthur stood, placing his hand on my shoulder, attention broken by the cries of a baby echoing around the hall. 'Ah, timing as perfect as ever. Please excuse me, sirs, for my wife and I must attend to Mordred.

Another restless night for all three of us, I sense.' The infant's cries drew a deep breath from Sir Lancelot, a bead or two of sweat rolling down the chiselled face of the knight as Lady Guinevere cast a forlorn glance his way, quickening her pace as she passed Morgan le Fay, the sorceress offering a near-mocking curtsy.

'What were you imagining?' Little Galahad tugged at my arm, still swinging his staff to no avail. 'Mine must be broken.' I assured him it was not, and that the only image I held firm in my mind was that of our king under attack, and me being willing to throw myself between him and any would-be assailant for the defence of his life. Galahad's eyes pooled, his father pulling him away with urgency just as Sir Geraint began to joke that Sir Tristan had already been successful in summoning his blade and was now inspecting his own reflection in its glossy steel.

Just as Morgan le Fay said, I was the one to lead by example. I was destined to be the least corruptible, the most honest, and most loyal. I am certain it was this that led her to suggest I lead the quest across the continent for the relic we have come to know as the Grail, the statue of protection that was meant to ensure our king's legacy for an eternity, the Kingdom of Britain unrivalled. Now, I kneel before a cross, for all other beliefs have failed me. I am a ghost, a shadow, perhaps

even a traitor. The thirteenth disciple, the Christian texts named me. Emperor Charlemagne, quite the orator that evening I duelled against his finest warrior for the right to claim the necklace he wore, that held equal importance to him as this Greek statue to le Fay. Judas Iscariot was the betrayer of Jesus Christ, just as I have done to our king and my fellow knights. A jewel as red as blood fuelled a desire within me like nothing I had ever experienced, challenging my own chastity and draining my allegiance like the spreading venom of a snake bite. A snake might indeed still be slithering amongst us, for while it was Prince Mordred who clashed his sword against the might of Excalibur, many amongst the Round Table suspect him to be no more than a pawn for what was destined to be a greater triumph for a new Queen of Camelot, one who holds knowledge of the mystic ways beyond any of us mortals. I am left to wonder whether Merlin foresaw his protégée's iridescent eyes of ambition, whether he knew of a doomed affair between Lady Guinevere and the double-sworded knight of Sir Lancelot, or how many other men were charmed by either the sorceress's innate powers or those granted by my ill-fated ruby gift that she so hastily seized.

Still, what does it matter? While the Kingdom of Britain appears to have been spared from Saxon conquest for now, the Red Dragon standard is torn, while the White is regrouping. Our king is dead, sacrificed at the hand of his son for the sake of his people and his lands, the final

wielding of Excalibur his epitaph, the prince confined to the depths of Hell for such treason, but I cannot deny my own role in Camelot's downfall. While several of my fellow knights now flee to continue to fight in Arthur's name, upholding his values and his honour, I must cleanse myself of my wrongdoing—my failure to pick a side in this most epic of battles. It will begin with a new quest, a pilgrimage of penance in the name of one of the earliest martyrs, Saint James - the *Santiago de Compostela*. In time, during my journey to the most holy of sites in Rome, I will undoubtedly feel the strain of my sins, but with each step, the load may get lighter. I fear that the Lady of the Lake will not make my crossing to the Iberian Peninsula an easy one, for such spirits are not above the wrath of vengeance, even those as seemingly meek as Niume. In an offering of peace, I stand deep within the woodlands of Camelot, and am prepared to cast my own cursed sword of bane and woe into the stubborn granite stone awash with spring waters of red and white. For while it might have brought me glory once, to all those around it shared only pain. Legend tells us that the Lady of the Lake gave our great king the power of Excalibur, and should no one left alive be worthy of wielding it, it should be returned, only to rise again once Britain requires it most. Perhaps this simple gesture of my own will appease the spirits, and should anyone worthy of leading these lands reflect my true soul and give all to the crown then can prise my blade from its bed—perhaps now she will let me cross. If not, at least know I have acted in good faith, and pray

to whatever deity remains that my fellow knights somehow come to mend the broken Round Table. It may take time, and the souls of generation after generation, but true peace and unity is so often a war hard fought.

Should I never return to the Isle of Britain, know that these are the final words of Sir Percival, the most noble Knight of the Round Table, the pure and the honest.

Chapter 1

Manresa – Catalonia, Spain

1st August 1482 AD

Far too warm and humid a night for blankets, young Isabella thought, as she tossed and turned on the creases of her bed. A trickle of a breeze crept in through the open window, sweet with the scent of oranges from the groves below, enough to tempt the child to the edge of the Juliet balcony. She soaked in what cool air she could, admiring the slit of a red sunset just above the mountain range of Monserrat. A few candles flickered like fireflies down in the sleepy town outside the imposing walls of Castle Corbenic, begging the question who exactly was trotting around the dusty summer streets so near sundown. All the villagers had been warned; the Inquisition was on its way, sweeping through the southern Castile coast armed with cross and judgement. A maid to her father bore a scar across her china-porcelain forehead, the only blemish Isabella could notice on an otherwise beautiful oval face. She enquired about it once, and the maid swiftly pulled down a lock of hair to hide it, cheeks flushing pink. ‘My own fault,’ she whispered piteously. ‘My father warned me, just as your father warns you, my dear princess. This is a land for the Lord and his dutiful son, born in Bethlehem. Not for those of the Yiddish tongue. Don’t ever let anyone see you try to break Passover bread,’ she said, daring a smile.

‘Passover bread? What’s that?’ Isabelle asked.

‘Did I not just tell you?’ the maid rushed the last few buttons of Isabella’s dress just when her father entered the room. ‘My good King Anfortas. My apologies for the delay. Her Highness is ready for supper now,’ she flustered.

‘Are we having Passover bread, Father? I want to know what it is,’ Isabella blurted, curiosity quickly changing to hesitation as the maid’s eyes popped.

The king raised his eyebrows and put a palm on the maid’s quivering shoulder. ‘You are dismissed, Mafalda,’ he said softly. The maid muttered an apology, was soothed by a smile from Isabella’s father along with words of comfort. ‘Fear not. I am not my ancestors.’ The maid curtsied swiftly and left. Isabella had more questions from that night onwards but rarely found the opportunity to share them with anyone else in the castle.

The chimes of the Santa Maria Church signalled the final shreds of daylight, the flickers of candles rushing back home along the narrow lanes of the Grau del Jueus, extinguished one by one. She was startled by a knock on the door, darting back to her bed just as her father entered. ‘I could see you from the grove up there on the balcony.’ He settled on the bedside. ‘What keeps my little cicada up at this hour?’ He stroked his daughter’s

forehead. 'Ah, too warm, maybe?' he moved to stretch the balcony doors a touch wider. 'A hot night for us all, in more ways than one,' he sighed.

'The Inquisition?' Isabella spouted. 'Are they angry with you, Father?' The king rested his large hands on the balcony, hunched and heavy. 'They don't like it that we still allow Passover bread here, do they?' she swung her knees over the edge and sat.

'King Ferdinand of Aragon disagrees with my court on many things, Isabella,' her father turned with a chuckle. But all lands will act in the best interest of the Kingdom of Castile, including ours. He and his queen, Lady Isabella, know that.'

'Is that why you called me Isabella? Because I too will be a queen someday?'

'Would you have preferred something else?'

Isabella wracked her brains for an alternative—Maria from their church perhaps? No, too ordinary. Joan, like the maiden that chased the English from neighbouring France, filled her with a sense of pride and purpose. No, no. Too grand a title for someone who had yet to achieve such a feat. 'Margarita. After Mother,' she blurted the instant the thought came to mind.

‘Ah, a kind and worthy choice, my dear.’ Her father smiled, guiding her back into bed. ‘But Isabella was in fact your mother’s choice, and who would we be to argue against her?’

‘Do you still think of her?’ Isabella cast her gaze down at her father’s wedding ring, the gleam of gold punctuated with the sparkling blue and red dots of sapphires and rubies.

‘Every day, little one,’ Anfortas replied, with a twist of the ring. ‘Taken from us by God too soon, I know, but the Lord has his reasons.’ His eyes moistened slightly, blinked away. ‘And...just like the Lord’s power over life and death, so too comes his power over our glorious summer night’s weather. So, if you cannot sleep, how about a story?’ he lightened. Isabella nodding gleefully. ‘Very well...let me guess which one you would like to hear.’

‘The Knight of Sir Percival!’ Isabella squeaked, interrupting the playful scratching of her father’s long beard.

‘Of course, of course. The favourite one. So be it.’ He stretched his arms out wide theatrically. ‘Long ago, on the Isle of Britain lived the noble King Arthur, and his thirteen loyal knights.’ Isabella’s eyes twinkled in delight. She loved to listen to the legendary story of the cursed thirteenth line of Sir Percival the Just, his escape

from the ferocious Saxons, torn between love of his king and matters of the heart. Willing to sacrifice all worldly pleasures in the name of duty. Left wandering these very plains, desperate for solace and forgiveness, travelling as far as the Holy City of Rome and the Vatican, blessed by the Pope himself, but still finding no comfort in what he saw as a betrayal to his king and country. 'Then, after many, many years of searching for salvation, he came to rest here in these very walls of Castle Corbinec, realising that his purpose in life was not the destination, but the journey. He had served his penalty, relinquished his knight's sword, and passed on into the afterlife, a man at peace with the Lord and his ways,' her father concluded.

'But not before...' Isabella sprung upright.

'Indeed, indeed. Not before blessing our very family with his name. A good name, now free of guilt and treachery. Sworn to defend these lands and their people for generations to come,' Anfortas said, settling his daughter once more.

'So, I am to be a knight! Not just a queen...but a knight!' she grinned.

'Perhaps, in time, my love. So the legend says. But remember, legends are words of caution, not celebration. A Knight of the Round Table was to be true of heart, remaining loyal to the values of the king, never

rising above their place, and sworn to fight for those who couldn't defend themselves. To deviate from this path is the true curse, Isabella, for that leads to a life without peace, knowing that others can be in desperate need, and those able to assist do nothing.' Her father waved a finger inches from her nose. 'So says the bloodline of...'

The bedroom door flew open. 'King Anfortas!' a steward blurted, wheezily. 'My sincere apologies, but the Inquisition has come.' He wiped away beads of sweat filled with fear.

The king's chin hit his chest. 'Very well, tell the righteous Tomas de Torquemada, I shall greet him shortly,' he replied.

'Father...what does the Inquisition want?' Isabella suddenly felt an unwelcome chill spread across her body, yanked a blanket free and wrapped it tightly around her waist.

'What it can never truly hope to achieve.' Her father twisted a corner of his mouth slyly. 'Stay here in your room, Isabella. No roaming about the castle, understood?' He snapped upright to attention, straightened, brushed down his scarlet and yellow tunic, and marched out. A sudden glow of what could have been a hundred candles burning from the grove below caught Isabella's attention. She snuck towards the

balcony once more, creaking the shutters open an inch. The golden stream of firelight torches of Tomas de Torquemada and his entourage began filling the courtyard.

‘To what do I owe the pleasure, Señor Balin?’ King Anfortas stood firmly before the midnight-black mount of Caballero de Savage, a name soaked in more blood than his master de Torquemada, for a man claiming to act in the name of the Holy Lord would never sully his hands with the slain—that was work delegated to lesser followers, ones who obeyed without mercy or conscience. ‘I was not expecting His Excellency at such an hour, so my humble court is not fit for entertaining him.’

De Savage dispended with the pleasantries, sweeping his cloak, adorned with Holy cross to one side, revealing a shard of battered metal, a spearhead—one King Anfortas was only too familiar with. A weapon that was steered by the right hand of God, and that of destiny, plunged into the side of the heavenly son nailed to the cross, with one of these nails rumoured to be encased within the head itself. ‘Shall I tell you what I saw upon riding into your fair lands of Manresa, good Anfortas?’ Señor Balin toyed. ‘Most upsetting for His Majesty, King Ferdinand II and His Holiness, the Pope, for I could have sworn upon God that I saw the symbol of the Jews

within a window, and over a door, and even carved upon stone walls,' he tutted. 'Surely not, I declared to Padre de Torquemada. For the name of Anfortas of Castle Corbenic has always enjoyed the favour of His Holiness, is this not true?' He stroked the neck of the spear.

'It is true, Señor Balin. But why, might I ask, am I not addressing Frey de Torquemada himself on such matters? Such *serious* matters?' Anfortas asked.

'The work of God requires many hands, Anfortas.' De Savage gestured to the swell of torches surrounding the castle. 'It is impossible for Padre de Torquemada to serve justice to everyone across Castile at once. Thankfully, he has his true followers to assist.'

'True followers? Some might even call you blind, Señor,' Anfortas sparked. Croaks of *blasfemia* rattled through the ranks.

'I can assure you, dear Anfortas, that our Lord is not blind.' Balin ordered his men to calm down. 'He sees everything, and judges everyone.' He kicked his horse a few steps closer, the mist of its hot breath warming the king's cheeks. 'Why, if he were to learn of a man such as yourself offering shelter to a people we had expelled decades ago, then I would not like to learn of the consequences,' he hissed. 'Whom else do you have

hiding in your town? A Muslim, maybe? An *ateista*, perhaps?’

The king backed away from the horse’s twitching muzzle and gave a respectful bow. ‘I assure your master, de Torquemada, that there are no *ateistas*, non-believers, here in Manresa...’ He turned his head to one side, spotting Isabella through the slats of the balcony above, instantly galvanising his resolve. ‘...but, what they choose to believe will forever be their right.’

De Savage’s face froze to stone; a rough chortle of resistance to the rebuke followed. His mount turned away, leaving enough room to release the spear and slice swiftly downward into Anfortas’s midriff. The king yelled louder than Isabella could scream. ‘Sadly, my dear Señor, I believe that to be true,’ he growled, wiping the spearhead free of the streaks of blood. He addressed his faithful audience proudly. ‘Be it witnessed here, the fate of a traitor to our high King Ferdinand II and the holy Lord. *King* Anfortas, maimed by the most dolorous of strokes by the Spear of Destiny, the piercer of our son, Jesus Christ. May these lands, once rich with fish and bounty from the seas, drain dry of plenty, and his bloodline be poisoned with the curse of disobedience. For there is only one faithful path to tread upon this Earth, and that is in the name of God! *Gloria a Dios!*’ Balin de Savage yelled, spear held high. The chant rang around the courtyard like a groaning bell that Isabella tried to shut out by clamping her hands down

hard on her ears. The canter of hooves shook the castle walls, echoing out, leaving just the whimpers of her father lingering in the air.

Chapter 2

London – England

14th September 2022 AD

There was a catch of dust in the evening sun, a ray that pierced the shutters and shone directly into Adam Allen's eyes. The dust tickled his nose. He squinted, holding his breath to avoid a loud sneeze that would have shattered the silence of the courtroom chamber. How many heads could remain silent for so long he didn't know; the odd tapping of busy fingers on keyboards and smart phones was all he could hear for the past twenty minutes. He had struggled to get comfortable in the stern wooden chair positioned directly in front of the XENO Committee. It squeaked on its back legs each time he tried to lean back, and wobbled a little when he shifted his weight. He felt completely exposed, eyes like pins encircling him, the occasional dry cough into a palm from a frumpy woman to his right, her sea green blouse done up tightly to a throat encircled with a string of pearls. Adam noticed that she would play with them each time the dreaded XENO-20 virus was mentioned—a lost loved one, maybe? The lustrous necklace a parting gift or treasured memory perhaps? The thought was enough to make Adam swallow hard and cast his head down as innocently as he could. The gentleman to his immediate right never once looked up from his notes, endlessly shuffling through papers and monotone photographs of

the London School of Tropical Hygiene, marking several with a thick red highlighter. Not one question was asked. Either some members of the Committee were holding their cards so close to their chests that they preferred to be on mute for this entire hearing, or perhaps worse, their minds were already made up before they sat down, and had been for these past two years.

‘All rise, please,’ came a booming voice. ‘Lady Whitstanley presiding.’ Adam took to his feet, rubbed his itchy nose, and spotted at the far end of the front row behind him the warming face of Violet Butcher, who gave him a quick wink and mouthed words of encouragement, her testimony already given, robust and secured. Now the leader of the Sacred Band just needed to attempt the same. They were not the aggressors, so for heaven’s sake don’t act like it, was the cautious advice given by Gary Willis and his Uncle Alex just hours before. The Allen family’s temper was always a potential pitfall in the quest for proving innocence.

Lady Whitstanley made her announcement, quickly summarising the last few hours of discussion in a neutral fashion, turning her head to each side of the courtroom as details were repeated over and over, her slim-styled reading glasses perched on the tip of her pointy nose as yet more papers were passed in her direction. ‘Remind all present again, Mr Allen. The

actual purpose of this Sacred Band is *what?*' Her eyes remained fixed on her notes.

'Protection,' Adam affirmed.

'Of what? Whom?'

'Everybody.' Adam's response was greeted with a mutter across the court.

'*Everybody?* And you came to this conclusion, how exactly?' Lady Whitstanley peered over her spectacles.

'Because it's what we've always done, for many years, ma'am.' Adam tucked his hands behind his back and noted Violet nodding in accord.

'Hmmm. Not the best of years for you then in 2020? As their leader? If protecting everybody is your objective...'

Whitstanley bit back. 'You mentioned, how can I put it, a dissension in your order's ranks?' she continued, with a shuffle of papers.

'Correct.'

'And this dissenter was the criminal Mr Damasichthon Zethus, who you claim usurped your position as a leader and then masterminded the release of the deadly pathogen XENO-20, a virus he engineered himself, in an

attempt to hold the world to ransom?’ Whitstanley’s tone grew deeper.

‘Not all the world,’ Adam spoke softly but without thinking.

‘Ah, quite. This illness wasn’t to affect you or members of this Sacred Band, was it? At least that was the intention—it was *targeted*. Correct?’

Adam felt the burn of acid rise from his stomach to his throat; he gulped it down again. ‘In a way, yes.’

‘So, a targeted attack on specific individuals. I’m sure you are smart enough to realise a striking resemblance to other acts carried out under such terms,’ Whitstanley said hunching forward, arms folded, the faces of other Committee members following her.

‘I know what you are all thinking, what the world has thought these past few years.’ Adam bowed his head and knitted his fingers together. ‘But...I respectfully remind the Committee and all representatives from all nations that without our help, mine and Mrs Butcher’s over there, you would have had no cure for XENO-20, and despite the best efforts of representatives from the London School of Tropical Hygiene, requests to take the startling nature of the virus and its capacity to harm only heterosexuals seriously was dismissed on many occasions by global health bodies.’

‘Yes, we have the statement from Doctor Ana Braithwaite. Thank you, Mr Allen.’ The first words uttered by the gentleman with the thick red marker confirmed Adam’s fears of preconceived assumptions.

‘Good. Then you’ll also know that it was Doctor Braithwaite’s tireless work that led to the overall development of ASCLEPIUS, the antibodies for Damasichthon’s created disease and that the Sacred Band, once back under my command, has done all that has been expected of governments from all nations, including agreeing to any further medical trials and ensuring its efficiency and...’ Adam felt a wisp of blue fire crest over his knuckles. A welcome interruption came from Lady Whitstanley acknowledging such support from his fighters and what did appear to be a remarkable about-turn of aggression since the day Damasichthon disappeared.

‘The problem is, Mr Allen, while your and Mrs Butcher’s testimony appears heartfelt and sincere, and there is no question of both your and your wider family members’ involvement in such a vital solution to an act of unprecedented terror, we remain ignorant of the whereabouts of Mr Zethus...and also this individual, often seen with him.’ The frumpy lady with the pearls suddenly found resolve, reached for a handful of CCTV images taken from Wembley Stadium surveillance and pointed out the pixelated face of Cleodoxa with the tip of her pen. ‘Without a firm culprit to cross-examine, we

cannot but conclude that you are obscuring evidence from this Committee, and therefore the justice due to so much of the world.'

Now it was Violet Butcher hanging her head low, acutely aware of her partner's involvement in the slaughter, the Niobid sister of Damasichthon in hiding, doing what she had always done best throughout the two millennia of her existence, walking in the shadows, only this time, with the aid of Arthurian knights for additional cover. It was a snippet of comfort to Adam that should either of them choose to try and explain their own bloodlines...the Sacred Band's true founding and abilities, the power of blades born of thorn tree descended through the generations from the fabled Merlin, the interweaving of Greek legends and relics of insurmountable strength that shaped much of the modern world...then both he and Violet would be handcuffed immediately, pumped full of sedatives and carted off to the nearest psychiatric hospital. His uncle and other close family and friends had agreed to keep all commentary dilute and, of course, plausible: a blue flame spear became a unique cocktail of chemical components consisting of copper and potassium nitrate, swords became regular weapons concealed in walking canes, then of course, the traditional folly of fireworks and flares to excuse summoned shields and occasional explosions. This charade was about as plausible as any of them would get and, so far, had only raised a few incredulous eyebrows from the assessment of public

evidence. 'I assure the Committee, as I have done from day one of this interrogation, that if I knew of the whereabouts of Damasichthon, I would turn him over in a heartbeat,' Adam exhaled. 'As such, I've had all those of the Sacred Band scout across every continent, and not found him. This is in addition to all the resources every government and Secret Service might have at their disposal...aspects I know very little about, understandably. Still nothing, not a trace of the man in question.' His face twitched as he caught the dulling, pale eyes of Violet. 'Nor his sister,' he concluded.

'So, what would you have this Committee do, Mr Allen?' Lady Whitstanley furrowed her brow. 'While the ASCLEPIUS serum is unquestionably doing its job for the billions impacted by the XENO-20 disease, many are rightly concerned. Concerned that such an event could reoccur, with mutations in the genetic code of that virus bringing about a strain we cannot counter with a vaccine. All the while, the few people who know anything about its inception sit in this room.'

'Perhaps you'll have to trust us? Or failing that, trust nature.' Adam gave an ill-advised, casual shrug. The flicker of attitude was not lost on the Committee.

'*Nature?* Please explain, Mr Allen,' Whitstanley pressed.

'Well, back in the days of the Black Death, there was no cure or vaccine. Many millions perished, but life

resumed. Some might even say humanity grew stronger as a result, and this entitles us to remain on top of the food chain. Does it not? Our progress in science, for sure, our research into antibodies no doubt, but also our adaptive immunity. Quite Orwellian, I suppose,' Adam injected confidence in his reply.

'Wells, Mr Allen. You are referring to H. G. Wells and *The War of the Worlds*, I believe,' the gentleman with the thick red marker scoffed. Damn it. Adam flicked another glance towards Violet, face now in her hands. 'And I most certainly wouldn't be comparing the sickness that was XENO-20 to the common cold!' He stubbed his index finger firmly on the table.

'All right, all right. Enough, please,' said Lady Whitstanley, raising her hand. 'We will conclude for today. Mr Allen, You and Mrs Butcher may return to Bath and resume your assistance with this Committee and its Inquiry as agreed. Should we achieve extradition and have further need to interview other members of this Sacred Band, including your uncle, Alex Allen, or indeed your own brother Luke Allen, we shall count on complete cooperation, agreed?'

Adam stood to attention and clenched his jaw before nodding, almost letting slip the instinctive correction that his elder brother was *not* Sacred Band; an ill-suited jibe, his thoughts switching to Luke and Aisha out in the Middle East fighting their own cases to localised

governments and courts from Jordan to Turkey as to their whereabouts and involvement in Damasichthon's scheme, Aisha lending appeasing support through her Followers of Palamedes in humanitarian relief, but facing the same line of questioning nonetheless, more so given the already fierce cultural and religious divides now exacerbated by the Western powers. If terror were to be found, a direct line would be drawn to known pools of extremism.

The thud of the gavel announced the end of the session, heavy feet jarred on the marble floors, and the screech of chair legs filled the courtroom with a grating sound. Violet pushed her way forward, wrapping her arms around Adam. 'Orwell...seriously? Your father would be shocked,' she teased.

'Got flustered at the end there.' Adam bit his lip. 'Can't see an easy way out of this one, Vi, despite all we've done to make amends.'

'Give it time. We know the truth, and that's all that matters.' Violet patted Adam's stubble. 'You need a shave, young Mr Allen.'

'Might as well look like a criminal,' Adam grumbled.

'Keep saying that, and someone might end up believing you,' Violet cautioned playfully. 'Come on, best get back

to Bath. Not comfortable leaving Cleo by herself, and you need to update your brother and uncle.'

'Sure, they must have seen the news feed.'

Violet wrapped her fingers around her wooden staff, bringing her voice down to a whisper. 'As I said, only we know the truth.'

As expected, every radio station appeared tuned in to recent events from London and the Committee Inquiry. Many railed at the years of delay in resolve and conclusion since the first case of XENO-20, the widow of a spectator at Wembley Stadium becoming tearful in recalling the rapid demise of her husband once infected, the isolation and restrictions that followed, the relief in finding a cure but the unquenched thirst for justice. In contrast, a representative from the charity Stonewall appealed for calm in the wake of government activity and no rash retaliation against the LGBT community, with harassment and smear campaigns already ramping up across the globe, one extreme critic even a bold as to propose a world full of only homosexuals would curtail any impending climate disaster through a slash in population figures —preposterous, but always a cycle, Adam pondered. The one certainty from history that it appeared doomed to repeat. He fiddled with the radio buttons, interspersing sound with static, a short quip

from one BBC channel promoting a soon-to-be aired television programme about a small town in Southern Spain that boasted of absolute immunity to XENO-20 throughout the pandemic, the fuzzy words of the reporter commenting on the report born from the investigations of Mr Gary Willis, renowned journalist and writer. Yet again, the Knight of Sir Gaheris seemed to have forged fortune from tragedy.

‘Bath lost again,’ Violet chirped while messaging Cleo. ‘7-24. Jonathan with the only try.’ She pursed her lips. ‘Went off injured in the second half, apparently.’

‘Unlikely,’ Adam continued, punching random buttons.

‘You know how sensitive he still is about—well, everything,’ Violet replied. ‘How many of his teammates know about you two?’ Adam remained quiet, uttering only a soft curse at failing to tune into anything that resembled discernible music. ‘You have to remember that coming out might have become more difficult for him now after everything that’s happened recently.’ Adam persisted in pulling awkward faces. ‘You should really speak with him. Ask him how he’s feeling. Like an actual *partner*. Rather than just a sparring buddy with shields and swords and...wait, I like that song. Go back,’ she prompted. Adam managed to settle on a Roxette song and endured several poorly sung notes of Joyride from his passenger.

'You seem very upbeat about all this, Violet,' Adam enquired. 'Can I just remind you that both you and I, as well as Cleo, my uncle, my brother and his wife, have been locked in a duel for our very existence lately, threatened with complete and absolute exposure. Have you stopped to ask yourself what that could mean?'

'My father Nick once said that if you are constantly looking up at the mountain, eventually you'll end up tripping over your shoelaces.' Violet rattled the door window rhythmically.

'What?'

'He meant that no matter how big things appear to be right in front of you, if you miss the smaller things, they will be your downfall,' she clarified. 'Meaning, spend more time on those close to you and what you have, rather than trying to control...'

'Yeah, I get it, Vi. Thanks,' Adam scoffed. 'I'll call Jon when I get back. Ask him about his day and whether he needs a massage or something.' He grimaced at the sight of a tail of traffic spilling onto the M25.

'A massage? Wow. You're a keeper,' Violet smirked. Adam dared not ask what she and Cleo would have considered to be an alternative. Her phone buzzed, lit up with a cute photo of the two of them arm in arm over the Clifton Suspension Bridge bathed in rich sunset,

an intimate image that seared with a hint of jealousy as Adam searched through memories of his time with Jonathan for something equally romantic. 'Hi, love, yes. On our way back now...went as well as can be expected. More to come, I know.' Violet pointed towards the nearest junction and suggested an alternative route back to Bath. 'No, he's fine. Driving at the moment— held his nerve as always. I was just telling him he needs to relax a little more and recognise that not everyone sees us as criminals despite...wait, what?' she sat up straight, still fussing at Adam to move to the far lane. 'Who? Say the name again.' She strained to hear through a weak signal, stabbing wildly at the radio volume. 'Tell them to wait there. We're heading back now. Not one single word, Cleo, not yet. You understand?' She hung up promptly.

'Care to explain? Not Fernando carelessly inviting more Celtic FC players down for the weekend and expecting us all to entertain them with tales of myth and legend in front of a roaring fire at The Bear and...' Violet's shocked expression cut him short. 'Vi? What is it? Who was Cleo speaking to?'

'Two gentlemen. Both from Jamaica.' She tightened her hands to fists, a flicker of red flame channelling through her arms. 'Went by the name of *Benson*.'

Chapter 3

London – England

1st October 1554 AD

Master Drake had never seen grass cut so neatly, lush green squares framed with fresh gravel moistened by a glistening touch of morning dew. He stopped to pick at a blade or two, just to check if it was genuine, not some painted illusion—he was after all, at the palace of a queen, where just about everything looked surreal. A sharp shadow cast from Boleyn’s tower shielded his eyes. He tented a hand over his brow and stared up at the gilt circles that made up the astronomical clock face. He puzzled for a moment, trying to determine the actual time of day, its hands not making any sense in his head. Something about the moon and its cycles, he was told, tracing the circumference with a finger. Still couldn’t fathom it. A gaunt and frail woman with an unnaturally white complexion bumped into him. ‘S...s...sorry, ma’am,’ he stuttered. Two cloudy eyes peered down at him with disdain, followed by a grunt of disapproval.

‘Francis? Francis!’ His father called. ‘What have I told you about walking on the lawns?’

‘Sorry, Father,’ Drake replied then bowed.

‘You will be sorry if the queen finds out.’ His father seized his pencil-thin arm. ‘Come. Her Majesty’s guests

will be arriving soon, and we need to be present and proper in the main hall of the court.’ He brushed a light dusting of gravel sand from his scarlet tunic.

‘What’s that clock supposed to do, Father?’ Francis pointed once more.

‘It is an astrolabe, son, not a clock.’

‘An astro...what?’

‘Astrolabe. Tells the position of the planets and heavenly bodies beyond our own. Very important for sailing, fishing, and so on, and so forth.’ His father fussed over Francis’s top buttons. ‘I would imagine our royal guest from Spain would have had a similar one to navigate their way to London today.’ He stood up straight and tucked his wooden staff beneath his arm. ‘How do I look?’

‘Like a knight,’ Francis proclaimed, complete with an impromptu fencing stance.

‘Splendid. Exactly how we should. Quite a rarity is a good knight in the Kingdom of England these times, just when we have the greatest need for them.’ He patted Francis on the head.

‘Why? Why now?’ Francis reached for his father’s hand.

'Because we are at the dawn of a new age of empires, Francis. Remember what I told you about empires?' He winked.

'Those that know love, and felt its true pain...?' Francis began to recite with a scratch of his chin. 'Is...is *she* going to be here?'

'Possibly. Only one way to find out.' His father nodded in acknowledgement of Mr Walsingham, a stout fellow Francis recognised from several encounters at their home in Devon. The same wooden staff as his father's, never far from his side, together with a beguiling face that belied its youth. He dared a brief wave, hand withdrawn and wrapped under his cloak before slotting in line with the precession of pompous wigged heads.

'Why do we need an astrolabe to follow the moon? Surely we can just watch it, can't we?' Francis and his father quickened their strides to catch up with the flocks ahead.

'We can't see everything with our naked eyes from down here on our mortal plane, son. There are always other powers at work up there in the heavens. Planets that dwarf our own and, as such, exert great influence.' His father caught his breath as he attached himself to the back of the queue. 'Trust me. Should we meet Doctor Dee, he will lecture you to your heart's content, but for now, stay quiet.'

‘Mr Drake, good sir. Wonderful to see you,’ came a hearty embrace from Mr Raleigh. ‘And you’ve brought young Francis. Walter will be pleased to learn he is not the only young boy present here today.’ Francis received another ruffle of his hair from the broad man’s coarse hand. ‘I trust you’ve seen Walsingham?’

‘I have, albeit briefly. What news?’

‘As we’ve long suspected. The White Dragon of Iberia seeks to reign from afar. This wedding is but a sham, a ruse.’ Raleigh leant in tight to Francis’ father. ‘Prince Philip II has no interest in our Queen Mary—only her lands. He’ll use the thrall of Catholicism to sway her allegiance and then proclaim himself king over this island once her health deteriorates, which it will.’

‘The statue?’

‘The Palladium is in the hands of our enemy, that much is certain. Look at the influence of the mighty House of Hapsburg, from Spain to Naples. So much of the continent answers to it now; only England prevails,’ Raleigh sighed. ‘So, we must put our faith in John Dee.’

Drake’s face twisted into a frown upon hearing the doctor’s name. ‘Ill of mind is the line of Sir Bedivere, Mr

Raleigh—you and I both know that. Should the blade of the true King of Britain be required, we may be short of time.’ The creak of the great hall doors interrupted his flow. A sea of vibrant fabrics and the distinctive red and gold of the Iberian Empire swept through, unchallenged, to a grand trumpet fanfare. Spanish soldier boots stomped rhythmically on the slate paving stones below. Francis drew a deep breath upon seeing the lines of polished iron helmets and puffy frilled collars of the Royal Guardias stamping to a halt a mere yard or two from the queen herself. ‘Who knows...maybe even out of it altogether,’ Drake finished as the queen stood to attention, encouraging her subjects to mimic.

‘Damas y caballeros, ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Su Alteza Real, Prince Philip of Spain, son of the glorious Rey Carlos V and his Reina Isabella,’ an olive-skinned Spaniard announced with puffed-out chest, quickly sliding to the side and bowing low for the arrival of a short-statured man no older than Francis’s own father. His immaculately trimmed beard, as black as oil, matched the shade of his armour. The gentle clink of each pauldron broke the eerie silence in the Hall, Queen Mary already making her first tentative steps from the high altar down to greet her guest. A trained noble of a royal court, the queen’s delicate hand was cradled by the prince, treated to a prolonged kiss and a firm shake. *‘Gracias, gracias,’* Philip muttered.

'I bid thee welcome, my dear prince. As does all of England,' a blushing Mary proclaimed. 'May our exchange of hands be a blessing between our two great kingdoms, and the sign of prosperity yet to come.' Her eyes darted behind her for the support of her advisors, smiles just cracking their otherwise stern expressions.

'Sí, sí, señorita.' Philip began to turn his back and scan his audience. 'At least we can, shall we say, hope for a better union than any consort of your father's, yes?' His English was broken, but his temerity still hit the mark. A few sneers in the crowd, several uncomfortable chuckles, each brushed off by the prince and his pageantry. 'That beautiful tower we were welcomed under, in the name of one of your father's late wives I am told, sí?' the prince bit again, the corner of his mouth creased upwards to add a giggle.

'Why, yes. Only just completed is the Tower of Boleyn. I'm certain my father would have approved,' Queen Mary replied, looking unsettled.

'Ah, and what of your young sister, *Elizabeth*?' The prince pulled off his long velvet gloves. 'She would have approved also, sí?' the sharpened smile returned. Mary's eyes narrowed, and cast another glance back to her advisors for support. 'Ah, I tease you, my good queen. For we in Spain all know, this, too, is a land answering only to the true God, and your father Henry VIII has passed on into the depths of Hell for his treason

to faith,' he soured. 'Hope and salvation for all of Inglaterra, now that I have arrived to guide your beloved Mary.' His arms stretched wide to embrace his mute crowd.

'Cursed folly is this.' Mr Raleigh pulled his son Walter close. 'If only the Spanish king Charles V knew of his *true* source of power,' he whispered into Drake's ear. Francis's father caught from the corner of his eye the ghostly grey figure of a woman drifting in behind the Spanish cohort. Ashen in every way, save the red glow from just above her breast. She moved unassumingly to the side of the prince, gave a modest curtsy, and then hovered a step behind. 'Ah, I believe we have our muse, Mr Drake.' Raleigh readied his staff.

'Not here, Sir Gawain. The shadows, always in the shadows,' Drake cautioned, hand clamped on Raleigh's arm. 'Our children must learn restraint, yes?'

'I suppose,' Raleigh grunted. 'Walter, you and Francis listen well to the knight of Sir Galahad here, always a man of restraint. Almost to the point of frustration,' he mocked, while scouting the far side of the Hall. 'Where's Walsingham? The knights of Sir Gaheris should be here to witness this absurd union of crowns.'

There was a series of clangs and the echo of shouts from behind the thick oak hall door, a few heads turned in curiosity just as Prince Philip was introducing the grey

lady to the queen. 'The *Señorita Morgana*,' said an English translator. A row of darkened teeth appeared when Mary greeted her. The clangs grew louder, punctuated with some throaty shouts. 'Señorita Morgana knows this land well, my good queen, and I must say, my father is well advised with a blessing to her,' the prince continued, pausing to question the commotion from behind the door.

'That, I am sure.' The queen looked awkwardly at Morgana, unsettled perhaps by the presence of a near-flawless face, silver hair like waves of silk framing a delicate, curved jaw, rich red lips a splash of welcome colour on a muted skin. 'I...I must honour your visit and our coupling with a gift, my prince.' She beckoned an aide with her finger, and a plump cushion hurried to her side. 'Not much to look at, I know, but I am told this small token of thorn wood has quite a history.' The staff was lifted, light as a feather, and held flat along both her palms. 'My father, as you will be aware, saw to it that several of our monasteries were destroyed in the great dissolution and reformation of the church. This splinter of thorn wood is said to come from the abbey in Glastonbury, its last Abbot, Sir Richard Whlting, brutally hanged, drawn, and quartered in 1539 as he tried to defend our mighty Lord. The abbey itself has a special significance to our teachings, founded after the prophet Joseph of Arimathea passed through...' The wooden doors flew open, breaking Morgana's coveting gaze and pausing her eager reach for the dark staff.

‘Stop! Stop this madness! For this isle full of noises will hurt, not delight!’ Doctor John Dee forced his way through the restraints of the two sentry guards, one poked squarely on the forehead with his staff. Cries for his arrest were sounded from every corner of the hall, young Walsingham quick to appear from the flustered crowd and throw his weight against Dee’s relentless charge.

‘Dee! Not here. Not now.’ Walsingham could be seen mouthing the words. Francis and Walter exchanged a stunned look as their fathers summoned their swords from their staves. The familiar flash of white light whisked away in a blink.

‘This thing of darkness, I acknowledge mine!’ Dee continued to ramble, locking eyes with Morgana. ‘This rough magic, this poor womb has born bad sons!’ A flicker of white light came from the doctor’s staff, Walsingham preventing the full emergence of the sword of Sir Bedivere with a swift block by his own. Raleigh and Drake went to move, the knight of Sir Gaheris shaking his head disapprovingly. The pair stood down, sheltering both boys.

‘Are they going to fight the witch?’ Walter croaked to Francis with a tremble.

‘I don’t think so, no,’ Francis replied. ‘Too many people.’

'But Father told me he and the knights of Sir Galahad would always...ouch!' Walter was silenced by his father with a firm pinch on his ear.

'What is the meaning of this, Doctor Dee?' The queen's nearest aide stepped forward, threateningly. 'Away with you back to the Palace of Westminster. Sir Walsingham, if you please?'

'Yes, sir.' Walsingham nodded and shared another look of concern with Drake and Raleigh as Dee was escorted from the hall, heels dragged behind him as he spewed forth yet more words of indiscernible nonsense. 'Get your sons home, Sir Galahad, Sir Gawain.' Walsingham advised in passing.

'Drake, you don't think...?' Raleigh furrowed his brow as Morgana's chalky cheeks cracked with an untameable grin, long fingers curling around the edge of the Glastonbury thorn gift. *'Impossible.'*

'To evoke such a response from the knight of Sir Bedivere, I fear as such Mr Raleigh.' Drake stiffened. 'Come, we must regroup at the Chalice Well immediately.' He seized Francis's wrist, turning sharply on his heel. 'Inform the families of Poley and Gifford, and have them meet us there. Pray that Dee remains out of prison for his tantrums!'

'And the Sacred Band?' Raleigh asked.

'Of course.'

Prince Philip gave a light-hearted chuckle towards his hosts. 'Ah, what can I say? I told you these people of Ingletarra were *locos*, did I not?'

Chapter 4

Bath – England

14th September 2022 AD

His English was fluent, with a pleasant twang of a Jamaican accent on each vowel. He had a broad build, with rough shabby hair, and a bold white smile. Cleo skimmed the foam off the head of a lager, trying desperately to make small talk with her guest while tapping her mobile for updates on Adam and Violet's progress. Damn M4 traffic, she cursed repeatedly. 'Did your father want a drink?' she nodded towards a crumpled figure hunched by the fireplace, chin resting on a weathered palm and gazing unnervingly out of The Bear Pub's window. He'd muttered something when the pair first entered, something concerning the Allen and Wood families, instantly transfixed by the photograph of Violet's father, Nick Butcher, hanging behind the bar, a memory triggering a twitch in his hands.

'No, thank you. He'd best not,' the younger Benson replied. 'Won't get him out of the bathroom.' He cautiously sipped his pint. 'I'm sorry, I did not get your name?'

'No. No, you didn't,' Cleo replied coldly. A broken-down car just outside Swindon—marvellous. A louder moan came from the father, a complaint about the draft.

‘Would he at least be more comfortable if he moved away from the door?’ she suggested. His son shared the offer, speaking in a richer West Indian tongue, too quick for Cleo to grasp, the father swatting the offer away with a tsk. ‘I can light that fire if it helps?’ she followed.

‘That would be appreciated. He’s not used to the England climate, I’m afraid,’ Young Benson said cheerily. ‘Been a while.’

Cleo reached for the firelighters. ‘Your father lived here before?’ She took the opportunity to turn down the volume on the television. Her mobile alerted her once again. *Keep them there*, Violet messaged. More small talk.

‘Some time ago, yes. Met his wife here in the 1970s,’ the younger Benson answered, his amber eyes locked on the news channel providing a XENO-20 update and the latest vaccination rollout of ASCLEPIUS. ‘Pardon me, but could you turn the volume back up on that?’

‘Take it you’ve both been vaccinated.’ Cleo bashed some life into the scratched remote control.

‘We have, yes. But not all of Kingston was so lucky. Strangely, when XENO-20 ravaged the island, my father and I appeared quite well despite close neighbours and friends...well, you know the outcome of the virus only too well, I’m sure.’ Young Benson lifted his pint in

acknowledgement. The bloodline of a knight, Cleo thought, her brother Damas's sinister plan of social correction expanding beyond what both siblings had initially sought. They were wielders of magic from times past, equally destined to share this Earth, but how much did this young Benson know of his true lineage? There was a temptation to touch his wrist, allow her a snippet of a guarded memory or two, just as she had done with her partner Violet in this very spot two years ago. Would her partner approve of such a gross overstepping of decorum? Forced telepathy on another knight and guest? Cleo could imagine the argument that would ensue the moment she and Adam burst through the door, and slid her hand back under the bar. Only fifteen minutes later, her phone buzzed again.

'Cursed! It is what we are, boy! I told you. I told your mother, and your brother.' The father barked up at the television. His son settled by his side once a rough coughing fit followed.

'Could I swap that offer of a pint for a glass of water?' the younger Benson asked. Cleo reached for the tap.

'Cursed? How so?' Cleo couldn't help but ask.

'Who hasn't been, the last few years? No, quite the imagination on my father...not helped by an ageing brain.'

'Dementia?' Cleo placed the half-full glass down in front of the pair. 'I've seen plenty of my closest...*relatives*...succumb to it,' she stumbled, trying to sound genuine thus stopping being drawn into a heavy discussion about immortality.

Young Benson nodded. 'Started just before the outbreak of XENO-20. He was always a mutterer, my mother told me. British myths and Round Tables, something like that. Got worse as her own health deteriorated, one of the many XENO-20 victims in Jamaica. After her sudden loss, it all spiralled downward.' He raised the glass and encouraged a sip.

'You have a brother?'

'Half-brother, goes by the name of Mack. Never met him. Not sure I wish to either...but, my father did not stop talking about him, and when my mother passed, it was the least I could do to try and heal old wounds.' Young Benson gave a loose smile. Cleo felt her chest tighten in remorse, the fate of Mack Benson a tale shared by Adam and brother Luke on many an occasion, the events of 2012 that night in Edinburgh studied closely by Damasichthon. Their Sacred Band warriors had proved they were alive and well, but hiding in the shadows, just as they both had been for so many centuries. A true instrument for change for his people, she recalled him saying, if indeed the might of Excalibur

was not to come to their aid. 'He married here too, I'm told. Had a wife and daughter; that is all I know.'

'My staff...my stick.' The father's shaky hand made its way across his son's lap.

'Says this a lot, too. Never known him to need or ever own a walking stick, but he is quite insistent,' the younger Benson explained.

'Perhaps you gave it away? To someone special?' Cleo reassured the frail man with a soft grin.

'Never! Never will I give up my sword.' The father bolted upright and righteous. 'My duty, my family's duty. To my son I must pass the legacy down.'

'Yes, yes. Father. That'll be me.' Young Benson settled his father once more.

'No! The eldest boy. Mack. Your time will come.' The father pointed a stern finger directly at his son's nose.

'Fine. As you please.' A quick eye roll across to Cleo. 'I think I'll go for another pint, if you'd be so kind?' He necked the last few gulps. Cleo heard the gravel groan from the tyre tread just outside. Thank the heavens. The pub door flew open, Violet in first, darting in all directions, arms flung around Cleo. Adam slid in calmly behind.

'Sorry, you know how slowly he drives.' Violet cupped Cleo's cheeks and pecked a kiss.

'And you also understand how traffic works,' Adam sighed. 'So...where are these two members of the Benson...?' He was interrupted by a bellow from the father, now standing to attention upon seeing Violet's staff.

'A knight! A Knight of the Table!' His hand shook more violently now, mouth remaining open, voice breaking as tears welled.

'Ah, that answers that question.' Adam buried his hands in his pockets. 'You must be Lucian? Lucian Benson?' The elderly man screwed his eyes shut, whimpered a greeting, and then buried his face in his son's shoulder.

'My apologies. Long day. Mr...?'

'Allen, Adam Allen. This is Violet Butcher, Cleo's partner, and daughter of Mr Nick Butcher...a man your father might remember?' Adam offered a firm handshake.

'I doubt it. Not now. Jacob Benson.' The younger man introduced and cocked his head to one side, scanning both Violet and Cleo with a growingly quizzical look. 'Not, erm, business partners I'm assuming?' he tried to lighten with a jovial chuckle, met with an unexpected clip round the ear from his father.

‘Not here. This is not Jamaica, boy! Warriors!’ the father disciplined.

‘All right, damn, I know, Father. Christ.’ Jacob rubbed the back of his head. ‘More than a long day, it would appear.’

‘Actually reminded me I need to call Beth to see if the Blue Hare has any pork scratchings left. We’re clean out here.’ Violet patted Adam on the forearm. ‘You’ve got this, right?’ she beamed. Adam furrowed his brow at the thought of how many speeding tickets might be making their way through the letterbox over the coming weeks, at Violet’s instigation, only to be dumped the moment the door flew open. He checked the clock by the television. Jonathan will be expecting a call before six o’clock. The familiar voice of Gary Willis sounding from the channel broke his attention.

‘So, we all now know the story, and tragically, so many of our lives have been impacted by it.’ Gary Willis did his usual parting and recoupling of his hands while on camera, tapping his clipped-on microphone moments before the cameraperson shouted ‘Action!’ He was not quite a professional presenter just yet, but had enough gravitas to hold the screen. Adam could picture Geraint South in all his theatricality, giving his fellow knight tips on everything from enunciation to body language hours

before: carefully rehearsed and selected words, not to draw too much attention to their true selves, but enough to sound authoritative. 'XENO-20 has to date taken twenty million lives that we know of, across the world. But as soon as it arrived, it was treated, thanks to the progress in medical technology and science.' His voice held firm, only a flicker of restraint upon the use of the word *science*—a falsehood for all those inside their circle. Let myth remain myth. 'Some have called it the "Straight Plague". Other more conservative minds have seen it as a resurgence of the bubonic plague in a form far stronger than mankind had witnessed earlier. A most unusual tale, however, comes from a small town called Manresa on the southern shores of Spain. This unique region has claimed that not one of its nearly eight-thousand-strong population has ever got infected by XENO-20. Many medics have questioned the legitimacy of such a claim, some suggesting it was due to Catalonia's tough stance on movement over the pandemic and strict borders, but its newly elected mayoress, Sofia Pescador, has decided on an alternative theory.'

A woman in a pinstriped maroon blazer, light white summer dress, and open-toed sandals stood up to Gary's shoulder, hands clutched behind her back, head held high and proud against the aquamarine of the Mediterranean behind her. Adam guessed she was in her mid or late thirties, but a playful glint in her eyes when she smiled brought a more youthful quality. She

lent in and kissed Gary on both cheeks. *'Bienvenido, Señor Willis.'* When she caught sight of Gary's staff her smile faded for a split second, then snapped back with welcoming warmth.

'Now, you are very open about the strength of the people here in Manresa, and claim it has been much more than just a vaccine rollout of ASCLEPIUS that has saved local lives. What is it that you and those in this town believe?' Gary questioned, a touch too formally.

'Ah, you see, Manresa has a history of struggle and turmoil,' Sofia relaxed. 'It goes back centuries, and is retold through stories to our children to this day.'

'Like a myth, then?' Gary's eyebrow shot up, a slight squirm of a laugh.

'Sí, sí. A myth. But only to those from the outside; those born here know its truth.' Sofia began to show glimmers of energy more suited to a politician than a mayor, hands gesturing, the welcoming face becoming a little forced and gimmicky.

'Truth from a legend?' Gary's composure began to slip, but he recovered quickly, with a playful nod to the camera.

'Isn't all legend a form of truth to some?' Sofia rebuffed. 'Here in Manresa, there once lived a man, a king by the

name of Anfortas. Tales from Western Europe give him a different title...'

'The *Fisher King*,' Gary interjected, becoming oblivious to the camera's presence.

'Ah, sí, you know. The Fisher King and his ancestors lived here in this very town, each enduring tragedy due to a curse from the Holy Lance, a punishment for not kneeling to the one great King of Spain during the Inquisition.' Sofia closed her hands and bowed reverently.

'At a time of a great empire, the Iberian Empire.' Gary just couldn't help himself now.

'Right. An empire that fell at the hands of your good English people and Elizabeth I,' Sofia chuckled. 'In the later sixteenth century our King Philip II lost much of his influence and wealth owing to the defeat of the Armada, and all his lands began to perish. But Manresa had been affected decades earlier by the Holy Lance, all its once plentiful fish dried up in an instant, each heir to the regional throne born deformed and ill each time the crown passed on. Madrid was sucking the wealth from this region at the height of its powers, and continues to do so to this day.' Her tone turned sombre.

'But something has changed?'

‘Sí, señor. My grandmother was the queen of this realm, you see, and the first to be born without any illness or deformity for several hundred years. I remember her sharing her story with me when I was a young girl. In the year 1942 she came into this world unblemished. A miracle for Manresa.’ She held her hands high in praise. ‘And I am the third generation of a blessed line, now protecting my people.’

‘Interesting. Nothing to do with antibodies and herd immunity, then?’ Gary joked.

‘Ah, no, no. I understand,’ Sofia shared a laugh. ‘Of course, people owe their lives to medical advances; we have all completed our vaccinations as expected. But I like to think this town has had more than just science on its side for these past few years, and now that the dust has settled, it could become a beacon of hope and progress for all people to follow.’

‘How so?’

Sofia tapped a finger to her nose in a childlike fashion. ‘*Un secreto!*’ she grinned, before pointing to an ornate building in the eye line of the peaks of Monserrat. ‘The *Santa Cova*...and within lies a cave that we here call the Cova de Sant Ignasi, named after Saint Ignatius of Loyola, a spiritual man who dedicated his life to Christian practice around the time of King Philip II. He, like so many, was tried by the infamous Inquisition

ordered by the crown, despite his penance. He, however, just like our King Anfortas, tried to offer shelter to those persecuted, and even advised His Majesty King Philip following his defeat to England.'

'Advised how?'

'The King of Spain came to hold a powerful relic, rumoured to be a gift from Philip's then spouse, Queen Mary I—a far more fruitful union, I'm sure you know your history, Señor Willis?' Sofia winked.

'I know a little,' Gary replied, trying to rein in his smirk.

'Well, this relic was at first seen as a gift, but when the Armada fell, the Jesuit Order founded by Saint Ignatius provided counsel to the king, and advised that the relic be removed from the capital at once to spare it further shame and humiliation. The king, in his despondency, agreed, and the order brought the relic here for safekeeping by his monks of Manresa, where it remains to this day. Of course, this was a trick by the order, knowing full well that the removal of the relic would likely result in the downfall of Madrid. Consider this *venganza*, vengeance, for daring to question the saint's faith,' Sofia cautioned once more with her finger.

'So, this relic now favours you?'

‘No, señor. Not just me...everyone here in Manresa. As we began by saying, I believe it has long provided protection for us, and now, following such atrocities to mankind, it will find its true calling.’ The mayoress turned her head out of alignment from both Gary and the camera, staring blankly at the earliest sparks of evening stars speckling the musty blue skies. She blinked several times, freeing herself from her trance. ‘Of course, it is only a story, señor. A tale for the niños awake at night. I do not govern on myths, only health, business, and trade for our great region. But, such tales can give a person renewed focus and drive to achieve almost anything, and make destiny a reality. Would you not agree, Señor Willis?’

Now it was Gary who was caught in a trance, all the mannerisms learnt for interviews and on-air presenting evaporated, his focus narrowed on the mountain and the hazy shimmer of the Santa Cova. A purposeful cough came from off-screen. Gary hesitantly responded to the prompt and reconfigured his expression for the audience. ‘I would indeed, Mayoress Pescador. A fascinating subject.’

Chapter 5
Edinburgh – Scotland
29th July 1565 AD

‘Well, she’s been taking her sweet time, my dear John Norris.’ David Rizzo poured another full glass of red into a cut-crystal glass. ‘Her own sweet time, like a fine wine.’ He smiled with a small toast. ‘What do Signor Francis Drake and Signor Walter Raleigh have to say on the matter?’

‘That we need to be patient,’ John replied with a slurp, the acidity of the wine disagreeing with his still juvenile palate. ‘But a storm is brewing on the horizon with Spain, and Morgan le Fay is its ever-watching eye.’

‘Ah, my dear young Norris, all these nations of Europe are at war, some lands baring their teeth more than others I grant you, others biding their time. This will no doubt continue for many a lifetime beyond our own.’ The Italian stroked the long crow-black hair of his guest, a flicker of blue light catching Norris’s amber eyes. A chatter of song came from down the hall, as the royal wedding between Queen Mary, blessed by Scotland, and her suitor Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, slowly drew to a close. Processions of sumptuous fabrics poured out of the gates of Holyrood Palace, a chorus of French and Scottish cheers honouring the crown as they parted, the lamplight just bold enough to guide the guests back

towards Edinburgh town, where the ominous gloom of King Arthur's Seat was darkening with the sunset. Rizzo and Norris had found a quiet spot in the room adjoining the queen's chamber and settled beside a roaring fire, neither keen to engage in festivities. Rizzo, in particular, viewed the union as a sham, a caging of Mary's claim to her cousin Elizabeth's throne south of the border, with a husband as limp in bed as he was in spirit, all the easier to manipulate by both sides of the holy cross, be it Knox the Reformer or the Papacy of Rome. 'It must seem strange to your father to be summoned as a guest at this most Gallic of unions?' Rizzo rasped.

'I do not answer to my father, David. You know that.'
John brushed the petting hand clear.

'Sì, of course. *The Sacro Cerchio*...the Band,' Rizzo said with a hearty chuckle. 'So certain is the line of Sir Galahad and Sir Gawain that the Palladium lies in Madrid? Not Paris?'

'England's fortunes are too favourable in France. It is Iberia that is forging an empire, David.'

'Faith is forging an empire, dear friend. An empire neither you nor I will be spared, gladiators or not.' Rizzo cast a sorrowful gaze down at his bare feet and chased down the last of his wine with a belch.

'Walsingham believes Queen Mary of Scotland might be with child?' John stood abruptly and moved towards the fresh breeze of the open window.

'Ah, he must frighten the Virgin Queen of England, no?' Rizzo smirked. 'No, not that I am aware. My queen's newfound spouse lacks the...well, *desiderio*, one might say.' The wine flowed freely once more.

'Are you serious? Lord Darnley sways to the man, not the woman?' John lowered his voice as footsteps from the queen's chamber were heard. 'Then how does the Queen of Scotland intend to...?' Rizzo's glum expression gave the young Englishman his answer. His chest was clamped in a momentary vise. 'No, no, David. That is *forbidden*. Drake and Raleigh will never allow it, and as for Walsingham...'

'Ah, let the lecturing knight of Sir Gaheris preach and posture as he sees fit. I have a duty to my queen, not just the Red Dragon and your Band!' Rizzo snapped. 'Scotland needs an heir, so does England...otherwise, King Philip II will seize both, the Inquisition will spread, and your Band will be slaughtered along with any others who do not kneel before the Pope.' He shot to his feet too quickly, the wine bringing on a dizzy spell, the support of the bedpost just finding his broad frame in time. '*Salute!*' he gurgled with a heavy gulp.

John rushed to his side, both hands firmly on Rizzo's shoulders. 'To sire an illegitimate child of the crown, David...that is a death sentence, and you know it. If Elizabeth finds out, I cannot protect you. Nor can any of the Red Dragon Knights...it's too risky,' he pleaded. 'Scotland will be thrown into turmoil, especially with Morgan le Fay by King Philip II's side...such instability will be all the White Dragon knights need to launch an invasion.' He grew animated, pacing back and forth in tight lines.

'Perhaps Elizabeth's late sister should have charmed the Spanish crown a little more, eh? Before beginning her bloody reign of terror. Perhaps the Red Dragon advisors should have known that the Palladium's powers were not going to be suppressed by ritual Protestant executions? Spain's empire will swell, John, and war is the only antidote. Well, that, and whatever the maddened mind of John Dee conjures up. How goes the knight of Sir Bedivere?' Rizzo slid down to the floor, squeezing the fog from his temples.

'Rambling as always...Drake and Raleigh remain convinced that our Queen Mary's gift to King Philip II was the fabled King's Blade. Walsingham, less sure.' John sat on the edge of the bed, his head buried in his hands.

'And what say you, young Sacred Band leader?'

'I say, if Excalibur too had reached our enemy, then we and England would have known it by now. As you say, taking too much sweet time. Something is holding the hand of Morgan le Fay and the White Dragon back...but quite what, I am unsure,' John replied, with a heavy sigh.

'Perhaps the sorceress is more of a slave to men than we care to realise?' Rizzo pondered.

'Never stopped her before.'

'No, but we have. A touch more careful planning is needed, I fear, waiting for the right time to strike. When England has weakened France, once the two kingdoms of this Isle of Britain lock horns like bucks, and the ordained power of the Papal See is seen at its most potent—that's when victory can be assured. Sir Galahad and Sir Gawain must be on their guard for every trick...' The blue shimmer flickered across Rizzo's knuckles, fading as quickly as it had sparked. '...seen, and unseen.'

'Walsingham will inform the Poley and Gifford families to ensure the knights of Sir Bors and Sir Kay are held to account and pass their skills in subterfuge down through their bloodlines as necessary.' Norris eased back in his seat. 'Queen Elizabeth will be well protected.'

'Sì, sì. As will mine.' Rizzo curled a half-smile. 'You guard your queen, I shall guard mine, yes?' he gripped Norris

by the wrist, pulled him down close. The pair dared a gentle kiss but parted hastily as the chamber door flew open. One of the queen's ladies in waiting hurried in, giddy with excitement, thick powdered makeup already beginning to flake from the day's exertions, wild strands of ginger hair springing in all directions.

'Sir Rizzo, dearest! Her Majesty and Lord Darnley request that you join them in the great hall immediately. A melody of your finest music to see a good end to this wondrous day. Oh, do wear the black velvet tunic Mary gave you, it is her favourite...and a rapturous tune or two please, the night is for celebration.' Her eyes switched to John Norris. 'Oh, my apologies, sir. I do not believe we have been introduced.'

'Mr John Norris, m'lady. His family serves Queen Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, and her cause in the French lands.' Rizzo cleared the wine from his throat. 'A good friend of mine and the crown's, I promise you.'

'Oh, very well. Lord Darnley said to expect guests from England. Indeed, quite the matchmaker is your queen, Sir Norris.' The lady extended her hand and curtsied.

'Please, no formal titles. My father will retain such favour for now.' Norris pecked the delicate wrist with a charming smile.

'Can you dance, Mr Norris?' The lady managed to hide her blush.

'Errr...' John tightened his fists behind his back.

'Sì, m'lady, he can dance. In fact, he and I have been practising for just this occasion. If Her Majesty would like to see?' Rizzo rescued.

'Oh, I'm sure she would. Do hurry now.' The lady turned sharply and trotted out like a newborn foal, heels clipping the tail of her dress.

'David...I cannot dance,' John protested.

'Nonsense. *La Danza Sacra*. Have you only learnt the art of blue fire spears and shields, young Band leader?' Rizzo teased. 'Just follow my lead.'

The piercing glare from Lord Darnley was inescapable. The instant John and David locked wrists with a spark of blue in the centre of the great hall, the pair might as well have been the only two people in the queen's presence. Each mellifluous move mirrored the actions of a sparring session, a would-be spear to the throat, the block by a shield, the wielding of two warriors' backs together and turning in tight steps as if surrounded by foes. They broke apart, the flash of blue fire made to

look like a petty jester's trick as light and gunpowder showered the audience with smouldering embers. The queen cheered, and gushed words of disbelief to her husband, who seemed to be growing more envious of Rizzo's every advance. In a moment of closeness, John whispered into David's ear words of caution, not just during this ostentatious display, but each day henceforth. Not only was Lord Darnley's stare one of judgement, but each advisor to the naïve head that wore the Scottish crown had a part in the plot. Was it England they sought? Was it merely Scotland? Was it solely a room full of corpses dangling mercilessly from the strings of the White Dragon lurking composed on the continent, content with such playful theatrics, at least for now? One thing was certain: no matter how close he brought himself to his partner, John Norris had never felt so alone.

Chapter 6

Bath – England

14th September 2022 AD

Blotches of purple and blue had spread over Jonathan Worthington's right shoulder. His top-heavy bulk was sitting at the foot of the single bed, Adam's old bed in the room above The Bear Pub. His once-welcome reprieve from the pressures of his father now resembles the loft space it once was, littered with half-empty boxes, crumbling picture frames, and cracked mirrors. Violet's idea of tidying...out of sight, out of mind. Adam perched on the edge of the mattress, Jon's broad shoulders forcing him to spread his knees wide just to get comfortable. 'Hold still, will you,' Adam ordered, a cotton wool bud soaked in antiseptic triggering a quick grind of molars from Jon. 'Jez, I said hold still,' Adam repeated. 'Couldn't the medics at the Bath Rec have seen to this?'

'Thought I'd heal. You said we always do,' Jon said as he rubbed the sting from his eyes.

'Not that quickly.' Adam re-inspected the weeping wound. 'Doesn't need stitches. Just a few days' rest. Can you still rotate your shoulder?' Jon flapped his right arm in a clumsy circular motion and grunted affirmatively despite obvious discomfort. 'We'll lay off any training...swords or spears.' Adam ruffled the trimmed

spikes of mud-matted hair. 'Need a shower, though,' he sniffed.

'Left the Rec as soon as I was called off. Made my excuses to the lads and just left. Don't like quittin', not midway through a match,' Jon gruffed while staggering to his feet.

'You've still not told them, have you,' Adam cut through his partner's desperate attempt at masculinity that was becoming all too familiar, 'about *us*.' Jon fumbled with his mucky post-match shorts, and a deflective wince came while bending his back. 'Have you?' Adam fired again, arms folded judgingly.

'Not right now, mate, OK? With all the noise about XENO-20 and, well, the Sacred Band fellas, it makes the whole thing...difficult,' Jon justified.

Adam bolted to his feet. 'We hide from no one, Jon. Staying silent on this doesn't simply deny you a voice, but anyone and everyone else in your position still living in fear, and any generation that is to follow. Believe me, over recent years, we've had more than enough fear...regardless of who you are.' He gave that ridged twist of his jaw that Jon had come to expect whenever either Allen brother was close to boiling point.

‘The Celtic FC Strikers—Milo Conti and Tommy Brooks—have they come out as proud Band warriors yet?’ Jon goaded.

‘Fernando is working on it.’ Adam’s passion lost its momentum.

‘Sure, sure he is. Look, I’m more than happy to be by your side in all this warrior shit, and fight whatever war needs winning, but our personal lives are ours and ours alone, right?’ Jon pushed past his partner, grabbed a moth-eaten towel, and headed for the pint-sized bathroom, bashing his head on a low beam as he went, curse word duly spat.

‘Not all wars are on a battlefield, Jon. They won’t always involve blue fire spears and shields...and, in your case, swords. Society itself has its skirmishes every day, and winning those can be done with the simplest of gestures,’ Adam continued to lecture, spotting the two wooden staffs of the Sir Lancelot blade sticking out of Jon’s Bath Rugby duffel bag. He rolled his eyes at such carelessness.

‘Can’t hear you, mate,’ Jon mocked as he turned the shower on full blast, clouds of steam swelling into the room. ‘So, the two chaps downstairs...you said they are Bensons?’

‘Yes. The Sir Bedivere line.’ Adam pulled the two staffs free, tapped them both together in curiosity, and tried to summon the glimmer of a blade.

‘Thought you said that bloodline died with Mack Benson, or whatever his name was. The guy that got buried in Edinburgh?’ Jon’s voice was interrupted by the squeak of old taps and the gurgle of water pipes.

‘Thought it had. Mack’s only child died in a car crash. He rarely spoke of his father, this Lucian. Apart from maybe to Jane DuLac.’ Adam tried to swing both staffs in a simultaneous and fluid motion, but still nothing.

‘Who?’

‘Err...Jane DuLac was the former name and guise of the Lady of the Lake, turned counsellor. A different approach to assist the troubled minds of the Sir Bedivere line. Long story.’

‘You’re good at those, mate.’ Jon was heard slapping and splashing water around, gargling some mouthwash at the same time. The spray of the shower ground to a halt. ‘So, guessing a bit like me and Lawrence Worthington, this Lucian didn’t hang around long?’

Adam placed the two staffs on the bed, frustrated. ‘Fled back to Jamaica when Mack was still pretty young, I was told—most likely the burden of Excalibur. Some of Sir

Bedivere's line rise to the occasion, others turn and run, sadly,' Adam laced his words with added poignancy, not wholly lost on his dripping wet partner, with the towel barely covering his modesty. 'Doubt Mack ever knew he had a half-brother back in Kingston. Probably for the best.'

'You think he'll be able to raise Excalibur from the Roman Baths as your brother did?' Jon pulled a fresh pair of boxers from his bag and pushed his trunk-thick legs into them. 'You also take my polo shirt outta here while you were going through my stuff?' he scorned while nodding towards the staffs.

'No,' Adam defended sharply. 'Put one of Violet's dad's old shirts on, sure she won't mind.' He pointed at one of the boxes, Nick Butcher's name scrawled in pen on the side.

'Respectful.' Jon shook his head as he pulled out a baggy T-shirt with a Siouxsie and the Banshees album cover. Worthington creased his brow. 'Seriously?'

'Violet's late mother was a fan. Better than being naked...sure there are some jeans in there too. Nick was about your size,' Adam dismissed. 'And no, to answer your question...I doubt Lucian is of sufficiently sound mind to find his way around a Tesco now, let alone wield the King's Blade.'

‘So, back to Luke, then? Should we ever need it.’ Jon slid into a rough pair of denim jeans, a good inch or two too wide at the waist, having him resort to keeping his hands firmly in his pockets. *About my size?* he sneered to himself.

‘We’ll always have a need for it...maybe not in the ways of the past with the Palladium and Necklace forging endless empires, Morgan le Fay’s desperate grasping for power and relevance that cost millions of lives across many centuries and...’ Adam paused, acknowledging respectfully that the sorceress was the only mother his partner had ever really come to know, however fleetingly. ‘You get my point. Who would have thought Excalibur could have played such a vital role in stopping Damas Zethus?’

Jon curved a half-smile, picked up one of his adoptive father’s staffs, and in a single swing the bold blade of Sir Lancelot materialised. Adam’s eyes narrowed. ‘Clearly a bestowed gift, this Knight of the Round Table business. More than just mere blood, eh?’ He raised a pert eyebrow.

‘Suppose. Which means his son, Jacob, Jake, whatever...he might just have inherited that same gift.’ Adam took the twin staff and offered it to Jon. Again, the second blade was transformed. ‘You tried bringing forth both Blade and Band strength through those?’ he quizzed.

‘What? Like Violet can? Think her powers are a little different to mine... a bit of a living goddess in her, you said, right? Harmony or something?’ Jon pulsed a shade of blue flame through his wrists, but no further. ‘Can’t summon a shield or spear while holding these things, it’s one or the other, it would seem,’ he confessed.

‘*Harmonia*,’ Adam corrected. ‘And it most likely just takes time and practice...we’re all unique in our own way,’ he lightened with a playful punch to Jon’s sore shoulder. ‘Whatever Lawrence Worthington bestowed upon you, he was always a man of knowledge, of insight. Be it as foe or friend over many incarnations, the knights of Sir Lancelot did their homework. My father always respected him for that, an idiosyncratic mind that, despite being under the thrall of Lady Morgan for generations, still plotted its own course.’

‘Idio-what?’ Jon gawped.

‘Idiosyncratic. Means...y’know what, let’s just say your dad knew what he was doing, bulldozer!’ Adam tapped a jovial knuckle against Jon’s forehead. ‘Speaking of knowledgeable men, Geraint South and Doctor Ana Braithwaite are stopping by this weekend. Have some announcement, apparently.’

‘Those two pretty close now, huh? You think...?’ Jon locked one blade into the other, the familiar, bespoke single wooden staff reforming.

'So Violet tells me. Never thought of Geraint South as the marrying type, but he and Braithwaite appear to have hit it off pretty well these past few years. Maybe being locked in a medical chamber frantically formulating an antiviral serum was just the right amount of peril for a first date that the knight of Sir Geraint needed,' Adam laughed.

'Man of Books meets the Woman of Science. Probably a good combo,' Jon replied. 'Luke and Aisha joining?'

'Will be, so my brother tells me. Little Richard Allen Junior should be able to stand a few hours on a plane now. Well, private jet.' Adam squirmed at the thought of his nephew being spoilt so young, a concern he logically dismissed from his mind when recalling the troubled upbringing of both his elder brother and the daughter of Mohammed Hussin, knight of Sir Palamedes. A child accelerating towards precociousness rather than indolence, even before the possibility of being a bearer of the Sacred Band gene. 'Not so sure about Gary, mind.'

'Saw him on the telly downstairs. News reporting keeping him busy?'

'Always...and something more than a little off about that town in Catalonia. No XENO-20 victims. Unheard of.' Adam scratched the stubble under his chin pensively. 'A holy relic, the Mayoress of Manresa said.'

Jon gave a derisive, spooky humming noise followed by an off-key whistled tune of Mike Oldfield's Exorcist score, which earned him a chuckle from Adam. 'They didn't compose that,' came Violet's commanding voice from the open door. 'And yes, you may wear my father's clothes, Jonathan...my guess is you weren't even alive when Siouxsie Sioux was recording.'

'Neither were you, Vi,' Adam reminded him promptly.

'Whatever. Look, Cleo and I have tried engaging in cordial conversation with the two Bensons downstairs, but the father is most insistent that they visit the Lady of the Lake. Which of course means very little to his son, and we're both extremely tired of churning out the Arthurian back catalogue of tales and mysteries. Can you just take them to see Mary at the Roman Baths?' Violet huffed, hands on hips.

'It'll be closed,' Jon noted.

'Trust me, never stopped the Allens before. I know you might need Luke, but...' Violet's eyes grew weary.

'Sure. I'll take them...never know, even if Excalibur isn't summoned, Mary Cassidy might see fit to forge a new sword for the Sir Bedivere family, on account of we're never getting Mack's back from beneath Arthur's Seat. Worked for Luke,' Adam suggested with a shrug.

'Recall the circumstances with your dad's sword being somewhat different, but sure, knock yourself out. I have no idea what the two of them want for dinner, so they'll get whatever we've got on the pub menu tonight. Not expecting large crowds, given Bath lost.' Violet shot a snippy glare at Jon. 'You recovered, big man?'

'Will do,' Jon grunted back.

'Good. Oh, and we're out of pork scratchings.' Violet casually threw both arms up and slapped them down hard. 'I really was having a much better day until now.'

Chapter 7
London – England
12th April 1586 AD

The abundant smell of molten wax was never a good omen, as Francis Drake thumped his wooden staff several times against the wrought iron door. ‘Dee! For the Lord’s sake, open up!’ He began to shove his weight through his shoulder, the door rattling slightly, but still stubborn. ‘Christ almighty, whose idea was it to keep him here in the tower?’

‘The queen’s. Want to take it up with Elizabeth?’ Raleigh replied, ear pressed against the wood, straining to hear the knight of Sir Bedivere’s chattering. ‘Doesn’t dare let the man leave London, not after his loose-lipped verse to William Cecil, the queen’s advisor was hardly going to turn away a doctor that claimed to have seen the future...the future of the British Empire,’ Drake gave a dismissive snort. ‘I know, I know, Francis, but at least unlike her sister-in-law, the queen is not trying to burn us all at the stake.’ Raleigh stood upright to attention as a royal guard walked past, looked the two gentlemen up and down briefly, and shook a stern finger at both. ‘With someone, is he?’

‘Hell knows. All we are told is to keep the madman in there. Cecil’s orders. Certainly when he’s having a day of

ill mind,' the guard groaned. 'What be your business with Dee, anyway?'

'Friends of Sir Walsingham. He requested we speak with the...well, prisoner.' Drake thought quickly, hoping that dropping the name of a more senior aide to her Majesty might serve in their favour. The guard remained obstinate. 'It was of grave importance, sir,' Drake insisted.

'Then Sir Francis Walsingham can come here in person and behave as such,' the guard riposted. 'Until such time, may I suggest you gentlemen return to the royal courts and keep your heads low...' He leant in close, tapered his voice. 'There is a rumour that there is to be an uprising against the queen, born of the Catholic faith, supported by those in the innermost circle to the crown. Why, such behaviour against the expressed will of Walsingham could draw the ire of those loyal to Elizabeth, and then...' The bumping of young feet from behind and the clatter of silverware drew the guard's attention away from the two knights. 'Billy! You are late...very late.'

'So sorry, sir. Won't happen again,' a pimply complexion replied, frantically picking up stray goblets and scrolls of parchments. 'I was told Doctor Dee had all he needed...had to cross to the other side of the river to gather more candle wax. Wasn't entirely sure what a speculum was, so just found...'

'A *mirror*. He wants a mirror,' Drake replied sternly, scanning the young boy's slim build. 'Can't imagine why a doctor would run out of parchment, however.' The knight of Sir Galahad narrowed his eyes. The boy's head drooped bashfully, mouth partially opening, ready to offer an excuse that just could not be constructed in time, the good doctor offering mercy as the heavy door flew open. Dee's wrinkled skin sagged around his eyes and jaw, jaundice had spread from brow to breast, threadbare brown robes musty and stale, and spots of ash burns down each sleeve. 'John? Are you...Holy Hell!' Drake rushed into the chamber to attend to the burning drapes, flames licking their way higher towards the beamed ceiling. Dee and his damned candles, he thought, kicking a few thick wax rolls clear of the fire. 'A little help, Walter?' He continued to stamp furiously at the angry embers.

The guard went to protest at Drake and Raleigh's entry. 'Don't just stand there, man, get some water from the well outside! You want the entire Tower of London burnt down on your watch?' Raleigh dramatised. The guard did a quick double-take, then bolted for the stairwell, Walter slamming and fastening the door shut from the inside, paying little attention to the young attendant who had also slid his way in. 'Really are up against it now, Dee. Even if Walsingham does manage to intervene here, Drake and I don't really care for a night in the dungeons for defying Cecil's orders. Now, what do you know, knight of Sir Bedivere.'

'Knight? *Sir Bedivere*...?' the young attendant sputtered, quill already dipped and poised.

'What? Good Lord, boy, please be quiet...this does not concern you or any of your masters. Please, at least pretend as much,' Raleigh snipped.

'Put the wild waters in this roar, ally them!' Dee bellowed, seizing the speculum from the boy, scattering all manner of implements of divinity across his oak table, hands trembling, sweat beading. 'For I am all the subject you have.' His tone softened, almost in prayer.

'Sorry...repeat that.' The boy scratched his quill harshly against the parchment.

'What are you doing?' Drake demanded. 'Did Cecil ask for notes? Walsingham? The queen herself? Be truthful, young master.'

The boy gave an honest shake of his head. 'For me, sir, me only. I promise...these words the doctor uses. They are quite unlike anything I've ever heard, full of wonder. Of promise. Of noises, and...'

'Ah, full of noises, this isle is, my boy. Full of noises,' Dee cleared his throat in a moment of clarity. He caught the solemn gazes of Drake and Raleigh, and raised both his hands high above his head. 'She speaks to me, my Lady of these wild Waters, and it is loud, louder than ever

before.’ He dropped suddenly to his knees, seizing his own wooden staff, the sword of his bloodline. ‘I’ll break my staff, bury it certain fathoms in the earth, and deeper than did ever plummet sound, I’ll drown my books’.

‘Ah, splendid, *splendid!*’ The young attendant shook with excitement, quill flowing effortlessly.

‘Quiet, I said, boy!’ Raleigh snapped, kneeling beside his fellow Red Dragon knight, arm loosely around Dee’s frail shoulders. ‘John, Sir Bedivere, please...Sir Galahad and I need to know. The staff Queen Mary presented to King Philip II of Spain all those years ago, do you remember? The one you tried to prevent from exchanging such hands when we were both young boys. Was it the King’s Blade? Was it *Excalibur* itself?’ he pleaded.

Dee’s eyes grew dim, his fingernails scratched the smooth edges of his staff, he let out a heavy sigh and repeated, ‘My staff, bury it in the bowels of the earth. Deeper. *Deeper.*’ Raleigh drew back, slumped against the stone wall, face buried in his palms.

‘Morgan le Fay and the White Dragon have won, Drake. I don’t know how this addle-brained fool of a knight did it, but they and the Empire of Spain have won. The gift bestowed upon King Philip II, our only chance of breaking the Palladium’s spell, has fallen into the arms of our enemy. England is doomed,’ Raleigh capitulated,

tears welling. 'Our father's always told us the Sir Bedivere line was cursed. Now, that curse has cost us a kingdom!'

Francis Drake leant against the window ledge and monitored the guard and his men dragging brim-full buckets of river water clumsily up from the moat waters, sloshing over their leathered feet in fits of panic. 'We must speak with Walsingham. The knight of Sir Gaheris knows more of this conspiracy against our queen than that oaf of a guard ever could...has had Robert Poley and Gilbert Gifford keep watch of certain White Dragon individuals operating here in England for some time now. He fears an assassination attempt.'

'Against Elizabeth? To what end?' Raleigh wiped his eyes.

'Spain and England believe there to be two queens at war. Why, with Elizabeth's cousin Queen Mary of Scotland now hounded out of her homeland following Lord Darnley's death, and rumoured to be with child, a Catholic monarch would be a far more suitable match for King Philip's aspirations across Europe.' Drake began to pace back and forth, the young attendant following his every step. 'Only, as we know, there are actually *three* queens at play here, and it is the third who holds true power. Quite how much power, we are still unaware of. If Morgan le Fay and the White Dragon did indeed hold all three powerful relics, the Palladium, the

Necklace of Harmonia long known to breathe near everlasting life into le Fay, and Excalibur, why wait nearly two decades to make their move?' he wondered.

'Le Fay? The Faerie Queene?' the young attendant perked up once more. 'What be you folk? How came you to learn of all these mystic relics and words of sorcery?'

'She's no queen, not of our lifetime, believe me, young master,' Drake scolded. 'No, something is holding her back. Maybe she, too, questions the blade she has been gifted, its power obstinate to her and her followers. Maybe warnings from Alonso Perez de Guzman, knight of Sir Lancelot, or the noble Juan Martinez, knight of Sir Gareth, or Admiral Miguel de Oquendo, born of Sir Palamedes, all acknowledged and skilled Naval Officers of the Spanish, biding their time until the Kingdoms of England and Scotland are truly unhinged.'

Walter Raleigh heaved himself to his feet. 'An invasion? T'would take many thousands of ships to embark on such an ambitious manoeuvre.'

'Ah, yes! A thousand ships! A plague upon both our houses...a remedy we must conjure. As did the crown of Britons to sail across the oceans blue to America, so goes the way of King Arthur, and his predecessor Brutus of Troy, son to Anenas, the Roman Eagle that cast its wings and soared higher than any empire before it,

blessed by the treasurers of Ancient Thebes. From birth comes the greed of life, then...its timely death.' Dee stumbled across the floor once more, parting papers full of scribbles and alchemy symbols, settling on one drawing in particular: a crude sketch of the feminine symbol, circle and seated cross, enhanced with minotaur horns and three feet. 'Unity of all creation. A *monad*. A *trinity*. It must not come to pass. Never,' he wheezed.



There was a fierce bang against the door, barked orders from the guard, and his men demanding entry. Raleigh summoned his blade in a blink of light. 'No, Walter, not here. We'll seek out Walsingham, see what our fellow knights have to say...and what credence there is behind any such plot against the Queen of England. Whatever Spain is preparing for, we may just have time to counter.' Drake lowered the knight of Sir Gawain's sword, the gawping young attendant attempting to mutter words of disbelief upon witnessing steel be forged from wood. 'Young master...is there another way out of this chamber?' Drake gripped the boy's arm.

'Yes...erm, sort of. Once, when I was denied entry, I climbed that outer drain pipe there. Its bolts sit loose in the walls, but should hold you. If not...best learn how to swim.' The boy pointed to the smaller crevice of a window, just wide enough for a man's shoulders to slide between. 'I can stall them, the guards, say you left the moment the fire was extinguished.'

'And Doctor Dee?' Raleigh enquired. 'We might not ever get a chance to come back here, Drake, and doubt the wasting fool will find his way back to us, given the state of mind he appears to be in.'

'I can stay with him. The guards trust me. I will try and piece together anything I can from his speech, anything of significance relating to this...this King's Blade. I am, after all, a writer at heart, not just a servant. Look out for my words.' The attendant suddenly glowed with confidence.

'Fine. Address any such letters to Sir Walsingham, *not* to William Cecil. You understand? Walsingham is one of us, and very good at letters...especially cryptic ones. Feel free to let your quill act verbatim, young Mr....?'

'Shakespeare, sir. William or Billy Shakespeare. Now please, do hurry.'

Chapter 8

Bath – England

14th September 2022 AD

‘They’ll be watching you like a hawk, you realise, Bro.’ Luke Allen stopped to inspect the newly wrought railings outside the front door of their family home, their late father’s home. Neat poles of scaffolding crossed their way across between windows, drips of fresh magnolia paint running down the familiar Georgian brickwork. ‘They missed a spot.’ Luke pointed with his staff. ‘Hell, can’t believe it’s taken you a good two years to finally get Dad’s place back into shape.’

‘Oddly enough, insurance companies appear reluctant to pay out when you submit a claim that reads *house burnt to ashes by warriors wielding blue fire.*’ Adam fiddled with his phone, trying to balance two text message threads at once, one to Jon urging him to rest and put ice on his bruises for a good few hours, the other deciphering Fernando Russo’s broken English...something about trains delayed from Edinburgh and whether Milo Conti and Tommy Brooks could attend Geraint South’s gathering. Adam punched in a firm but frustrated ‘Sure.’ In response to his Italian friend, unsure how both South and Ana Braithwaite would feel about having the Celtic FC strikers for company once more, the charcoal stains around each window frame a sobering reminder of recent conflict.

Still, things had moved on, he tried to convince himself...perhaps Fernando epitomised that. 'You and Aisha arrive here OK?' he promptly switched subjects.

'Easy. Arrived at Bristol Airport in good time,' Luke replied smugly. 'Mind you, the wider world isn't overly concerned about us good old Arthurian knights, is it, Bro? It's your Boys in the Band that almost caused another Barmageddon,' he teased with a prod of his staff into his little brother's waist.

'Stop calling us that.'

'Come on. Only joking.'

'It's not a joke, Luke. Not for everyone. Despite some respite and common understanding here in Britain and some other parts of the world, XENO-20 is now used as a slur, a weapon of subjugation in countries that already have axes to grind against people like me. Now, anything from the common cold to a sudden outbreak of polio is blamed on us.' Adam picked up his pace, a sign Luke had come to know well when his brother was agitated about something other than the immediate topic of discussion—a little flick of deflection.

'You and Violet get on OK in London earlier, at the hearing?' Luke softened. Adam gave a quick nod and returned to his phone. 'And Jonathan? Spawn of the Worthingtons? How's he coping with all of this?'

'Hardly Lawrence and Morgan le Fay's spawn, is he?' Adam corrected pragmatically, '...but yes, not bad. Lost a rugby match today, so slightly pissed off is all.'

'Sure. That's all he's had to contend with...a game of rugby.' Luke ran his staff along the ironwork fences of the terrace houses leading towards Bath's centre, nonchalantly whistling a tune vaguely resembling the "Skye Boat Song".

'Mum used to sing that...to us when we were young.' Adam said, managing a smile.

'Little Richard Junior seems to enjoy it.'

'Getting much sleep?'

'On and off...teething a bit of a bitch, but Aisha seems to know every motherly trick in the book,' Luke proclaimed proudly.

'Hmmm...perhaps leave the humming of Scottish lullabies to her too then,' Adam teased playfully. Luke punched his shoulder in response, pleased to hear a snippet of humour could still surface from his steadfast sibling when needed. 'You're both lucky, you know, you and Aisha.' He hardened once more.

'How so?'

‘Your relationship. Your marriage. Your family,’ Adam’s tone turned glum. ‘Mum and Dad would have been very happy. A lasting legacy for both the Sir Galahad and Sir Palamedes lines, as well as a potential new Sacred Band member...perhaps even a leader someday.’

‘A leader will require a mentor, Bro, don’t forget that,’ Luke soothed with a comforting hand on Adam’s shoulder. ‘Aisha and I are still not sure what little Richard Junior will become, but whatever it is, he’ll always need the counsel and guidance of his uncle. The greatest Sacred Band leader there has ever been...vanquishing the wicked Morgan le Fay, preventing a lunatic Niobid from exterminating nearly all of mankind, and perhaps most significant of all, a catalyst for peace, an example of reconciliation and forgiveness. Hell, you’ll have some good stories to tell little Richard when he grows up,’ he beamed.

‘His parents were there, too, for much of that.’ Adam loosened, clocking Aisha standing just outside the Roman Baths, Jacob and Lucian Benson staring blankly up at the dusty evening skies, no doubt wondering how they were meant to enter long after closing time. ‘Aisha will tell the tales far better than me.’

Luke paused and seized his brother’s arm. ‘Adam, before we do this...please, Bro, tell me, what’s up? This isn’t just about the Sacred Band and its protection from

international repercussions...you can handle that, I know you can. Is it Jon?’

His brother pursed his lips and pulled his hand away. ‘Not now, Luke. Let’s get this over with, for the Bensons’ sake. Besides, you’re right, both you and I will be watched closely around this place. I’m amazed our previous antics haven’t made it online yet! How does your wife plan on getting around security this time?’ The piercing sound of an emergency siren filled the air; it was coming from inside the Roman Baths. The security guards were evacuated immediately by smartly dressed individuals, all with earpieces and wires, exchanging coded dialogue. ‘Luke?’ Adam puzzled.

‘You should know by now, Bro, being close to the knights of Sir Palamedes and their followers has its privileges,’ Luke grinned.

The dank waters of the Roman Baths lingered as always, Jacob Benson occasionally stopping to admire some of the stone carvings and screwing his eyes up tightly in an attempt to read the infographics dotted around specific sites. ‘This was a health spa in olden times? Doesn’t smell or look like one,’ he grunted.

‘Sorry it’s not quite up to the standard of Oracabessa, Mr Bond,’ Adam snipped, expecting the Ian Fleming

reference to fly way over the young Benson's head...burnt by a surprise counter commentary from Jacob about singer Sting composing "Every Breath You Take" on those same golden beaches, acerbically noting that such lyrics would likely have taken on a new meaning in such an acrid atmosphere. He snorted a chuckle when Jacob lost his balance and splashed into the central bath waters, prompting a slap to the back of the head from a zealous father.

'Yuk. Damn freezing and mucky. This is where the legendary Lady of the Lake lives?' Jacob sneered. 'Hardly the stuff of Arthurian legends.'

'Think Mary can pretty much go anywhere, anywhere there's water, that is,' Luke stated, lowering his hand into the water.

'Mary?' Jacob gave a quizzical look.

'Yeah, we used to date. Long story.' Luke winked over to Aisha. Jacob was now even more perturbed. 'Min, Mary Cassidy, you there? Got a few guests for you. Think you'll like them.'

'This is ridiculous,' Jacob protested again, noting his father's hands were shivering from the cold. 'Father, let's leave this to another time, eh? Let's get you warm. Whatever all this is, it clearly hasn't been doing you any good whatsoever and I'd rather you didn't pass on from

pneumonia in some vain hope that a mystic goddess will appear from a stagnant pool of stinking water and...Father?' his tongue froze as quickly as Lucian's eyes had swollen. He felt his father's skin ripple, every muscle tighten. 'Father? What is it?'

'M'lady. M'lady,' Lucian croaked, pushing his son aside and stumbling towards a jutting rock in the corner of the Bath. 'Spare the King's Blade! Spare the King's Blade!' he repeated over and over through bitter tears.

'What darkness is this?' Jacob confronted Luke and Adam. 'What have you done to my father? Tell me!' he fumed.

'Only what your father should have done decades ago, but decided to flee,' Adam confirmed. 'Leaving your half-brother to pick up the pieces...well, *a piece*, to be more precise.' He pointed back over Jacob's shoulder, the young Benson twisting round, this time the rock adorned with the sapphire-blue lace of Mary Cassidy, creamy-white skin as fresh as a spring flower, molten-red hair flowing past her shoulders, face emanating warmth as the once-great knight of Sir Bedivere continued to trip and tumble his way towards her.

'What...who is that?' Jacob stuttered.

'My ex,' Luke sniggered.

'Luke,' Aisha warned.

'Sorry, hun. Shall we go get this overdue reunion over with?' Luke marched forward.

Lucian had crumpled at Mary's feet, still weeping. 'I have failed you, M'lady. Failed you. I couldn't bear the sounds, the voices, the...responsibility. My son, he took it upon himself to carry our legacy, your legacy.' He buried his face in his hands. 'I have heard of what has become of him, my boy, my Mack...it should never have been,' he sobbed.

'Oh, how over the years those before me have heard this recital of agony, Mr Benson.' Mary caressed the frail man's wiry grey coils of hair. 'You can calm your aching mind, knowing that Mack Benson did his duty, and in doing so, we all meet here today.' She gave an acknowledging nod towards Luke, Adam, and Aisha. 'I must confess, Lucian, that my predecessor Jane DuLac must take far more credit than me, for she realised that ethereal voices whispered on the breeze or in the running stream might well not prove to be the most effective method of communication with the knights of Sir Bedivere, those who also carry the curse of an unbalanced mind. Manifesting as a counsellor, why, that was a stroke of inspiration,' she said with sly chuckle towards her familiar company. 'Helps now, of course. I speak to my most noble and gallant of knights in the new Sir Galahad, and his lovelier than ever knight of Sir

Palamedes. Motherhood has suited you well, Aisha, as I always knew it would.'

'Thanks to you, Mary.' Aisha wrapped her arm around her husband's waist. 'Once he comes of age, we'll no doubt be making a little introduction of our own. For now, little Richard Junior just needs a good dose of clove oil every now and again.'

'Ah, the old ways are always the best,' Mary said.

'I'm sorry...I'm so sorry, but...who exactly are you?' Jacob attempted to haul his grovelling father to his feet; the old man remained unobliging. 'If you're about to say the Lady of the Lake, then forgive me. Where is the mythical and legendary Excalibur?'

The Allen brothers let out a sigh and offered expressions of apology towards Mary. 'Quite a point you make there, young Mr Benson...Jacob, is it? Or do you prefer Jake?' she teased.

'Err...how did you know my...? Whatever...Jacob, Miss Lake Lady.' Jacob slapped his hands down on his flanks, as quickly as he threw them up.

'My duty is to watch over the Sir Bedivere line and determine when you are of sound mind to retrieve Excalibur from its resting place. Your father, as he so admirably admits, never found such peace. His son and

your half-brother, despite all he had lost in the tragic car accident that claimed both wife and son, rose to the challenge and called it forth from King Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh a decade ago. He proved worthy, but believe me when I say that over the rise and fall of so many empires built upon the powers of the Palladium and Necklace of Harmonia, treasures of my ancestral sister Morgan le Fay, your father here need have no shame in his actions. Sometimes, events simply require a different perspective.'

Jacob turned to Adam and recalled the relics of the Palladium and Necklace of Harmonia in the briefest of summaries the warrior could regale them with. 'Told you. Always best to hear it from the source. Seems all the more believable now, right?' Adam folded his arms.

'And you...? The Sacred Band? You protected this Palladium?' Jacob asked.

'Over many centuries, yes. Up until a young Macedonian prince by the name of Alexander the Great came along and wiped us out. Along came one of the world's first-known empires shortly after, with no one to challenge it but the curse of greed that lay within Ares's own supposed gift to the House of Thebes. That was until...'

Adam gestured towards his brother and Aisha. '...the age of Arthurian knights. But we, of course, didn't always agree.'

'Isn't that the truth,' Aisha replied, tightening her grip on Luke tenderly. 'But rifts do heal, Jacob...given time.'

'So...if these two Greek relics are now no more, what need is there for Excalibur?' Jacob pondered out loud.

'I asked that same question here two years ago, during the height of the XENO-20 crisis. Trust me, the King's Blade will always have its uses, no matter what the threat to Britain,' Luke replied firmly.

'Indeed, the world,' Adam added. Jacob rubbed his eyes furiously, his brain beyond saturation. 'I know, Jacob, I know. It's a lot to take in. But believe us all when we say your father is not mad, or disgraced.'

Jacob bolted upright like a soldier suddenly standing to attention. 'It's not that, Mr Allen, it's what is expected of *me*. My half-brother is gone, sacrificing his life for this cause...' A wail came from his father as he uttered the brutal words of Mack's fate. '...now you are telling me I have no purpose? Or, if I do, it is not clearly defined? I must...*wait*? Wait while so many in the world starve, struggle, and continue to die in countries like my own while the Western World treats itself to the vaccines and medicines it hordes? No. I must have a purpose *now*. I could right so many wrongs seen before our very eyes,' he roared. Adam and Luke looked at one another and hung their heads, knowing exactly what response was set to come from Mary.

‘My dear Jacob...the knights of Sir Bedivere have to bear a nearly unbearable toll in the wielding of Excalibur, and any shred of anger, pain, or revenge for past wrongs must be extinguished. Carry such rage with you for a lifetime, and it will be a lifetime of regret.’ She turned towards Luke and Aisha, and gave a slow blink. ‘Loss is part of life. Born, or unborn.’ She took to her feet and cast a slender arm out above the bath waters. ‘That being said, a storm is rising, born of a power from our own times, uncertain and unpredictable...the blade of the Thirteenth.’ A hiss of steam came from the waters below, and a fresh willow sapling coiled its way high towards Mary’s open hand, thickening nearly instantly into the mature branch of a tree. It remained slim as a stick...a staff newborn, plucked from the water and offered to Jacob. ‘A Knight of the Round Table must have their sword in such times, so go forth, young Benson, just as Mack’s ashes laid here to rest would have wanted, and join your brethren, united in one cause as King Arthur intended.’

Jacob tentatively took the staff, smooth and glistening in the fresh moonlight. ‘I...I don’t know how to use it,’ he confessed, casting his glare down towards the shuddering torso of his father, knees tucked up into the belly, foetal and vulnerable.

‘I’m sure there are those here who will teach you, young Sir Bedivere. Should the time come for more, I will be waiting.’ Mary bowed reverently.

'The *Thirteenth*?' Adam interjected. 'What do you mean, Mary? The Thirteenth?'

'Why, the last knight, of course, Adam. The right hand of King Arthur himself,' Mary replied.

'Sir Percival? But...how? He has no descendants. What possible threat could he pose?' Adam retorted.

'Nor did Lawrence Worthington, the last known knight of Sir Lancelot...at least, that's what you thought, wasn't it? The mortal body of flesh and bone that is a knight can rot and wither, but the steel of their blade, well, that can be bequeathed. Sometimes without thought of consequence or outcome...sometimes for the good, as your heart now tells you, sometimes for the bad.'

Mary's expression morphed from warming to stone cold. 'Trust me. Channel enough guilt and remorse to the very end, and it will leave its mark.' She spread her hands wide, presenting the very personification in Lucian Benson's crippled frame, his weakened body once silent, now cooing the name Grace, over and over again.

'Father? Father!' Jacob rushed to Lucian's side once more, twisting him over onto his back to reveal a near-paralysed face, left arm twitching, and drool trickling down his cheek. 'It's a stroke. He's having a stroke!' he cried. Before the group dared ask a deity for help, Mary had disappeared, leaving only the shallow smoke of the

warm, milky-white bath waters. 'We've got to get him out of here...to hospital. Please!' Jacob begged. Aisha seized her radio from her belt and barked orders at her men outside to ready the vehicles for the Royal Hospital. Adam wrapped Lucian's taut arm around his shoulders in assistance to Jacob, rushing towards the Bath exit, Aisha following with ever-louder Arabic instructions. Luke paused and turned back to look at the jutting rock one last time, a lump hardening in his throat. So little time he always had, yet so much he wished to share with Mary, if only to hear Min's words of wisdom that so often brought great comfort. The only words that now remained in the forefront of his mind were, 'loss is part of life'.

Chapter 9

Glastonbury – England

20th July 1586 AD

A single square slab of stone sat awkwardly in the patched grasses. Walter Raleigh used its edge to scrape the mud off his boots. The low shadow of the desecrated abbey shrouded him, the late evening sun dipping beneath the Tor and causing him to squint to assess the extent of the ruins. The once splendid vaulted nave was reduced to curved spikes, like a broken ribcage protruding from the ground, a few archways remaining proud and defiant, if a little charred by the flames that had brought down their wooden rooves. Walter prodded and tugged at some early ivy vines winding their way up walls, revealing a polished slate tablet engraved with the words *Hic jacet sepultus inclitus Rex Arturius in insula Avalonia*—in the English tongue, ‘Here lies interred the famous King Arthur in the Isle of Avalon’. He chuckled softly to himself.

‘Something amusing?’ Francis Drake drew to his side, and a startled Raleigh gripped his wooden staff, ready to strike. ‘Relax, Sir Gawain. Not here to have you stand for treason. We have a new monarch now, remember?’

‘Hmm. Blood of her sister, and indeed her father. A house of trickery and treachery these Tudors, never sure what or whom they may turn on next.’ Walter

aimed the tip of his staff towards the summit of the Tor. 'I can't help wondering, if it were Elizabeth who wore the crown when the dissolution began, would she have spared Abbot Whiting from being sliced and diced up there on the high hill? Or would her bloodlust have been just as insatiable? Preferring to be feared than respected?' he grunted.

Drake gave a crooked smile, studied the slate inscription for himself, and stroked the fine tip of his beard. 'Well, those that came before us either misread our legends, or a few were smart enough to throw any pilgrims off the scent. No burial for our king here.' He squatted, wiping soot from the tablet. 'Maybe those of English blood held themselves in such high esteem they'd prefer to have the King of Britons on home soil, rather than in Welsh or Scottish lands. Especially at this time.' The cleaned slate revealed the year 1191. 'Height of Plantagenet power, crusades for the blessed Holy Land and the rise of Saint George. Those of the White Dragon were very much in their element, would be Lords of all the British Isles.' He stood again, nursing a twinge in his back.

'Three hundred years of turmoil and infighting...the Tudors were meant to bring about peace, accords through diplomacy, Henry offering both land and marriage of his kin to the Welsh and Scots, a united island once more. Alas...' Walter turned, gave a dismissive sweep of his arm spanning one side of the

crippled abbey walls to the other. '...so much for the infamous Tudor Rose of Red and White combined. Our ancestors' efforts in Bosworth Fields to end the Yorkist White rule reduced to this rubble!' He kicked the square stone slab in a flare of frustration that swiftly fizzled out.

'So goes the cycle, the rise and the fall,' Francis reassured, a comforting hand on Walter's shoulder. 'Besides, how dull our lives would be if we had not a foe as formidable as Morgan le Fay and her relics of Ancient Greek antiquity, say you not? What cause would there be for the most venerable name of Raleigh?'

'*Discovery*, Francis. Exploration of the world anew,' Walter rebuked.

'Oh, so you desire newfound freedom?'

'Don't pretend you do not desire this, too, Sir Galahad. Just as our parents encouraged, a man's life cannot be confined to these shores alone. A new world awaits beyond the waters of England, and I believe it to be our duty to the Red Dragon legacy to stake our claim to as much of it as possible before our counterparts do,' Walter replied, quickening his pace when sighting the steed of Sir Walsingham galloping down Chalice Hill. 'Instead, we have yet another war brewing, and as you request, must remain loyal and just to our queen while we wait for that lunatic John Dee to get his stars

aligned,' he spat crudely into his hand to clean the soil from his fingers.

'He'll come to his senses,' Drake reassured.

'Heard anything from that Shakespeare fellow? Any word on deciphering the madman's ramblings?'

Francis shook his head, squinting as he tried to make out the two other riders flanking Walsingham. The pair paused by the Glastonbury thorn tree that marked the waters of the White Spring, its crystal clear streams trickling from the low walled embankment and neatly flowing along carved canals to the iron-rich red waters no more than a few yards away, a sister thorn overreaching its branches to join the other in harmony, both red and white trickles forming a pink-hued spout fresh from the carved stone lion head. A vaulted abbey of their own, far older than the ruins behind, but like nature itself, so often overlooked when many seek only riches of gold or other precious plunder. A gift for the living Knights of King Arthur, no doubt, to operate without attention from those in assumed power. He raised his staff, butting the end three times—*thud, thud, thud*—into the steady stream of iron-stained rocks, cautiously looking over his shoulder for any passersby who might bear witness to the red bricks slowly folding back beneath the trunk of the thorn tree, steep steps revealed below. 'You know, we really should think about a less conspicuous method to enter here,' he muttered,

slipping immediately on the first step down. Sir Walsingham was seen tethering his horse to the hooks just outside the Pilgrim Public House, his two guests now identifiable as Robert Polely, knight of Sir Bors, and Gilbert Gifford, knight of Sir Kay, each looking as flustered as the other, swords already on show and glistening.

‘What would you suggest? Fabric curtains?’ Walter jested.

‘I don’t know...so many ornate gardens have splendid wrought iron or carved wooden gates now. Would blend in more, at least.’ Francis summoned his own sword for a scrape of light.

‘Which would require a key.’ Walter followed his fellow knight downstairs. ‘A key that would likely be lost during the generations that followed. Very smart, Sir Galahad.’

‘You know what I mean. This town will only come to grow in number, so why not think ahead a touch? Besides, Sir Walsingham knows the Duke of Somerset very well, and as new owners of the Pilgrim Inn, could always keep a spare,’ Francis’s words began to echo and vibrate with the descent.

‘A key to the Red Dragon sanctuary...now that’s what I call a new world,’ Walter grunted.

Sir Francis Walsingham held the parchment aloft, puffed his chest with pride, and curled his bottom lip. 'My fellow Red Dragon Knights...we have it. Proof that King Philip II of Spain has acted through both our White Dragon foes and arguably unwilling puppets to assassinate our queen!' the knight of Sir Gaheris announced.

'Babington and Ballard, I assume?' Walter Raleigh seized the parchment, struggling to decipher the encryption in the dim, cavernous light.

'Correct. The knights of Sir Lamorak and Sir Geraint. Anthony and John have toed the Jesuit cause for many years, making swift work of supporting Queen Mary of Scotland and pressing for her claim to the English throne by the right of the Papacy.' He took the parchment and wiped the dribble of well water from his nose while being careful to preserve the ink scribbles. 'You see here, Queen Mary's own words: 'Thus affairs being prepared.' She plans to escape from her residency at Chartley Castle and onward to London once Babington has committed his crime. The murder of a Protestant, and his replacement with a Catholic sympathiser.'

'Has the palace been warned?' Francis Drake interjected.

'No need. Babington is under close watch now and the arrest of Ballard is all but guaranteed. The Sir Geraint line is feeble and once it squeals, Ballard will for certain confess to Sir Lamorak's clear involvement...should any more evidence be required.' Gilbert Gifford sat staunchly against the damp stone walls of the entrance. 'Confessions from both will inevitably lead to execution, thus eliminating two White Dragon adversaries in one...' He drew a sinister finger across his throat, letting loose a croak mimicking a final breath.

'And what of Queen Mary of Scotland?' Drake followed.

'What about her?' Polely queried, leading firmly on his pommel.

'Her implication in this plot of Anthony Babington's will surely mean Queen Elizabeth will have no choice but to...' Francis stammered at the thought.

'A queen removes a queen. Hardly the first time in history, and unquestionably it will not be the last, Sir Galahad,' Walsingham reminded him. 'Whether they be tied by blood or not, Elizabeth cannot risk her cousin seizing the throne...and might I remind you, nor can we.'

Drake coiled his arms tightly around his chest, hands tucked tightly under his arms as the chill of the chamber seeped through his skin. 'And Mary's son?' he uttered timidly.

'Prince James? What does that matter? He can remain stowed away in Scotland, remain there until withered and drawn for all we care...the reign of England is the only strength capable of preventing Morgan le Fay and the White Dragon, Francis,' Walsingham sparked.

Drake drew close to the knight of Sir Gaheris, close enough for a whisper. 'Prince James of Scotland, you know his true lineage Walsingham, a born Son of the Sacred Band. David Rizzo paid the price for such an act at the hands of that worm, Lord Darnley, the coward who could not bring himself to stand up as the man that he was born to be, envious of those who took honour and pride at wielding the blue fire. John Norris was heartbroken at his partner Rizzo's death. That much is certain, but should anything happen to the forced incident that has become his bastard son, the Band leader will not take lightly to such drastic intervention for the sake of crowns!' Drake hissed.

Walsingham sighed heavily, and watched as Polely, Gifford, and Raleigh began to snip and quarrel as to whether the efforts of such espionage had actually resulted in bona fide proof of King Philip of Spain's intentions, or merely a ruse between lesser factions of faith. Assassinations of monarchs were not uncommon at the behest of the regular man, the recent Throckmorton Plot to overthrow Elizabeth in favour of the Queen of Scots evidence that not all indecorous

behaviour was helmed by Morgan le Fay and her acolytes. Polely rebuffed this with the translated line from Mary of Scotland herself in which she states she would certainly know of the names and qualities of the six gentlemen who are to accomplish the assignment—the *six gentlemen*, the six knights. What more proof was required? ‘I know I grow old, Sir Lancelot, and my mind may scatter to the four winds just as that of our treasured John Dee, knight of Sir Bedivere, appears to have done, but while I too have love and commitment to the Sacred Band, I cannot guarantee the safety of Prince James. We can only ready our defences and alliance to England, and an unrivalled Queen Elizabeth spared from any White Dragon subterfuge is our best chance at overcoming the White Dragon once more.’

With a quick snap at the three bickering knights for order, Drake conceded to Walsingham with a polite nod. ‘Fellow Knights of the Red Dragon, we proceed as planned and as per the knight of Sir Gaheris’s instruction. Bring down Anthony Babington, knight of Sir Lamorak, and his accomplice, John Ballard, knight of Sir Geraint, for treason against the rightful Queen of England. If this results in the execution of a would-be usurper in Mary of Scots, then so be it, our gauntlet is laid down firmly in the face of King Philip II and the White Dragon...’ His words tapered off, breath drawing thin, a tremble in his voice at the thought of Spanish rebuke—a blistering salvo spurned by wrath at the foiling of Morgan le Fay’s plans. Was it a wrath worth

incurring? The powers of the Palladium and Necklace of Harmonia unleashed to their full potential, and, at Hell's mercy only, the potential of the King's Blade itself...the only antithesis the Red Dragon had held against the sorceress, willingly passed into the coils of a silent and calculating snake. 'Dee. How goes Sir Bedivere?' Drake blurted out with little thought.

'Still rambling in tongues,' Walsingham groaned, the toll of standing for so long creaking his ageing knees. 'That aspiring playwright believes he speaks of our Lady of the Lake, but the riddle as to whether the fabled King's Blade is in the hands of *Señorita Morgana* remains unsolved...even for a cryptic mind such as mine,' he let out a snort. 'Still, there may still be time, whatever the witch has planned.'

'Walter and I both witnessed it, as you did that day in the Court of Mary and the now King Philip II. That was the wooden staff of a *knight*, Walsingham, and one John Dee couldn't bear to be without...far more so than his own. What else could it be? What other offering could have lit the eyes of Morgan le Fay so brightly?' Drake tutted.

A crack of thunder echoed down the narrow cave stairway, and a crisp clean breeze laced with the scent of fresh rain filled the cavern. 'All in the shadows, Sir Lancelot, just as it has always been. All I know now is that a storm is coming,' Walsingham replied.

Chapter 10

Bath – England

14th September 2022 AD

It was a sticky, humid evening. The eagerness for the frolics of an engagement party were dampened by several hours at the Royal Hospital anxiously waiting for news on Lucian Benson's condition. The offer to remain at Jacob's side was extended by Adam, mindful that the sterile corridors of the hospital brought back painful memories for his older brother and sister-in-law. He noticed the lump form in Luke's throat the moment he stepped through the Accident and Emergency doors, Aisha tightening up as medical staff rushed to the elderly Benson's aid. The couple remained outside in the waiting room, arms locked together, barely a word spoken. Jacob appeared not thirty minutes later, provided a fleeting update on his father's condition, and urged the party to continue with their friend's festivities while the situation remained stable. Adam gave out the direct line to The Bear Pub, should anything be required urgently.

'Wish Bookworm all the best,' Alex Allen crackled through a faint mobile phone signal. Adam smirked. 'How did the Inquiry session go?' His uncle quickly switched subjects. 'That Lady Whitstanley sounds like a bit of dragon, from what Chris and I heard on the news.'

‘Well, Violet and I have experience with dragons,’ his nephew lightened. ‘Strangely, I got the impression she was more with us than against us, at least for now.’ He acknowledged Fernando as he pushed the front door open, dressed flamboyantly in a tropical shirt that would have made Graham McCready proud, or annoyed that he’d dared go through his wardrobe, couldn’t tell. Milo Conti and Tommy Brooks followed mutely, in figure-flattering athletic attire as always. ‘Your delegation has just arrived from Edinburgh,’ Adam noted. ‘Sure you and Chris can’t make it down?’

‘Bit too much going on up here. Chris is always busy crunching numbers, burying his head in the sand. Still worried about how his work might react to this ongoing XENO-20 saga, his answer being to double down on effort, make himself indispensable,’ Alex groaned. ‘As if he hadn’t burnt himself into the ground before, now it’s like trying to see the Pope.’ Adam came close to suggesting Wood simply leave his façade of a profession, his connections to the Sacred Band now all too exposed, but the message to the Inquiry, indeed the community, was to blend in, become unassuming, non-threatening. Spotting the Celtic FC logos emblazoned on both Conti and Brooks, two Band warriors who had managed to reshape their public image through both their contrition and success on the football field, giving hope to many just like them that change was always possible. ‘As I said, I wish Bookworm and the good Doctor Braithwaite all the best...and keep spreading the

ASCLEPIUS message to all who question us. The Sacred Band was the solution, as well as...' He drew sharply to a close.

'...the problem,' Adam finished mutedly. Violet waved from behind the bar, urging Adam to hang up and assist Cleo in hanging up the party banners, Luke inhaling helium from the balloons and squeaking in a high-pitched voice, bringing a smile to little Richard Allen's chubby face. Aisha's cheeks puffed red as she tried to inflate other balloons while not breaking into laughter herself. 'I'll try to catch up with Gary, see what he makes of all that Manresa business.' He raised a digit for an extra minute, shut down by Violet as Geraint and Ana's car cracked over the gravel outside. 'No cases of XENO-20, ever. That's odd.'

'It is. But don't have your work follow you around too much. Chris is bad enough—I don't need it from my nephews,' Alex cautioned. 'Have some fun, Adam.' The call closed. Geraint South and Ana Braithwaite entered The Bear hand-in-hand to a spontaneous cheer of 'Surprise!' The pair feigned shock despite Violet being one of the worst secret keepers Adam knew when it came to celebrations. Jon stumbled down the stairs, pawing at the tight fit around the neck of the Siouxi and the Banshees T-shirt.

'So...this is a party?' Jon raised an incredulous eyebrow.

‘An understated one. Sorry it’s not the ruckus your rugby mates are used to,’ Adam quipped in reply.

‘Well, we lost. So, show me beer on tap.’ Jon playfully punched Adam on the arm, wincing as his partner clipped him back right on the sore spot of his shoulder.

‘Knock yourself out.’ Adam pointed to the bar. ‘Just don’t let Violet see you down too many pints,’ he warned. Jon clocked the Celtic FC players already beginning to conduct their own private karaoke session in the corner by the fireplace, an unmelodious rendition of Bon Jovi’s “Livin’ on a Prayer” punishing all ears.

‘It’s not the rugby lad you need to worry about,’ Jon said. ‘Don’t let the footie hooligans off the leash too early!’

Gary Willis ran a finger around the rim of his beer bottle, trapped deep in a mist of thoughts. ‘A relic that provides protection...but not an empire,’ he whispered into the bottleneck. ‘No Palladium, that’s clear. No Necklace of Harmonia of course, and unless there’s some skulduggery from these newfound relatives of Mack Benson’s, no direct line to Excalibur,’ he heaved a deflated sigh.

‘Definitely not the King’s Blade, already checked with Mary Cassidy.’ Adam leant back, trying to keep an eye on the tequila shot contest between Team Fernando and Jon versus stern opponents in Team Violet and Cleo. He wondered how long it would take the men to realise they were up against a pairing of demi-goddesses, the devils of alcohol barely registering in their blood with every gulp. ‘Our new Lady of the Lake is reluctant to hand control over to this Jacob Benson anyway, not his time.’

‘Hmm...can imagine. Not your everyday news for a young lad brought up in the West Indies. I doubt Lucian was of much influence, either, mind frayed like so many other knights of Sir Bedivere. No. There’s something else at work here...Mayoress Sofia Pescador mentioned *Saint Ignatius*, a Jesuit known for his research and following of the Knights of the Round Table, Arthurian myth...a possible perpetuator of the link between Catalonia and the fabled Castle Corbenic.’

‘The so-called *Grail Castle*? The legend of the Fisher King?’ Adam twitched the corner of his mouth.

‘Perhaps...we all know legends have an ever-lasting grain of truth at their core. Corbenic, while not the home of King Arthur or his fabled Blade, not all the Knights of the Round Table remain accounted for, do they.’ Gary tried to catch the eye of Geraint, quietly busying himself, picking through the remnants of the

simple pub-grub spread Violet and Beth had laid out. 'Need more of a historian's view on this one...' He pointed his staff in South's direction.

Adam tried to beckon Geraint over, straining at the thought of mixing business with supposed pleasure, his uncle's words ringing in his ear. 'You're referring to Sir Percival? The virgin? The knight of the Thirteenth?' he queried. 'Quite a turn of events if, after over two millennia, his bloodline ended up having descendants after all.'

'Not necessarily descendants, more like followers,' Gary replied timidly.

'Like Aisha and the followers of Sir Palamedes?'

'More clandestine. Lost to the text of time...the mayoress quotes her family's line of King Anfortas, a king wounded by the infamous *Dolorous Stroke* by the Spear of Destiny, his offspring and the lands of Corbenic cursed to live an ill life thereafter.' He caught South's eye, ushered him to their table, the knight of Sir Geraint stuffing mini sausage rolls into his mouth by the handful.

'The Spear of Destiny was destroyed, around about the time that Mayoress Sofia mentioned, I recall Father telling me.' Adam shifted seats to accommodate Geraint. 'A Polish resistance pilot of some sort? Worked

closely with our grandfather during World War II...think I was even named after him,' Adam recounted.

'Adam Drobinski.' Geraint sprayed flakes of pastry with his interjection. 'Polish 303 Squadron, and yes, infamous Sacred Band leader during Operation Barbarossa, the Nazi Germany invasion of Soviet Russia. Died in Stalingrad.'

'Nineteen forty-two, then,' Adam confirmed. Geraint nodded. 'The mayoress's family was freed of the curse almost immediately.'

'As were their lands in and around Manresa, perhaps all of Catalonia, as the mayoress proclaimed. A welcome reprieve, no doubt, but still doesn't explain the fortuitous sparing from XENO-20 while the rest of the world suffered.' Gary furrowed his brow, licking the few remaining drops from the bottle. 'Geraint, what do you know about Sir Percival's line?' he burped out.

'The virgin? He has no bloodline. Died in shame and grief once King Arthur fell to his son, Prince Mordred...the rest, you know, is *our* history.' Geraint wiped his mouth and revealed a grin.

'What if he *didn't* die?' Adam proposed. Geraint narrowed his eyes at such a notion, reiterating the common belief of virginity, and thus no heirs for the blade of Sir Percival. Adam gestured towards his partner

Jon, now locked in an arm wrestle with Cleo, tequila shot rounds resulting in an impressive stalemate. 'He was not in the direct bloodline of Lawrence Worthington or the knights of Sir Lancelot, but was bequeathed his sword. We all know the powers of the Lady of the Lake and her forging of new blades for those worthy...born of the same blood or not. Surely, there's a chance Sir Percival might have...' A heavy slam of a balled fist sent splinters of wood flying across the floor, Cleo's forceful victory leaving Jon with yet another wound, and emasculated.

'Possible,' Geraint conceded. 'While considered an Arthurian martyr to the King of Briton's cause, there have been tales of travel by the knight of Sir Percival...pilgrimages to Rome and the Vatican, even these rumoured lands of Corbenic and the Fisher King as fabled keeper of the Holy Grail, all in the name of newfound faith and desperate need for exoneration. Fleeting fancies, if you will, given what we as true knights have come to know about our brethren and our former conflicts. Never once has a knight of Sir Percival, direct descendant or otherwise, made themselves known to either the White or Red Dragon factions.'

'Unless they didn't *know* what they actually were, or learnt not to believe it,' Adam pressed, the bell from the pub phone drowned out by the boom from the karaoke stereo, Fernando now insisting that the battle between the sexes should cease and the engaged couple should

take to the dance floor. 'During a time of religious persecution during the Spanish Inquisition, Saint Ignatius would do all he could to protect those around him, ally himself to the Iberian throne, maybe even offer counsel to the king...certainly not the time to be spouting pagan-connected heresy.' Geraint had time to shrug a shoulder before the other was tapped by his fiancée, urging him to take to his feet once their proposal song began to play. The pub landline buzzed to life again, Adam taking firmer note this time, interrupted by Violet midway.

'No, no, Mr Allen...you owe your partner a dance.' She tugged at the collar of his polo shirt.

'With Jon? No, Vi. We don't dance,' Adam protested, still edging towards the chime of the phone.

'Nonsense. Sacred Band warriors danced all the time in Ancient Thebes, it was part of their induction and tuition,' Cleo intervened, pulling a barely sober Jonathan close and practically tying his hands around Adam's waist. 'The Band Dance. You can use your blue fire, if you like?' she insisted.

'Band Dance? Like those two over there?' Adam nudged his head towards the gauche movements of Milo and Tommy, stepping on each other's toes in drunken camaraderie, trying to remember the words to LeAnn Rimes's "I Need You". 'Think we can give it a miss.'

Violet and Cleo took control of the partners' limbs. 'It's really quite simple...Jon lifts his wrist up high, like so. Adam's meets it. Same on the other side. They both turn, cross forearms, technically with a summoned spear, turn again, touch with the other forearm, the shield, bow...' Cleo mechanically moved the uncooperative pair through each motion, Violet mirroring. Left to their own devices, Adam and Jon loosened, began to slide their feet more effortlessly with each complete cycle. 'There you go. Now a bit quicker...' Cleo clapped. The pair sniggered at each other, Jon bowing a little too eagerly and clipping his partner on the forehead, quick to steady himself, but Adam assisting before his lumbering frame fell through another table. The two couldn't help but snort out a loud chuckle, Adam relaxing, as Aisha managed to make it to the phone. A single turn and cycle through the routine later, and her once joyful expression became sour and despondent. He knew what news had come through, and the Royal Hospital corridors cruelly beckoned twice in one day.

The moans of Lucian were completely incoherent, punctuated with oscillations between pain and vibrant reverie. 'My curse! My damned curse!' he would shout, arms flailing in the bed and tugging on IV lines. He calmed down as the tranquilizers did their work, but his fingers still twitched with urgency, pupils darting from

side to side seeking reassurance. Jacob remained by his side, mopping his brow. 'I failed you, my boy. You and your brother. Mack. My dearest Mack...left to fight alone. She curses me, my Lady of the Lake...I deserve Hell,' his father continued to weep.

Jacob stoically turned to Adam, Violet, and Cleo, glistening streaks of tears just visible through the setting sun slit by the blinds. 'The bleeding on the brain won't stop. They're trying everything, they say, but....' His words dried up. A young nurse stepped in, checked all vitals, and gave a warming smile to Jacob while ominously checking her watch before retreating into the corridor to request urgent assistance from a doctor. 'I...I don't know what to do for him. I don't know what he wants, or anything about all of this and...'

Violet slid her arm under his, ran her hand down to his newly forged thorn staff, and encouraged him to release his grip on the sword of Sir Bedivere. The wistful but eager hand of Lucian took the tip, the would-be pommel, knuckles tightened to white, and breathed a sigh of resignation. 'I am a knight. I am a Knight of the Red Dragon, my duty, my curse,' he whispered through a haze of medicines.

Jacob looked on helplessly. 'His stick, his sword,' Violet calmed him. 'The most treasured possession of all Knights of the Round Table, and within, my own father told me, are memories...and believe it or not, I still see

some from my own staff given to me upon my father's passing. Times spent with my mother, with us as a family, both the pleasure and the pain, one making the other all the more precious.'

Adam gave a reassuring wink in Violet's direction, always impressed with how the knight of Sir Bors had continued to grow both in spirit and compassion, wiser than her father Nick could have ever dreamed, yet strong enough to overcome all challenges when presented. Lucian bolted and jerked once more, words of dread and remorse filling the room. The once wooden staff became a shimmering sliver of steel in the commotion, severing one of the drips and slicing through the bedsheets in the convulsions. Jacob was quick to relieve his ailing father of the weapon, emergency sirens bringing a bustle of nurses and doctors running down the hallway. The blade remained, despite Jacob's every effort to reconfigure it. 'How? I can't...I don't know how to...' he panicked. Violet seized the sword's handle, attempted to summon her own power of Harmonia red down through its core. The sword remained unresponsive. Adam urged the two to leave, lest they be seen with a knight's blade in a dying man's room. 'But my father...he needs me!' Jacob rooted his feet, hospital staff closing in.

Then, the manic episode that erupted from his father ceased unexpectedly. Jacob forced himself free from Violet's grip and rushed to Lucian's side once again,

astonished by the beaming smile that lit up every wrinkle on his face. He looked across at Cleo, her eyes closed, the frail hand of his father's pressed between hers, his newfound glee and delight easing into a final few breaths and the monotone hum of a flat-lined heartbeat. Jacob's lower lip trembled, his head bowed. He composed himself enough to meet Cleo's eyes as they opened... 'What did you do?' he croaked.

Cleo gave a slow wink. 'Your swords are not the only relics that can stir memories.' She smiled towards Violet. 'He has passed peacefully, young Jacob, and I can tell you this...he loved you, your mother and your half-brother Mack very, very much.' Tears began to well and trickle down her olive cheeks. 'The duty of Sir Bedivere now falls to you, and you should carry it with honour.'

Chapter 11
Madrid – Spain
30th April 1587 AD

Patience. Morgan le Fay despised the word, for to her, it had become little more than an excuse for those lesser than her to flex whatever assumed power they clung to, confer secretly amongst themselves, and reach the same inevitable conclusion. She possessed the gift of foresight and commanded powers beyond the comprehension of men, but still had to adhere to their rules, their protocols, and their hollow commands. There were often times when such assumed control by mankind, be it kings, queens, or noble folk, would trigger her inner smile. There was nothing more pleasing than witnessing puppets at work while blissfully unaware of their own strings. But today, she was in no such mood. Patience was a poison—an unnecessary tease. She glided back and forth across the glossy wooden floors of the El Escorial's Hall of Battles, an occasional glance towards one of the sumptuous frescoes boasting of Spain's achievements over their French neighbours these past few centuries. She would huff and growl out loud...as if such victories would have been possible for the Iberian Kingdom without her intervention. Pawns believing they were masters of their own fate. 'Spare me these fools!' she hissed through gritted teeth.

Now was the time to strike England. Morgan knew it only too well, for it was her orchestration that had led King Philip II to this pivotal moment. The Spanish monarch would claim initial glory, but the true victor was her, vanquishing the ages-old foe of the Red Dragon and plotting a course for a global empire...Iberian colours or not, it mattered little. Under the façade of Catholicism and its rabid fanatics, she had risen, Spain becoming the ultimate weapon across Europe and beyond. Queen Mary I, pious sycophant that she was, had played her role beautifully, hundreds of Protestants burnt at the stake to appease her husband, but denied true love and driven into lustful spite, Morgan's charmed Necklace of Harmonia ensuring King Philip II only had eyes for its wearer. The lands of England became his goal, as did his dearest Morgana's heart. Her White Dragon acolytes of Antony Babington and John Ballard became required sacrifices for the cataclysm of carnage that was to follow, the blood of Sir Lamorak and Sir Geraint spilling as freely as the executed Queen of Scots, the poor, innocent cousin of Queen Elizabeth's, resting now as a martyr to Morgan's cause. A boy king now sat on the throne of Scotland, born somehow out of love from the Sacred Band...no, not love, *duty*. For that is all the Sacred Band has ever been, duty to a maiden. To follow blindly, however, is purely naïve, for enemies will not hesitate to twist their tactics to gain an advantage. Loyalty can carry severe punishment if on the wrong side of history. The name of this Scottish king could be heard from behind the doors of King Philip's

chambers... 'James VI. *Rey legítimo!*' she would hear, and the crack of a grin would follow. Then came the cautious, sly voice of the Superior General of the Jesuit Order, Signior Claudio Acquaviva, a slight and unassuming Italian man rich with Papal prestige, and once a student of the First Order General, the revered Saint Ignatius of Loyola, a name that still carried weight in the Royal Spanish court. The order's spiritual exercises, while blessed by the Holy See, stretched beyond typical Catholic teachings, Saint Ignatius acknowledging more than a simple priest should on Arthurian mythology, the discernment of good deeds over bad, atonement for sin, and the illusion of choice. *Choice*—another word Morgan had come to despise...when it slipped from the tongue of men in her presence, a flagrant insult. Her flare of rage sparked inside once more, those doors to the chamber coming close to being blown apart by a bolt of green energy bubbling beneath the skin of her palms, shut down by the firm grip of Señor Alonso Perez.

'*Paciencia*, Lady Morgan,' Perez soothed. 'The king does not appreciate being disturbed while at the counsel of the Jesuit Order.'

'Counsel...*Counsel?*' Morgan tisked, snatching her hand free. '*I am his counsel*, Sir Lancelot. And I determine his fortune, not Rome, not the sackcloth of abstinent monks or clergymen who believe they understand our ways...*my ways.*'

‘Sí, Lady Morgan. I too wish for war on Inglaterra sooner, not later. Not only to avenge the deaths of Sir Lamorak and Sir Geraint as part of your inspired Babington Plot, but...’ he sheepishly lifted the bristle of charcoal black hairs from his trimmed moustache, revealing a slender scar above his lip. ‘They say it was the king’s beard that was singed during the raid on Cadiz, but trust me, His Majesty did not form a part of the front line,’ The naval commander sneered, wooden staff tapping against the heel of his boot. ‘Thirty galleons sunk or damaged, and yet still, we wait. Francis Drake now moves north through Portugal. I hear he has the temerity to offer terms to exchange *prisioneros* to spare further humiliation. We are being made to look like dogs at the mercy of a whip.’

‘Let the knight of Sir Galahad enjoy his trifling skirmishes on our shores for now, Señor Perez. For once the Armada is ready, it will deliver such a blow to England and the Red Dragon that they shall never recover...not without their only relic of hope.’ Morgan ran a finger along Alonso’s wooden staff, forcing a smile once more. The commander pressed his ear against the chamber doors and pulled a strained face.

‘You think that is what the Jesuit Order is advising against? The gifted sword of Excalibur from the *Maldita Maria?*’ Alonso asked. ‘The Bloody Queen of Inglaterra, also bloody ignorant, no?’ He let loose a snigger. ‘It would explain Sir Galahad’s rash actions of late, boldest

to strike at our heartlands. One might say the actions of a man *desesperado*, desperate, no?’ He moved his head from the chamber doors, slyly curving over Morgan le Fay’s shoulder. ‘Do you think he has the bed of Queen Elizabeth too? Or would that be Sir Gawain, Señor Walter Raleigh? No...Señor Francis Walsingham, perhaps? Who would dare deny the knight of Sir Kay?’ He placed an unwelcome hand on Morgan’s hip. ‘Perhaps even the homosexuals of the Sacred Band? Fraternising with the strong women in their lives...Señor David Rizzo proving a true Italian stallion, you tell my knights, sí? Their leader, Señor John Norris, still alive and desperate to break the Queen of England’s maidenhead.’ He pecked tenderly several times on Morgan’s chalk-white neck. The sorceress humoured the knight for a moment, the hollow grey of her eyes snapping to vivid green the instant Alonso’s hand ventured between her thighs, the wrists of Sir Lancelot ensnared in coils of serpent green light, the commander brought heavily to his knees. ‘Ah, too eager, my good lady? *Me disculpe.*’ He grimaced somewhere between pleasure and pain. His bonds were released the instant the chamber doors flew open, Claudio Acquaviva casting scorn on the pair while begrudgingly ordered to summon them forth before the king.

King Philip II grumbled, twisting the darkened thorn staff between his hands as if trying to rustically spark a

fire. His head hung low, beads of sweat running freely from his wrinkled brow down to the tip of his sharp nose. He tried to loosen the frill collar, gasping for a breath of cooler air, and quickly ordered a servant to crack open a window. He craned his neck back, attempting to sit regally to attention as Morgan le Fay and Commander Alonso stepped forth, the commander kneeling instantly, le Fay a touch tardier in the pleasantries. *'El Diablo!* the king lifted and shook the staff with vigour. *'Maldición! Maldición!* he spat.

'My good king, what brings about this discontent?' Morgan intrepidly stepped forward. 'Have I not guided you and your kingdom to greatness? Have I...we...not now the right and reason to launch a full invasion of England? A kind Catholic monarch of Scotland cruelly executed despite fierce objection from the Pope...' She paused to recognise a still-simmering Claudio Acquaviva, and exchanged a polite nod. '...and therefore God's good grace rising with your banner to remove Elizabeth, the heretic queen?'

'With a demon's blade!' Acquaviva interjected with a firm step closer to the king. 'Your grace, my order is resolute, for the tales told from Saint Ignatius, our first father, are clear. There is a curse upon this gift from your former wife Queen Mary, born from the wretched thirteenth warrior of Britain's knights of a bygone era. For what it grants its wielder, it drains from the lands surrounding it.' Acquaviva moved swiftly to the open

window, and yanked the velvet drapes aside, allowing a stream of morning sunlight to cut through the musty air. 'Look! Beyond the towering walls of the El Escorial—a triumph to your reign, I might humbly add—the Iberian regions across our lands, from Navarre to Aragon, grow bitter with your demands for funds, for soldiers, for timber for your grand *Armada*. We have enemies lying in wait aside from England my king...the inflamed Dutch, those of the Low Countries, even Italy itself has its concerns over the Hapsburg reign, and the French will not protest with one another over factions of Christian superiority for long...' He paused for a flustered breath, leaving Morgan le Fay to snatch her moment.

'I can assure His Majesty that Italy and Signior Alessandro Farnese, the good Duke of Parma, remain committed to your most sacrosanct of causes...' She gave a snappy wink to a still kneeling Alonso, the knight of Sir Tristan a firm piece yet to move on the board. '...and as for these accusations of demonic practices and cursed relics, I can equally assure you that the Golden Age of Spain remains bold and bright as ever, perhaps now as radiant as the sun itself.' She, too, was now praising the solitary ray of sunlight. 'You can go further, my king, for you have powers beyond the imaginable. Inglaterra can be yours. Have faith, faith in your own...Dios... *Dios*... God.' She swallowed hard and awkwardly, having to proclaim a deity superior did little to appease her temper, but meekly she placed a hand upon the thorn wood staff. 'This...gift, this *treasure*, can

be your greatest triumph, my grace. Have the courage to see it through.’ Her words came like a chilling whisper.

Acquaviva coughed aggressively. ‘The *Thirteenth*, my grace. Never an auspicious number, the words of Sir Percival himself.’ The naming of the knight had both Alonso and Morgan turn their sights on the Order General, Alonso’s jade eyes now darting between his lady and the Jesuit, fuelled with bemusement. Morgan shot stoutly upright, fists trembling, his lower lip sucked in and locked to prevent a surge of rage that would have seen the finely robed priest defenestrated in an instant. The king narrowed his eyes, turned, and caught the green embers within Morgan’s.

‘Sir Percival? As in the Arthurian Knight of the...the Circle Table?’ the king puzzled.

‘*Round Table*, my grace,’ Alonso reverently corrected. ‘And while a name of great legend, a legend nonetheless...for it is the might of your army, your navy and your iron heart that has led Spain to this success across Europe, and indeed, across the Americas. Do not trouble yourself with childish myths.’ He forced a voice of diplomacy, locking his arm around Morgan le Fay’s. ‘Cadiz was a mere salvo of English intent, my king...they fear what Spain could accomplish and have tried to weaken our grip on Elizabeth’s crown. A setback undoubtedly, but they have failed...for we can still

command the greatest force the oceans have ever witnessed, you need but give the order.'

King Philip turned away, only to be lured back to the rich red burn of the jewel that shone from Morgan's neck, the same hue now pulsing within his eyes. A desire for more. More riches, more land, more *power*. 'Señor Claudio Acquaviva, inform His Holiness Pope Sixtus V that I require his blessing, the blessing of God almighty, to continue my taxes for the Armada, by any means necessary. Have any objectors to my divine requests brought before me,' he barked, and dismissed a deflated Acquaviva. Morgan le Fay and Alonso Perez gleefully countered the Order General's ongoing splurging of devilish cursing and the downfall of Spain as he skulked out of view. 'Commander Perez, are you and Commander Martinez thirsty for revenge?' He beckoned Alonso forward and encouraged him to kneel and be blessed by his anointed hand of God. The knight of Sir Lancelot obliged, his lady courteously stepping aside and curling her own grip around the Palladium statue framed in a decorative alcove to the right of the king's throne. As a vivid thought of myths blurring into reality took hold of him, he felt the sudden sting of his own wooden staff, transformed into steel without his summoning, the second sword eager to spring from its parent into the unique dual blade. He slammed his hand on its pommel, the king mercifully distracted by his focused holy incantation. The steel form remained, despite his willingness to revert back to its less

menacing form. The blackthorn staff of the king shone midnight black, scratching its tip across the marble, retreating away from Alonso's own, every inch the dual blades of Sir Lancelot crept forward against their master's demands, the blackthorn blade matched in an apparent cower. Alonso could control it no more, hurling himself back midway through the king's blessing and collapsing hard on the floor at the feet of Morgan, his lady casting an astonished look.

'My...my apologies, my good king. Your mighty words of the Lord have filled me with such a purpose that I must attend to my affairs immediately.' Pérez scrambled to his feet, dusted down his tunic, bowed swiftly, and fled. King Philip retracted his hand, shot a quizzical look towards Morgan le Fay, and then down towards the restored gifted thorn staff.

'A good omen, my dearest Morgana?' the king twitched a grin.

Morgan returned to her Palladium, and playfully twisted the ruby jewel around her neck. '*Absolutamente*, good Rey Felipe.'

Chapter 12

Manresa – Catalonia, Spain

18th September 2022 AD

Several months had passed since the mayoress had set foot inside the Santa Cova, a delay for which she privately punished herself. Never enough hours in the day, the demands of her city, her lands, her people—now more than ever. They had thrived over these turbulent two years of illness and death, that was without question, but envious eyes were now firmly fixed on them...not just from Spain, but now beyond its borders. The legacy of XENO-20 had hit the northern regions of Africa hard, with political instabilities and wrecked economies feeding desperation. Migrants were now willing to cross the often turbulent seas of the Mediterranean to flee grinding poverty and corruption. This month alone they tallied three thousand, as the mayoress had been informed by counterpart coastal patrols in neighbouring Barcelona, a major city that had undoubtedly benefited from her sleek management of affairs across Catalonia. Heads of state in the region's capital had, however, grown restless, critical of her own gumption towards Madrid as a noose around their necks to the detriment of progress and self-determination. History had long held a divide between the autonomous provinces of the country. Was it so wrong of her to wish to see Manresa's future decided by its own people as opposed to those whose fortunes

would fluctuate like the ebb and flow of the tides? Stability was hard won, and should others wish to seek their shores and share in their riches, they would need a sound reason to do so, lest the very foundations of their success crumble.

She paused for a moment within the vestibule, admiring the intricately tiled mosaics and burnished bronze reliefs depicting Saint Ignatius of Loyola and his penances. Spiritually wounded by the Inquisitions, each artwork was a fragment of his journey in convalescence, a reminder of his pilgrimage, and the encouragement of others to adopt similar spiritual exercises. Her thoughts returned to her work, and a sharp debate in her head as to whether the revered saint would have approved of migrants sailing to their shores in hope of bettering themselves...their own pilgrimage, one might say. But no, *no*, she convinced herself, for these were not times of altruism and humanitarian ideologies; her own family bloodline thought that way once, and was never rewarded, only caustically cursed. She saw the suffering through the eyes of her own relatives, of each person within Manresa, as whatever token luxuries the region may have won itself were quickly siphoned off for the good of Spain, or indeed the entire continent. The Anfortas family curse had taken different forms over the centuries since the spearing of the great king, from drought to famine to fortune. Pandemics were the final straw, and it was Mayoress Sofia Pescador who

possessed the guile and the gift of knowledge to turn such tide to her favour.

'Perdón, Mayoress Pescador. I was not expecting you,' the senior monk spoke humbly, stonewashed robes swept back before bowing. *'Might I enquire as to the reason for your visit?'*

'I wasn't aware I required one, my most noble general of the Jesuit Order,' the mayoress playfully teased. The monk brought his hands together and replied with a warm smile. *'It has been too long, my good general, and I have found myself in dire need of faith of late,'* Sofia confessed with a blessing.

'Sí, I understand. Most ugly scenes across Africa and large parts of Spain...the powers of Europe at each other's throats. Such disharmony. One cannot help but wonder if the Lord himself is sitting upon high and teaching us all a lesson.' The general cast his eyes to the heavens, glided past the mayoress and across the chiselled marble emblem of Saint Ignatius, a golden sunflower, releasing a solid bunch of heavy iron keys from his belt. *'I trust the Mayoress of Manresa seeks the solitary comfort of our holy First Order General of Jesuits himself? Please.'* He slid one of the keys firmly into the rusty hole of the panelled pine door. A slight wiggle released the lock with a clunk. *'The Cave of Saint Ignatius is yours, Señorita.'*

Narrow and robbed of all natural light, the saint's cave tunnelled unevenly for a good twenty metres, its impressive, low-hanging boulders protruding from each side and forcing Sofia to swerve and duck en route to the modest altar at the end. She knelt before the rose-white alabaster altarpiece, Saint Ignatius carved penitent and inscribed. The mayoress craned her neck to the side and studied the three crosses of prayer said to be carved by the saint himself while he sat in pious insolation. 'Will there be anything else you need from me, Mayoress?' the general enquired, standing sentry by the cave entrance. Sofia just managed to manoeuvre herself around without clipping one of the stone bulges above her head, her gaze drawn to the motif of a dragon wrapped in thorn sprigs partially obscured by the monk's gown. She stretched a smile and simply shook her head. 'Very well, Señorita.' Her guide departed.

A *dragon*. Creature of myth and legend, woven into tales from every corner of the globe. It was odd, Sofia thought, that she was the only one within her most recent family who understood its significance here within Saint Ignatius's humble hallowed ground. A scholar of Arthurian tales, the saint would come to tell others of the lauded Knights of the Round Table, and one such knight in particular who would

unceremoniously renounce his title and his ways in favour of the Christian faith, travel from Britain to the lands of Spain and Italy, settling here in the fabled site of Castle Corbenic, and bestowing upon her own family the bloodline that bore his virgin name—Sir Percival. If her own ancestor in Anfortas had only recognised the sliver of absolute truth in such tales, then perhaps the curse that plagued the Fisher King could have been deflected, for what could have stood against the strength of an Arthurian knight's blade...even that stained with the blood of Christ himself, the Spear of Destiny. Sofia entertained herself whimsically with the thought of a clean swipe from Sir Percival's blade shattering Christ's mortal spear, the face of Sir Balin de Savage dismayed, the Inquisition suddenly challenged by a might equal to its own fervency. Alas, it was not the time...dare she despondently say, a missed opportunity. Not to be repeated, as so often was the case in history, a lingering shadow of barbaric black legend that had hung over Spain since King Philip II and his failed Armada against the English and their Protestant allies in the sixteenth century. Not this time. As the clomp of the general's footsteps faded down the hallway, Sofia seized her chance. The lid of the altarpiece shifted with a grunt of effort, revealing a blackthorn wood staff preening against tattily woven cloth. She swore the first time she discovered it, she heard it whisper, a thrill of temptation spoken uniquely to her as its true heir. With this came a promise, a reassurance that any cautionary tales associated with the relic were diminished, for where

kings and queens such as Philip II or his fleeting wife Mary I were deemed unworthy to wield such power, she was Sir Percival's rightful claimant. She would become the one to take the bold action her ancestors failed to do in service to her people when they required it the most. So far, all her intrepid actions had paid dividends; from the moment her fingers had curled their grip around the blackthorn, a new destiny unfolded. Malady would recede, wealth would return, and pride and patriotism restored within Catalonia. They would be equals, no, they would be *leaders*. Masters of their own fate, not slaves to others. This was their future, and one worth fighting for, no matter what the consequence.

Chapter 13
Bath – England
18th September 2022 AD

The metallic taste of blood filled Jonathan Worthington's mouth. He spat to the side of the red crash mats, marginally missing Fernando's lily-white trainers. 'Hey! These are brand new!' The Italian tossed his hands in the air, protesting. Milo Conti snuck in a snigger. '*Maleducato*, eh?' cricking his neck and loosening his shoulders, getting ready for round two.

'What did the dopey footballer say?' Jonathan muttered in hot breath to Adam. His partner stood attentively in his corner.

'*Maleducato*...I believe it means *rude*,' Adam replied, with a flash of a grin. 'Playfully intended, of course.'

'Well, playtime's over!' Jon summoned both the blue flame shield and spear, the latter still feeling achy and awkward through his swollen shoulder. 'Think I can still thrust with this thing.' He jabbed the flaming spear sharply several times.

'Conti will block, he's good at that. Quick on his feet too...watch that elbow of his,' Adam advised. Milo's partner Tommy was already gearing up his champion with a raucous row of claps and Celtic FC-inspired

chants. 'Might also want to consider turning on your heel, y'know. Similar to avoiding a tackle in rugby, doubt he'll be expecting that.'

'Then what?' Jon swung his sore shoulder back and forth.

'Can't summon a shield from behind...just don't spear the guy, worth millions to their club apparently, and the Sacred Band has no sports insurance,' Adam chuckled. Fernando was urged to start the second bout by an increasingly restless Milo, Russo drawing the pair within striking distance, stinging Jon with a reminder that it was one nil to Celtic over Bath. The moment the whistle shrieked, Milo surged for Jonathan's vulnerable shoulder with a shortened spear sailing inches from the vest strap. Worthington dodged, and threw his superior weight into Conti's midriff, catching him off balance, the striker steadying his footing swiftly. Jon's spear aimed low, blocked by Conti's shield. '*Mancato! Missed!*' came a smug riposte. Milo kicked high, heel nearing Jon's temple, certain to impact had Adam not alerted his partner to duck. Tommy Brooks gestured to Fernando to protest such interference. Before Fernando had time to assess, Jon executed Adam's pre-bout advice, pivoting one hundred and eighty around his slender opponent and finding an advantageous position. His Band instinct gave way to his own sporting prowess without a spear. His muscular arm wrapped tightly around Milo's waist like a boa constrictor, followed by a contortion akin to a

typical on-field tackle that had the Italian flung over Worthington's back and landed firmly on the mats. Before Conti could blink away his shock, Jon was standing over him, spear tip hovering above his throat. Bout over.

'Ah, one apiece,' Fernando conceded. 'We go to decider, sì?'

'Like Hell, we do! Milo would have clocked 'em had it not been for Adam's yappin' from the sidelines!' Tommy snapped.

'I saw it comin',' Jon quipped back. Tommy squared up to the bigger man, pasty skin blooming red with rage. 'Fine...you and me go a final round, big boy. See who wins!' The spark of Band blue streaked through Brook's irises. Adam calmly stepped forward and wedged himself between the two pillars of testosterone.

'Gentleman...this is just practice, training. Save your irascible antics for your respective sports to appease your fans, who likely have more sawdust going on upstairs than flat-pack furniture. The Sacred Band warriors channel anger as one, not as individuals towards each other. Trust me, that only ends...painfully,' Adam choked a little, rubbing gingerly around his collarbone.

‘Sì, sì. No more infighting, *gentiluomini*.’ Fernando and Milo flanked the still-simmering pair, believing themselves aligned to Adam’s reference to recent events, Allen’s pain tracing back further still, his scar a far more visceral reminder than a tear in the united phalanx of the three hundred fighters. ‘Besides, this building is, er, *vecchio*...very old, sì?’ Fernando reminded, while pointing to ornately framed pictures hung against polished oak panels.

‘Seventeen forty-two. And yes, a bit of a family heirloom to me and my brother, so no burning this one down. please.’ Adam shook and lifted his gloom. ‘I doubt the Allen and Wood family ancestors had the same level of insurance for Prior Park as I did for my father’s...you spear something here, you pay for it. Understood?’ He shared a firm look between his partner and Tommy. A grumble of accord was given. ‘Good. Then we can work with the swords...Jon, you have your homework.’ He cocked his head towards the Sir Lancelot wooden staff propped up against a table where Geraint and Violet had all paired, moving from laptop to dusty textbook. ‘Let me know if you need Violet’s assistance...otherwise, carry on, gents. Fernando, keep it civil, please.’ The Band leader headed for the busy minds of the knights, dabbing off sweat with a shammy towel.

‘Seventeen forty-two...and you say *vecchio*. Hardly the Colosseum!’ Milo twitched cheekily to Fernando.

Each faded, cracked spine of the hefty books held the label *Property of the Bodleian Library* at their base. Adam inspected one, *Monas Hieroglyphica*, a text from Elizabethan favourite John Dee, its opening pages a near-incomprehensible series of symbols and glyphs with little English translation. He gave a shrug before passing back to Geraint South, admitting complete ignorance.

‘John Dee was one of the earliest accounts we have of the Sir Bedivere line.’ Geraint thumbed through the pages. ‘Astrologer, occultist, fortune teller...some say he foresaw the rise of a great empire for Queen Elizabeth and the Kingdom of England, perhaps an intellect gifted by his connection to the then Lady of the Lake. Certainly swayed the opinions of the queen’s court and, no doubt, many of our Red and White Dragon knights of the time. The rise of the Elizabethan Golden Age. Sir Francis Drake, Sir Walter Raleigh, Francis Walsingham...all playing their own roles in the territorial expanse of England.’

‘That and a certain Theban relic, too, I assume?’ Adam folded his arms tightly.

‘True. Lady Morgan at the time was known to be a more likely ally of the Spanish Empire, their own Golden Age

perhaps coming to an end, her Knights of the White Dragon pawns within the highest levels of the Iberian Navy—maybe heading up the famous Armada itself. Details are a little sketchy on my former side of the equation.’ Geraint switched books to a freshly printed *Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Adam peered inquisitively over the knight of Sir Geraint’s shoulder. ‘Sounds odd, I know, but there are rumours the Bard drew inspiration from Doctor Dee and his musings, in particular, in *The Tempest*...his own Prospero made flesh and blood.’

‘Might also have had a thing for dolls, this John Dee,’ Violet smirked, turning the laptop around and revealing a pixelated image of a specific glyph forged in Dee’s name—a *monad*.

‘Bit more to it than that...’ Geraint lent forward and traced his finger over the screen. ‘...you have a representation of both the Sun and the Moon, the cross below making the recognised symbol of the feminine, then what we believe to be the symbol for the zodiac sign of Aries.’ Violet and Adam exchanged puzzled looks. ‘Ok, think of the Sun and the birth of a new day, a dawn, then the Moon as its setting counterpart, the end, and the Ram of Aries...first sign of the zodiac, full of fire and tempestuousness, all wrapped up in the prime symbol of the feminine. Sounding familiar to either of you?’

‘The *Trinity*,’ Adam clocked. The Sun for the birth of an empire from the Palladium, the Moon for its ending and rebirth through Excalibur, the lust of Aries, the ram of war, a likely nod towards the Necklace of Harmonia even if the star sign itself had no direct association with the feared Greek god of war. It was a beginning, the beating heart of creation, shared through deep-rooted connections to motherhood and its elements. ‘Was this symbol meant to be auspicious, or a warning?’

‘Both, most likely,’ Geraint confirmed. ‘Whether his words went heeded or not at the time, we’ll never know, but as with all empires, England ended up benefitting from Morgan le Fay’s influence, that much I’m certain of.’

‘And Sir Percival?’ Adam turned his attention to another tome, *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*, by Chretien de Troyes, and blew cobwebs off its edges. ‘His proposed pilgrimages prove to be the basis for our popular theory?’

‘Chretien de Troyes pre-dates Thomas Mallory’s popular *Le Morte d’Arthur* by several centuries, and might well provide a keener insight into our mysterious thirteenth table inductee,’ Geraint continued to subvocalise through passages of *The Tempest*, occasionally muttering out loud. ‘Percival’s story was one of the French poet’s last, and arguably unfinished, maybe because...’

'...because it had no official ending,' Adam interjected. 'His bloodline lived on.' Geraint nodded slowly, a modest correction given on bloodline in its purest sense, more of an *adoption*, South put it. 'The Fisher King of Corbinec, Anfortas and his children now the honorary descendants of Sir Percival and his blade, carved through to its latest heir, Mayoress Sofia Pescador of Manresa. Wait, his blade...how did it...?'

'Reach the lands of Spain? Well, the remaining twelve knights and their descendants were all told that Sir Percival died a virgin, in self-abasement for not choosing a side during the Battle of Camlann and the slaying of King Arthur and his son, Prince Mordred. His sword was therefore cursed, either by his own hand or that of Merlin, or by the Lady of the Lake herself. Quite what this curse entailed we've never been sure, given all recognition of the bloodline was understandably erased and the civil war we came to know between Red and White factions ensued...but...' Geraint paused, identifying the passage he sought '...this intrigues me: *'I here abjure...this airy charm...break my staff, bury it certain fathoms in the earth, and deeper than did ever plummet sound...drown my book,'* he abridged the Bard's words.

'So...he abandoned it somewhere? That's what you're suggesting?' Violet took to her feet, one eye on Jonathan's attempts to channel blue fire through both his bequeathed swords, failing pitifully while trying to

bat away the derision from Milo and Tommy. ‘Buried it somewhere near Camelot? Glastonbury or Cadbury Castle, or wherever we believed it to be?’

‘Buried or cast into the seas. Let’s face it, the concept of a sword in a stone has just as much foundation as one rising from the waters,’ Geraint proposed. ‘A sword that perhaps could only be retrieved, or pulled free from a worthy candidate.’

‘A king of Britain?’ Adam supported.

‘Or *queen*,’ Violet quick in her judgement. ‘Queen Elizabeth was meant to be a virgin, too, so she and Percival would have had that in common, right?’ The logic clicked with Adam and Geraint if it weren’t for the fact that King Philip II of Spain married the bloody hand of her elder sister Mary I, not Elizabeth. A murderer of Protestants was hardly the best fit for the future of England and the Isle of Britain, but perhaps this was anecdotal evidence of Sir Percival’s very curse. The echo of a grunt filled the Priory Hall as Jonathan, with his foot high on the wooden training post, strained to prise free one of his twin blades that had unwillingly transformed mid-strike, now obstinately buried in the faux torso bust. Milo, Tommy, and Fernando rolled around in hysterics as pulses of blue fire emerged from Worthington’s struggles. ‘Excuse me, boys. My skills might be required before the new Sir Lancelot burns down the entire block.’

'It's a reasonable argument...a Tudor monarch messing around with magic beyond their comprehension, a possibly delusional doctor in John Dee, hounded by the same ailments that plague all the knights of Sir Bedivere, spouting ethereal nonsense interpreted as fact and destiny,' Adam pondered.

'All sounds very destructive, though,' Geraint countered, becoming entertained by both Violet's and Jonathan's tepid attempts at freeing the fiery blade. 'And we have a province of Spain now thriving against all the odds, beyond any mere lifting of divine damnation from the Holy Lance...complete protection from what could easily have become the world's deadliest pandemic. This hardly screams torture for its wielder.'

'Not at the moment.' Gary strode into the hall, Ana Braithwaite in mid-call on her mobile, sneaking in a peck on Geraint's cheek while seemingly trying to reason with whoever was on the other end. 'Ana and I were flicking through the news channels. Seen the latest from Africa? Central France? Fringes of Portugal and the Bay of Biscay?' he tapped rapidly on the laptop keyboard, pulling up several online news feeds, each describing an escalating tragedy. Droughts in Algeria overnight, crop failures in Morocco, conflagrations spreading from the Loire Valley to the fringes of Bordeaux, a similar tale in the Basque country, and farther afield to the outskirts of the German and Italian borders. 'Rivers and crops beginning to fail along the South Coast of England from

Kent to Cornwall too...and not a demi-god in sight this time,' Gary tutted.

'And Manresa?' Geraint enquired.

'Never better, apparently.' Ana tossed her mobile down on the table, exasperated. 'We've been trying to negotiate the movement of ASCLEPIUS vaccines through to Gibraltar, given much of Central Africa is still in dire need of them post-XENO-20, but Catalonia has closed its borders due to the influx of migrants from across the Mediterranean. Says it wishes to remain free of contamination. Complete nonsense.' She slumped deeply into a chair and pressed her palm against her forehead. 'The recent escalation of disasters is making it difficult to divert any Armed Forces reserves across Europe to aid the cause. Manresa, on the other hand...nothing. No illness, no floods or droughts, all clear.'

A different *shape* of curse, Adam contemplated. One that manifests as insular, absolute protection and perhaps elevation for its people, while all the while draining the fortunes of those around them. An indulgence and decadence most appealing to those who felt the cruel stab of mischance throughout life, believing blame to lie at the feet of their closest neighbours but ignorant to honour, to integrity, to humility. All the core values of a Knight of the Round Table, all vows considered broken by Sir Percival

himself. 'I'm travelling out there first thing tomorrow, to Manresa,' Gary announced. 'See if I can't wrangle myself another interview with the most wondrous Mayoress Sofia Pescador. Find out more about this *Un Secreto* relic of hers.'

'We believe it is indeed likely to be the sword of Sir Percival, Gary.' Geraint held up a hand of caution. 'And if so, we have no idea what it might be capable of.'

'A knight's sword is a knight's sword, South. It'll meet my own, and then let's see who is left standing.' Gary proudly raised his own wooden staff. 'Besides, you and Violet are welcome to join me...add Luke of Sir Galahad, Aisha of Sir Palamedes and her followers. You really think the mayoress can refuse us?'

'I'm only urging a touch of restraint, Sir Gaheris. Look at what is happening—quite unprecedented, even for us,' Geraint's voice ticked higher, a sure sign of agitation. Adam spotted the grave and concerned face of fiancée Ana, the thought of Geraint hurling himself into such an affray drawing short, tight breaths from the doctor. His attention turned to the high window, framing the solemn figures of Cleo and Jacob Benson. The pair stood pensively on the Palladian Bridge in the park grounds, the lady of Thebes having spent much of the afternoon consoling the Jamaican through his melancholy. A different *shape* of curse, he contemplated again, and one that an individual as long-lived and in turn blessed

with wisdom might shed further light on. Cleodoxa, and her brother Damasichthon, possibly bystanders to the events surrounding the Spanish Armada, Tudor England, and whatever mystical forces were at play, from the familiar to the foreign. 'I'll speak with my brother and Aisha, the Followers of Palamedes having no doubt already sprung into early philanthropy as they always do,' Adam affirmed. 'I side with Geraint though Gary...before we bolt, let's try to gather a little more intel on this cursed Thirteenth, this *storm bringer*, as Mary Cassidy herself put it. Cross-examine some faces from the past, here with us in the present.' He nodded out towards the pastures.

'Cleo? Fine. You do that...but I have another job to do, call it the regular day job of reporting the news, as most view it. You can either be on the plane or not,' Gary snorted. 'And the Sacred Band?'

Adam watched his partner finally pull free the blade from the training mannequin, both swords of Sir Lancelot fully ablaze in boldest blue, Jonathan looking smug and immediately re-requesting that third bout decider with Tommy or Milo. The adversary mattered not now with this newly found confidence of Band and knight's blade. 'Too soon, especially after such recent activity surrounding XENO-20, but, when we're needed, we'll be ready...I hope.'

Chapter 14
Plymouth – England
6th July 1588 AD

Honour between knights had become a rarity, especially in such bellicose times. Francis Drake stood silently on the cobbled walls of Plymouth Hoe, intermittent rumbles of thunder sounding from coal-dark skies on the horizon, causing his heart to skip a beat each time. The wind blew favourably, gently south towards the Bay of Biscay, the sails of the English fleet barely registering its direction, but their ornate bows slowly, reluctantly, drifting to face their advancing enemy. The fleet of the queen neared two hundred, a rag-tag gathering of seasoned sailors and plundering privateers, all prepared to rally to the call of crown and country...an impressive assembly, but squaring against Iberian firepower twice that of his, gleaming gilt galleons fresh from construction and nigh on twenty thousand men aboard, all rancorous from his recent skirmishes in Cadiz, dampened any hope of a swift victory. Drake had found himself on the receiving end of the orders of Walsingham, the cunning mind of Sir Gaheris insisting premature engagement with the Spanish fleet within their home waters, perhaps to test their resolve, dilute any will of invasion, or simply to report good fortune back to the queen when the true relic pivotal to victory over King Philip II remained lost in the muddled mind of her astrologer Doctor Dee. A prized advisor, Sir

Walsingham was, but despite a foiled attempt on the monarch's life through the guile of the White Dragon and many countless hours decrypting messages between would-be Catholic revolutionists, Elizabeth was still coerced into executing her own flesh and blood at his hand. Had the queen the slightest trace of vengefulness, making her capable of turning on her nearest allies in court as her father often did, Walsingham could so easily find himself on his way to the gallows at the snap of a finger. The faith Elizabeth held in John Norris, the lonely leader of the Sacred Band, might have become the last card the knight of Sir Gaheris clung to so dearly, for favour had certainly turned against compatriot Walter Raleigh...the allure of the Lady in Waiting Bess Throckmorton becoming quite the scandal at Hampton Court Palace. Now was most certainly not the time to be losing the seafaring skills of the most noble line of Sir Gawain, even if he struggled to keep his sword sheathed, as Walsingham so modestly put it.

'Sir Drake, sir.' A young page boy puffed his way up the hill behind, strawberry fair hair sticky with sweat. 'Sir, my good Lord Howard of Effingham requests that you...that you...join him in a game of bowls,' he panted.

'Bowls? Now?' Drake replied with a frown.

'Why, yes. The Lord Admiral believes no such invasion from the Armada is expected tonight, and he has yet to

hear word about the treaty negotiations from Mr Valentine Dale and the Duke of Parma,' the boy continued through ragged breath.

'I'm sure he hasn't,' Drake tisked, well aware of the duke's expected orders from Morgan le Fay to rebuff any such talk of peace from England...the knight of Sir Tristan will remain poised and waiting on Dutch shores with his Army of Flanders for the instant the English blockade is breached. Still, an invitation from the High Lord Admiral might as well be an order, so Drake nodded his assent to the young messenger in formal reply. The page caught his breath enough to point at the two bundles of cloth held under Drake's arm. A demure offer to carry the knight of Sir Galahad's baggage was given, followed by a question of curiosity upon seeing the ends of two wooden staffs poking out from each.

'Sir...why do you carry so many walking sticks? If I may ask.' The boy quivered. 'I did not believe you to be infirm in any way. Were you injured during your victories against the Spanish at Cadiz?' His once timorous voice became more confident and curious with each word.

'No, no,' Francis gave a hardy chuckle. 'I have long owned this staff here, carried it with me throughout all my adventures—around this entire globe, in fact. My father held it before me, and his father before that...like a crown passed to the next in line.' He led the way down

the Hoe with the tip of his own. 'These two here...well, they belonged to others, close to me, you could say, and it is my desire to see them return to their families.'

'Oh...is this a superstition for great men of the sea? A walking staff that carries with it great fortune? Was it carved from your splendid ship, *The Golden Hind* itself?' the boy's questions raced freely.

'A little older than even my own *Golden Hind*,' Drake replied playfully. 'But no, not exclusive to visionaries of the seas. An old alliance, you could say, an alliance I hope that will someday be reforged.'

The young boy fell quiet once more, meekly muttering, 'I do not believe England has many alliances now. Not like the Spanish. My father tells me it is only a matter of time before King Philip II seizes the crown of Elizabeth—if not him, then the spurned blood of the Scots to the north, or the blessed crusades of His Holiness the Pope himself.' He cast a forlorn look to his feet.

Drake paused midstride, and placed a firm hand on the boy's spindly shoulder. 'Tell me, are you of Jesuit faith?' he queried, lips pursed. The boy's eyes widened in shock, darted in every direction apart from looking directly at Drake. 'This is no reverse Inquisition, young master. You may tell me,' Francis softened. The boy found momentary comfort in Drake's tone. He drew a

deep breath and gave a single nod of his floppy blond fringe.

'I know it's not proper, like. My family has no ill favour towards the queen or her reign...but they struggle to see past the faith of His Holiness, and were alive to hear the words presented by her own father as Defender of the Faith. He spoke to them the way only a king could speak to his people. How can it be, in the turn of one daughter and queen to another, such rules could be broken?' the boy became flustered.

'Elizabeth's half-sister, Mary, killed many Protestants for her belief,' Drake theorised.

'In the name of Christ the Redeemer, sir! How can any king or queen claim to be above such a name?' the boy swelled in confidence once more. 'Do they not swear an oath? All of them that wear the Crown of England?'

'Faith takes many forms, young master,' Drake calmed. 'And from all I have learnt from my many miles across these vast oceans, you find that we, as mankind, have one thing in common...it is that we are all unique, in our own way.'

The boy's greasy complexion screwed up in puzzlement. 'Then, why do we fight, good Sir Drake? If we all claim to be different?'

Because to be different and to be accepted as such is worth fighting for. No one head should rise above the others...for this is what my family believes, as did those who held these additional staffs I carry, once upon a time at least,' Drake continued striding down the Hoe, the knobby knees of the boy picking up pace. 'Oh, and if it reassures you, these two staffs here belonged to two such individuals that shared the same beliefs as your own family, the much-maligned Anthony Babington and John Ballard,' he dropped the names casually.

'What? The *Babington Plot*? The treason and treachery against our queen? You would appease their families and have their belongings returned?' the boy burst aloud. Sewn onto the cloths that held the two staffs was the Red Wyvern insignia of Sir Drake himself, an honourable reference to his own Red Dragon lineage, and certain to get the attention of the inheritors of the blades of Sir Lamorak and Sir Geraint, for better or worse. He pointed to the Drake family's motto *Sic Parvis Magna* stitched beneath the wyvern's wings. 'What does that mean, Sir Francis?' he asked.

'Thus, great things from small things come,' Drake said with a warming smile. 'I believe this to be a small gesture, but as I said, such a trifling token of honour amongst our foes might yield rewards, maybe spare future generations the bloodshed we appear so willing to accept.' He fumbled in his tunic pocket for a coil of string looped with two silver rings.

‘And those...? To be returned to the Babington and Ballard families also?’ the boy queried. ‘In the hope of greater alliances to come?’

Drake inspected one of the rings. The words *Albus Draco* deeply engraved in the inner circle, a motto engrained deeper than any ocean he had crossed, an oath to Morgan le Fay’s resolve against his share of the Round Table, against the true King of Britons, and cast more resolutely than the toils of faith that had plagued Europe these many centuries. He sighed. ‘One can only hope.’

‘*Tormenta.*’ Juan Martinez lifted his staff to the stern of the *São Martinho*, streaks of morose grey sitting upon the Biscay horizon shrouding the coastline of England. ‘We dare not move now, Sir Lancelot, not in the storm,’ the knight of Sir Gareth cautioned, with a spit of tobacco overboard.

‘You wish to defy the king, Señor Martinez?’ Alonso Perez snapped back, the rebuke resulting in a smirk from the second in command. ‘Fine, our Lady Morgana perhaps?’ he persisted, cowing Martinez. ‘Sí, thought as much, Sir Gareth. No, we proceed as planned.’

‘Should we not await the outcome of the treaty with Alexander Farnese? The duke might still...’ Martinez was not allowed to finish.

‘There will be no accord between Spain and Inglaterra, Señor Martinez. You and Miguel de Oquendo know it as well as I do...the knight of Sir Tristan is merely buying our Lady some time following Sir Drake’s sorties of late. They will fail, and England will fall. It is that simple.’ Perez turned and made his way down the quarterdeck. ‘No *tormenta*, storm, or ill waters will stop us this time. Morgan le Fay is certain. Let the Red Dragon attempt to shield our wrath all they wish, condemn two of our own knights to slaughter, it matters not...in fact, it has all blown the way our Lady has foreseen.’ He stridently marched to the bow, inspecting each cannon with his staffs with firm thumbs to their bases.

‘She wished to see Sir Lamorak and Sir Geraint executed?’ Martinez swiftly moved shoulder to shoulder with his commander. ‘Far from the unity of *Albus Draco*, I would have expected, Sir Lancelot.’ His words were laced with bitterness.

‘Always another generation, Sir Gareth. One must be mindful of such ambition...the borders of the Iberian Empire must endure beyond the English shores, and we must all be prepared to make the necessary sacrifices.’ Perez halted, lifted his telescope and scanned the impressive display of Spanish sails that dotted the seas

to each side. 'We have the *Santísima Trinidad*, the most holy of Trinities, at our command. No fire in English hands can defeat what we have come to possess, be it of burning gold or fiercest blue.'

Martinez stood back, locked his hands behind him rigidly. 'Not all share such a view, Señor Perez. There are whispers of an *enfermedad* upon Spain, a sickness. A sickness even the king himself has succumbed to, one that could drain all our lands of wealth,' he muttered. 'What say this Jesuit Claudio Acquaviva? Contemporary of Saint Ignatius of Loyola and his spiritual exercises...far more than simply texts preached from the mouth of Christ, I understand,' he tapered off.

'The Superior General Acquaviva is, as you say, a contemporary, and knows little about our true lineage. Be not afraid of cursed words from the Holy See and Papacy. Yes, our king requested the Vatican's blessing, but as a courtesy only, as le Fay has done nearly countless times before to appease the masses. Once these seas settle, it will not be a cross or crescent that soars in the skies!' Perez patted his fellow knight on the shoulder, acknowledging receipt of a parchment roll from a royal guard, the signet ring of Rey Felipe pressed into the molten maroon wax at its centre. 'Ah!' the knight of Sir Lancelot chirped upon cracking the seal, '...*diplomacia* has failed with Señor Valentine Dale. The Duke of Parma, Sir Tristan, awaits our advance.' He brushed his upper lip, the itch of the scar still raw. 'My

revenge has come. Let these seas be stained red with the blood of Francis Drake, the noble line of Sir Galahad, and all his loyal men. His cherished lands shall be ours!

Chapter 15
Edinburgh – Scotland
28th July 1588 AD

The sodden ground squelched under Bill Shakespeare's every step. He mopped his brow, rosy cheeks sheening with sweat, the summit of Arthur's Seat still shrouded in drizzle and mist. Doctor John Dee ascended purposefully, stumbling several times on loose stones, then muttering his now familiar ramblings...something vaguely decipherable relating to standing lakes and stones, heavenly music, and rough magic, that Bill had given up attempting to record. The acrid smoke of Edinburgh chased them from behind, the soft golden glow of Saint Giles' Kirk casting just enough light against the foreboding shadow of the city's castle. A city that sat with unease of late, torn through alliances between two monarchs, the recent spilt blood of one spurring both delight and despair across these northern lands. As such, those of the English tongue needed to tread carefully, and be quick to discern friend from foe. Shakespeare tried to reason with his companion to speak timidly, let him do to the talking from town to town as they travelled north of the border. It often worked, the guise of two advisors to the honourable House of Stuart in support of the Black Acts, a shift in public persuasion towards the religious teachings of John Knox, thus paving a smoother road to the crown for the late Scottish queen's son. 'All the world's a

stage!’ Dee would proclaim the instant Shakespeare engaged in debate between Protestants and Catholics in their path. ‘All the men and women merely players!’ he would continue to gloat, and the mood would turn ominous for a few moments while Bill desperately explained such outbursts as theatrics from a man sore with age. Dee would later, in a small window of clarity, come to speak of powers beyond anyone’s imagination or reach, the earlier tales from Sir Francis Drake and Walter Raleigh beginning to spread deeper into his psyche. A secret war. One that cast itself like a dark cloud over the squabbles of mortal land and power, so many ignorant of its presence or meaning, yet all affected. Truly an isle full of noises, but not all as loud and as outspoken as those seethed in Spanish or English alone.

The foggy haze began to clear, and a piercing ray of full moonlight struck the summit of the seat. Bill squatted to catch his breath. ‘Beautiful, Doctor Dee. Beautiful to behold such a pleasant landscape. Now what, exactly?’ the servant-turned-scribe enquired with a flicker of insincerity. The thick woollen cloak of Dee was shed, unveiling his frail, lean frame dressed thinly in faded silks, the dimples of the spine visible and running evenly down his back. ‘Doctor, please! You’ll catch your death in this cold.’ Bill rushed to the discarded cloak, tried to throw it back across Dee’s slender shoulders, repelled back by a burst of brilliant white light born from the doctor’s staff. Shakespeare landed harshly on the wet

soil behind, buried under the cloak for a moment, but once lifted, the wooden staff had become steel, a knight's sword of purest white enhanced further by the milk of the moon. 'The...the King's Blade?' Bill stuttered. The knight of Sir Bedivere turned and faced his accomplice with a stern expression.

'Not yet, Master Shakespeare. Not yet.' Dee's words more coherent than ever. 'My wildest Lady of the Waters has tested me and waited until my mind was still. Silent, like standing waters and stones, and this has been my curse, my challenge.' He knelt as humbly as he could, every joint in his body clicking. He plunged a hand into the mud of the mound, shut his eyes tight, and whispered to himself while Bill scrambled to his side. 'My dearest Lady Nimue, oh, how I've longed to speak with you and hear your words of comfort. Learn of the stories that stretch far back into the shades of time, of Britain's King of Kings...the namesake of my firstborn, Arthur.'

'Wait. You have a son?' Bill interrupted abruptly.

'Shhh, boy!' Dee snapped and resumed his rhetoric. 'I fear I have failed you, for I have let slip the blade of the Thirteenth, Sir Percival, into the hands of the enemy. For this, hatred has corrupted the hearts of Spain, and ignited them like brimstone, an empire of a different breed. Not only the sacred relics of Thebes, the Palladium and the Necklace of Harmonia, come on this

Iberian march, but a warped and twisted heart that will draw all that is bright into its dark and consuming core until nothing springs green from an eternal winter's discontent. Its wielder, your own sibling or not, perhaps unaware of its true wretched nature until it is too late,' the doctor's voice quivered. 'I come before you broken, and with no sacrifice carved of wood, for this too has been lost to those same shades of time by my ancestors, but...' he fidgeted inside the pleats of silk, pulled out a sketch of his own hieroglyph, '...I recognise the *trinity*. The unity of all things that are born, live, and come to pass. The bedrock of our being, and what endures beyond the paltry contretemps that you now see between Spain and England, and long before that. I offer it to you in gracious favour.' He laid the parchment down on the ground and waited for a response, Bill turning his head in all directions in bewilderment.

'Is...is something meant to happen? Has this Lady of the Lake of which you speak not heard you? Lost her ethereal tongue?' Shakespeare prodded Dee curiously.

'Shhh!' Dee hissed even more sharply. 'What else can I sacrifice to you other than my sanity!' he boomed suddenly, jolting Bill back in alarm. 'Have you not seen that I have given my everything? I have shared my possessions, my beliefs, my own wives in the teachings of the Angel Uriel...a misinterpretation of your own pure voice by my once friend Edward Kelly, a man of lost wisdom in his quest for riches from your soils—alchemy

of the most vain, most ravenous to turn metal into gold. A philosopher with no understanding of Earth's lodestone, but with the ear of many an influential man or woman across our lands. A trickster. Not the last of his kind, you will know this, my lady, for it is not just your sister Morgan le Fay that may turn the minds of Kings and queens. Please, see my loss to this most sinister foe, and allow me a chance to salvage your faithful followers in the Red Dragon Knights to undo that which has been born from the trinity.' Dee buried both his hands into the mud, allowing fresh storm rains to splash freely across his wrinkled face. 'I beseech you!' he bellowed high into the tumultuous skies that were rumbling with discontent. Bill sat silently, feeling the earth of the mound shift beneath him, writhing like snakes, opening their jaws, and swallowing the pair whole.

The cavern was bleak. Carved steps invited Dee and Shakespeare down into the depths of Arthur's Seat, the air damp and chilled. Bill anchored his hand on John's, the knight's sword providing enough light to guide them down intrepidly. 'What dark magic is this?' the young scribe squeaked upon hearing an eerie whistle on a single gust of wind.

'Not dark, my dear friend. Just *forgotten*,' Dee reassured, halting Bill's next step as a chasm emerged.

'Look, just there, ahead.' He pointed with the tip of his blade towards the knotted roots of a thorn tree bathed in a gentle light. 'There lies the true King of Kings. The tomb of King Arthur himself.'

Shakespeare's lips parted, mind filling with questions, but not one managing to escape, only whirring around like a spinning top. The edge of the chasm cracked beneath his feet. He took a quick step backwards. 'Doctor, how do we cross this ravine if the tree is our required destination? This chasm is far too wide to bridge and...' As he turned to address Dee directly, he found himself alone on the edge, the silk robes now fluttering on the far side. 'Doctor Dee? How...?'

'We are not meant to cross...only I,' Dee echoed back. 'Go now, young Shakespeare, await me atop.' He could be seen kneeling once more before the great thorn tree, fingers coiled around a single sprout of sapling emerging between granite boulders. 'My Lady of the Lake has guided me now. The noise of the isle laid to rest. Now please go. For I know not what power I may unsheathe here, and its consequences,' the knight trembled as he tugged on the lone sprig.

'I dare not, sir.' Bill tried to secure his footing on the ledge.

'I shall not ask you again, Shakespeare. Go, go now!' Dee bellowed. The sprig was pulled free with minimal

effort, bold, and a brilliant light filled the cavern, blinding Bill. The young scribe fled on all fours back up the stone steps, the smokier air of the surface his only guide now, the fresh sods of grass finding his hands at the mouth of the cavern, a moment's relief as he pulled and rolled himself free of the subterranean entrance, a beam of bright white light erupting as he stumbled. The ground shifted once more, the beacon of illumination narrowing as the cavern mouth closed. 'Dee! Dee!' he cried, crawling as close as he could to a single beam as it flickered. In a blink, it was gone, leaving only the untamed earth of the mound as it once was. 'No!' he shouted, clawing at the soil with renewed energy and desperation. 'Return him. Return him, I command you!' his voice cracked with grief.

'I told you, Master Shakespeare, that only one of us could cross,' came Dee's voice from behind, standing proudly with a restored wooden staff and the gleaming gold of the King's Blade. 'And as a result, only one of us can return.'

Shakespeare breathed a subtle sigh of relief, his attention immediately caught by the brilliance of the blade by Sir Bedivere's side. 'Is... that?' he shuddered.

'The King's Blade. You know it as *Excalibur*. The bringer of death and rebirth...and England's last and only hope in this war for sovereignty,' Dee said, bowing reverently. 'The good Knights of Sir Galahad and Sir Gawain, even

Sir Gaheris, thought me mad, consumed by my grief and torment. Believed I had relinquished such a treasure into our enemies' hands, but this could never be the case...for I spoke only what my Lady of the Lake wished me to hear, and not one mind within our White Dragon counterparts could either conjure the courage or wisdom to wield such power. It is my destiny, and mine alone.' A subtle twist of his wrist, and the bold blade returned to its humble sprig form.

'But...Drake and Raleigh, they spoke of another, as did you—the *Thirteenth*,' Bill gulped. 'Even more twisted, of darker magic, you said.'

'Quite...and it might be that this prized third relic of the trinity is not enough to break whatever spell it holds over its wielder, but the blade of Sir Percival alone cannot forge an empire, nor bring spirit to its expanse—so my own ancestors dictated through texts dating back to Rhodri the Great of Gwynedd and the Welsh lands.'

'Rhodri the Great? That was nearly seven centuries ago.' Bill was amazed. 'Dare I ask, how many of your *ancestors* have made this pilgrimage, Doctor?'

Dee turned, scooped up his woollen cloak, and tucked a second cut thorn sprig inside just before the rains began to fall hard once more. 'Several, I believe.' His response was uncertain. 'I have passed the test, and have therefore the honour of bringing this cycle of blood to a

close, but as you say, good Master Shakespeare, seven centuries is a very long time indeed, and I fear not all my predecessors have had the resolve to complete such a challenge. I, too, harboured doubts as to my worthiness to source the King's Blade, knowing what bitter sacrifices some may have endured, often on the fields of battle.' He began to march briskly downhill, full of newly forged confidence. 'You should interpret the text of *Y'Gododdin*, should your Welsh be fluent enough dear boy...quite the conflict undertaken by a three-hundred-strong force from round here, most dramatic. Might enhance a few of your own creative works,' he echoed.

Bill rushed to the knight's side, slipping like a newborn foal on the damp grass. 'And now? What are we to do with this mighty Excalibur, sir? For the King of Spain has launched his Armada, and I see not how you alone can walk upon water and engage such a fleet. Or, wait...*can you?*', his curious, if absurd, nature got the better of him.

The doctor looked to the skies and flashed a grin. 'The perfect storm, Shakespeare. A tempest. These clouds I thought would open and show me riches, ready to drop upon me. Lie at my mercy, all mine enemies!'

'What?'

Dee gave a wilting sigh and held the sprig of Excalibur aloft. 'Just get me to the coast.'

Chapter 16

The English Channel – England

8th August 1588 AD

To challenge the elements is to challenge God himself, cautionary words passed down to Francis Drake by his father. The young knight of Galahad would acerbically reply, 'Which God, exactly, Father?' once he was well versed in their own Arthurian legacy. A quick clip around the ear usually followed. Drake rubbed his fringe, ran his blistered fingers down to the point of his beard, the once allied ink-blot clouds full of storm rains slowly clearing...England's natural barrier to the Spanish advance through the channel flaking like weathered paint from walls. A tempered heat rose through his wooden staff, a sign that a White Dragon counterpart was nearing, and with a squint towards the murky horizon, the bulb of a single Spanish galleon emerged...then another, then another three, springing like weeds until his sight line was peppered with dots of adorned figureheads. His heart began to sink deeper than the fathoms below, their early exchanges of cannonball off Plymouth and the Isle of Wight registering little more than a scratch upon the impressive Armada, the bulging cream sail of the *São Martinho* puffed out arrogantly, swelled with the same pride Alonso Perez unashamedly felt in the name of his great lady and sorceress.

‘The Knights of Sir Lancelot and Sir Gareth appear to be in good spirits.’ Walter Raleigh moved to Drake’s side, telescope to the right eye. ‘They won’t risk the shores of the Gravelines, though, not without the sea marks.’

‘The most charming Duke of Parma, Sir Tristan, might still come to their aid with beacons tonight. Guide them through.’ Drake sounded hoarse and weary. ‘Even if the duke’s troops cannot unite with Perez and Martinez, he could still prove useful.’

‘That’s chillingly pessimistic, Sir Galahad,’ Raleigh smirked, drawing his staff and transforming it into steel. ‘I am rather looking forward to a proper engagement with our foes...on account of missing your own little skirmish off Cadiz.’

‘Be careful what you wish for, Sir Gawain.’

‘Awww, nonsense! Show me Spanish blood! Let them get close enough to attempt to board our fleet, see if the *São Martinho*’s oak can match our own,’ he snarled as he tapped his blade against the sturdy decks of *HMS Revenge*.

Drake drew his own blade, allowed it to bask in the afternoon sun, and breathed deeply. ‘Despite my many travels across this globe, my skirmishes and raids plundering the Spanish riches across the Caribbean

Seas, I have never sought to bury this sword into another's flesh, least of all our own kin.'

'But found yourself doing so, nonetheless?' Raleigh smiled.

'Truth be told, Walter, no. Not once. For I have been fired upon, speared, sliced, and stabbed...but never once drawn an edged weapon first. My men have always loyally come to my aid, no matter what the circumstances.' His words drifted as he cast a gaze over the foredeck at the scurrying crew, heaving cannons to the port side in anticipation of a salvo. 'I wonder if we, as Knights of the Round Table, have come to expect too much of our fellow men and soldiers, Sir Gawain.'

'England expects every man to do his duty, Drake.' Raleigh quickstepped down from the quarterdeck, and hollered instructions to the busy heads of the crew as the frontline Spanish advance began to split and flank their position. 'Speaking of duty, how many Lions did Norris muster at Tilbury?'

'Twenty pairs, I am told, maybe less.'

'Not aboard any ship of our fleet? Why?'

'Change of plans. Should our ships fail, and Perez or Sir Lancelot makes it through our blockade and joins with Duke Farnese or Sir Tristan, their first target will be

London. John Norris has loyally agreed to stay with his queen until the end; thus, the Sacred Band remains with him.' Drake pulled some loose rigging taut while scolding a mousy-looking crew boy, then followed up with an order to draw up more gunpowder from below deck. The boy, flushed and crestfallen, whimpered that their supplies were low and the ship had little more than enough for two, perhaps three, clean volleys. 'Better than one, lad,' came Drake's softened approach, before a pat on the head sent the young sprat on his way.

'Lions on land, lilies on the sea, eh?' Raleigh lightened.

'Duty, Sir Gawain, as you said. Norris saw his own partner seemingly fail his queen; he is not about to do the same,' Drake replied sharply.

'How far do you think the whispers concerning the new king of Scots origins have spread throughout the English royal court? Our battle for kingdoms might not be over, irrespective of this naval outcome,' Raleigh's tone darkened.

'Walsingham will handle that as and when needed. A Virgin Queen in name will still require an heir, leaving it to Sir Gaheris to pave the way for a new union on these Islands. He always has a plan.' Drake's words quickened as the *São Martinho's* course turned to starboard, leaving the head of the Armada to the smaller *Del*

Rosario, an interesting tactic from Alonso Perez. 'He'll fire upon us portside, and have the *Del Rosario* attempt to board from the starboard,' he swiftly deduced.

'Splendid.' The knight of Sir Gawain twirled his blade. 'Who knows, maybe no need for the Lions of Leuctra at all this time?' he gave a sly wink.

'Trust me, Walter. They are *always* needed,' Drake answered, cupped his mouth with his hands and bellowed, 'Prepare to fire!'

You guard your queen, I will guard mine. Words that would linger with John Norris for the remainder of his life, near the last he heard from his partner David Rizzo before his untimely death, and honest to the end in the face of Lord Darnley's treachery. Perhaps all part of a plan, the Knights of the Red Dragon had sought to comfort him, but little comfort could be found. As his partner had done, Norris would stand a warrior, and fall a warrior should it be required. Such instruction had been given to all the Sacred Band pairings that stood behind him on the southern coast of England. They had come from as far north as York, to the western shores of Wales, even the borders of the Scottish lands, sympathisers of the English crown perhaps, or those simply baying for justice to avenge the spilling of Rizzo's blood. He cared not...for Drake's orders were clear, and

suiting the Band leader's personal agenda perfectly. Whether the plan worked, however, was in the hands of the Heavens.

'So, these ships carry no crew?' came the crisp home county accent of an elderly Band warrior, pointing with an arthritic finger to one of the galleons, gently bobbing against its moor rope. 'How, sir, are empty ships of any use to us?'

'No one said they were *empty*, sir,' John replied, giving the order to other Band members to shift the piles of barrels down each gangway. 'Please, be very careful with those, gentlemen,' he advised.

'Precious cargo?' the elderly Band warrior enquired.

'Deadly...with the right touch.'

'Oh, how so?'

John conjured from his hand the ring of blue fire and laced it neatly around his wrist. He gave no further instruction, turned, and went to assist with a few remaining barrels. The older man panned across the harbour, counted at least eight vacant ships tethered. *Eight*. A potential Sacred Band crew of forty, none particularly well versed in seamanship, and an entire English Navy already engaged in a fierce battle. The logic of able resources perturbed him. 'How, Sir Norris, are

we to man these ships with so few numbers at our disposal?’ He strained to lift one of the heavier barrels, wincing as the dry bones in his spine cracked and popped.

‘Who said anything about manning them?’ John replied cryptically. ‘Not all fleets need an Admiral, sir. Let Hell itself carry them forth.’

‘A flotilla of Hell burners?’ the elderly man scoffed. ‘Will need more than a hope in Hell to succeed in successfully disrupting the Spanish Armada. Wind, tides, coordination...variables beyond our control, Norris.’

‘Ah, the wonders of variables beyond our control, sir. How dull would a man’s life be without them?’ Norris chuckled brazenly to mask his own inner doubts. Still no word from Doctor Dee and his travels to Edinburgh, no trace of parchment hinting that the knight of Sir Bedivere’s accomplice Bill Shakespeare had successfully wormed the pair’s way through hostile terrain to reach the Scottish capital, or indeed found the vital relic Dee had long been seeking. Variables were playful twists of fate, but how satisfying it would be to receive welcome news that the King’s Blade had at least been found, and was not lying in the hands of their enemies. For each hour that passed without word, fate leant harder against him, the Sacred Band and the Red Dragon...with it, the undying nature of hope against this invasion suddenly disputed. The crack of cannon could be heard

far out to sea, vague plumes of grey smoke churned with the crest of the waves as ships' sails and standards lashed out at each other, viper's tongues striking blow for blow. The sun was setting, and the gusts of wind that caught Norris's cheeks veered, now tickling the nape of his neck. An advantage, but a capricious one. 'Cut the tethers!' he ordered to the Band. 'All of them!' The Band summoned their blue flame spears, split through the tightly coiled ropes, and watched their ghostly fleet sail gently out towards the affray.

The elderly Band member let out a derisive sigh: 'Forgive me, sir, but as auspicious as this wind might be in controlling our phantom fleet's direction, does it not also endanger Sir Drake's and Sir Raleigh's efforts as well?'

Norris stood tall, summoned his own spear of vibrant blue. 'That, good sir, truly is the hope in Hell.' He bit his bottom lip before barking the command, 'Band! Spears loose!' sparking the tiring amber night skies with vivid streaks of Sacred Band fire, each finding their target. The eight unmanned ships came alive with bursts of blue and orange flame, each explosion louder than the previous as their barrels of brimstone and tar blew fiercely skyward, heaving with a sinister crackle as the line approached the maelstrom of English and Spanish galleons. 'Godspeed, Sir Galahad and Sir Gawain,' Norris murmured beneath the raucous chant of 'We are Lions, *We...are...Lions!*'

Splinters from split masts scattered across the deck of *HMS Revenge*. Her sails remained high, creaking slightly from the wound at the mast base, courtesy of a well-aimed Spanish salvo. 'Return fire!' Drake shouted, his crew recomposing frantically, choking through acrid gunpowder smog and soot. Cinders of canon fuses lit the air around, fizzing down before a moment of silence, then the ship roared back in response, the *São Martinho's* foredeck bearing the brunt of its force, the cries of Spanish seamen heard through the smoke as the fine galleon's own mast began to falter. It righted itself assuredly just as the smoke began to clear, two familiar blades burning brightly on its quarterdeck - the twin swords of Sir Lancelot. 'Alonso!' Drake spat. 'Will the good leader of the White Dragon fight with honour or be a coward from afar?' he called across the narrowing distance between their gun ports.

'Ah, sí, Señor Drake, as you did in Cadiz? Rifles from afar shot towards my men? Do not lecture me on combat and *honour!*' Perez's broad silhouette could just be made out against the ashen sky behind, his two blades suddenly striking the quarterdeck of the *São Martinho*, a pulse of frost-white knight light travelling like an echo across to the *HMS Revenge*, hurling crewmembers back several metres and interrupting any attempt at a second salvo. Drake immediately responded with a conjured

light of his own, tinged with an aura of crimson, cancelled out by a swift counter from Sir Lancelot. *'Izquierda! A la izquierda!'* Perez could be heard shouting out of Drake's view, the *São Martinho* broadside lurching to the left once more and finding a more solid position for another cannon volley. Drake seized the wheel of his ship, turning its rudder firmly to port and aiming its bow straight at the stern of his rival's. A breath later came the crash of oak on oak as the quarterdeck of Alonso's flagship was skewered by the *HMS Revenge's* bowsprit, forcing Perez to counter-manoeuve away. *'A bordo! A bordo!'* came Perez's prompt follow-up actions, although not aimed at his own men this time, the vengeful shadow of the *Del Rosario* sweeping through on the starboard side in a pincher movement. Cheers from the Spanish carried across the saline breeze, grapple hooks flung high, and gripping like hounds' teeth into the decks. *HMS Revenge* was reeled in close; a dozen Spanish crew threw themselves across makeshift gangways, armed with both pistol and sabre.

'Engage!' Drake rallied, his blade cutting down the first overly eager Spaniard to cross his path, a faint splash of blood spraying across his cream tunic. 'Walter. Walter!' he called for the knight of Sir Gawain, his reply being the electric throb of a knight light back up on quarterdeck, Raleigh locking blades with Juan Martinez, the knight of Sir Gareth, one of those to stridently board of the English ship. 'Bloody Hell!' Drake cursed, severing the

limb of another stubborn Spanish crewmember on his way to the grapple hooks. His instinct was to untether his ship from the *Del Rosario*, make a break away from the imposing Armada, and regroup with what little there was left of the English fleet, but with Martinez now aboard, a new plan flashed in his mind. ‘Walter—hold him off!’ Drake cried while curling his left arm and leg around a single grapple hook rope.

‘Thank you, Francis...that idea had occurred to me!’ came the cutting remark from Sir Gawain as he tidily ducked a vicious swing from Martinez’s sword, making a clean swipe at Sir Gareth’s thigh as he passed, Martinez giving a mild whelp before swinging again. Drake hauled himself over the deck of the *Del Rosario* and struck two more Spaniards firmly on the head with his sword’s pommel while dashing for a lone canon. In the commotion and smoulder of gunpowder, he wheeled the lump of hollow metal around through gritted teeth, the canon head now aimed squarely at Del Rosario’s centre mast. Without question, a hint of Sacred Band fire would have come in useful in that instant, as the knight of Sir Galahad scouted for anything aflame, amazingly coming up short. He transformed his sword back into wood, buried the staff tip into the fuse hole, muttered a prayer, and restored the blade, the resulting heat enough to breathe life into the cannon and send the loaded ball hard into the mast, snapping it like a twig. He fell to his back, and crawled on his side as the timber and torn sail collapsed ungainly into the sea. He

blinked in astonishment at his own actions for a mere second, catching sight of Walter Raleigh taking advantage of a flustered and deflated Juan Martinez, an uppercut swing of the Sir Gawain blade splitting the fine gold tunic of Sir Gareth, his adversary stumbling backwards before finally being repulsed overboard by a flash of knight light. The English crew drew immediate inspiration, grapple hooks cleaved clean from *HMS Revenge's* flanks, and tossed aside along with any Spaniard that had dared remain on their decks. They cheered raucously in their victory, Drake springing with alacrity from the bruised *Del Rosario* as its bow began to tilt downward. 'Impressive, Sir Galahad.' Raleigh helped his fellow knight to his feet. 'I take it we shall keep this hard-won fine trophy of a Spanish galleon?'

'If she still floats long enough to make it back to English shores,' Drake caught his breath. 'Alonso has evaded us, though.'

Raleigh peered through the misty evening haze, the warming white cliffs of Kent strangely underscored with a feral fire marching forth relentlessly and heading straight for the heart of the Armada lines. 'That is no typical fire. Would you not agree?' he enquired.

'A hellfire. Or, as we would call it, a Sacred Band flame.' Drake awarded himself and his company a half-smile. 'The Lions have entered the battle.'

‘Hmmpf,’ Walter drew scorn. ‘From a distance, Sir Galahad, but I’ll credit you with such ingenuity.’ His critical tutting became a grin as the conflagrated fleet clashed with the Spanish forces, fires reaching eagerly for sail and shroud, the Armada forced to scatter in all directions. ‘Might still not be enough.’

‘Now, who is being pessimistic?’ Drake grilled his fellow knight. The pair’s attention was drawn high above as a single column of brilliant white light bolted beyond sight, diminishing in an instant, relieved by the formation of the most wicked and vexed storm clouds that Drake and Raleigh had ever witnessed. They bled into the night’s skies, turning them blacker than they ever thought possible—a cruel black, a *magic* black. ‘Excalibur!’ Drake proclaimed.

‘Well, well. Young Bill and the mad doctor appear to have surprised us all,’ Raleigh quipped, enjoying the swelling turmoil with which the Armada now had to contend. ‘Not so mad, the blessed line of Sir Bedivere, after all.’

A fresh-faced English crew member, his cut forehead welling blood but not enough to dampen his spirit, appeared at the feet of the two knights. ‘Vice Admiral, sir. Lord Effingham has signalled for a report to the queen. What say you?’

Drake appeared lost in thought for a moment, then turned to Raleigh for advice, but the knight of Sir Gawain was already lost in a dream of his own, most likely one of utter relief that he would see his sweet Bess Throckmorton once more. In a reserved tone, he replied, 'There has been some exchange of shots between some of our fleet and some of theirs; and as far as we can perceive, they are determined to sell their lives with blows. But their lives are ultimately forfeit.' He nodded reverently.

Chapter 17

Manresa – Catalonia, Spain

18th September 2022 AD

There was a buzz of activity around Barcelona Airport, its customs check area now a hive of journalists, reporters, and the odd philanthropist patiently queuing and bobbing their heads up and around to see whether those in front were permitted passage through, or earmarked off to an alternative policing room to be questioned further. A sense of sanctioning the global press grew with each shuffle forward Gary made, a tactic used the world over and even more so in recent years as a form of control over the local masses, Catalonia's surge of prosperity seen as both a triumph and template for many countries and territories, seen through envious and questionable eyes by others. Ardent supporters of Mayoress Pescador's rash actions saw their press representatives waved through with little more than a nod, with Gary wracking his brain to think of a believable excuse to be greeted in a similar manner by the guards.

The televisions hung high from the roof broadcast more of the disasters from across the continent, haunting images of once fertile plains and generous rivers no more than a few hundred kilometres away now barren wastelands, livelihoods erased by forest fires, grief-stricken families left with nowhere to turn. North Africa

continued to be lashed the fiercest, Morocco to Tunisia sending wave after wave of refugees across the Mediterranean, only to be blocked immediately once they made land on the Spanish coast, and herded into pens like cattle at a market. The mayoress defended her severe measures, claiming the rest of Europe needed to do more to prevent such illegal immigration in the first place, that northern countries should shoulder their share of the burden, and in now familiar fashion, Madrid was taking the province for fools while all the while secretly gaining from the region's newfound wealth.

Gary studied the face of the mayoress closely, noting a marked change in her composure and health...gone was the fresh sparkle and warmth he had seen no more than a week prior, exchanged for a more gaunt, exhausted complexion void of colour, veins slightly bulging across the temples, eyes like pots of black ink near overflowing. A shot of video footage was shown mid-interview to the mayoress, a shaky mobile phone camera depicting an incident from earlier that day of a young girl no more than ten years being wrenched from her mother's arms by a Catalanian soldier, the mother swiftly sectioned away in an alternative camp for a coughing fit she couldn't suppress, a lingering symptom of XENO-20. 'We cannot risk taking the sick,' Mayoress Sofia proclaimed, agitated. 'That is how XENO-20 was allowed to spread in the first place, and we, as you know, remain sickness-free on our shores,' she spouted

proudly. When pressed further on a captured interview with a representative from the Arabic Red Crescent—a face familiar to Gary as a moonlighting Follower of Palamedes—who spoke passionately about their efforts to get ASCLEPIUS vaccines into lowland Spain through Gibraltar, only to have their stocks seized and teams of support workers turned away, the mayoress did not hesitate to terminate the interview and let out a quick on-record curse word before ripping the wired microphone off and ushering in two of her personal armed guards.

‘Nombre, Señor?’ a rugged customs guard asked, eyes fixed on his computer screen.

‘Willis. Gary Willis.’

‘*Periódico?* Newspaper?’ the guard followed sharply.

‘Independent. Independent journalist,’ Gary replied, met with a steely glare from the guard. ‘Truly, I was here at this very airport not a week ago interviewing the Mayoress Sofia Pescador. She was most receptive.’ The knight of Sir Gaheris swiped through some images of the pair on his phone in evidence. ‘We discussed many a historic tale. Surely you saw it?’ Willis leant in close with a glint of charm. The guard remained obtuse, scanning Gary from head to toe incredulously before picking up the desk phone and punching in a few buttons. A brief dialogue followed, with Gary’s name repeated several

times. 'Señor Willis, sí, Señor Willis.' The guard gave a brief nod upon hearing an order and slammed the phone down.

'Puede pasar, Señor Willis,' came the growl from the guard, Gary's passport stamped with a force strong enough to shake the customs cubicle. 'Mayoress Pescador is, I hear, looking forward to convening with you.' A grin forced its way awkwardly, sinisterly, across the guard's face.

Gary pocketed his passport. 'I'm sure she is.'

The request from the mayoress to drive directly to the Santa Cova in Manresa was obeyed. Gary absorbed the glossy displays of political posturing upon each billboard he passed, Sofia Pescador's face plastered nearly everywhere since Catalonia Day, 11 September. Wills recalled the locals unrolling swaths of the posters when he drove past previously, cheerfully slapping them up with long paint brushes, a few peppered with the red and yellow stripes of the region's colours. Some were now sprayed with graffiti, a verse acting like a signature in the bottom corner. Gary couldn't translate it, but stopped to snap a picture:

*Catalunya triomfant,
tornarà a ser rica i plena.*

*Endarrera aquesta gent
tan ufana i tan superba.*

He pulled up at the foot of the small Santa Cova Church, a mellow ochre in the fading sun, the tarnished copper statue of Saint Ignatius standing humbly by its doors, back slightly hunched, a book of his celebrated spiritual teachings in one hand, a familiar carved wooden staff in the other. A homage to both blessed pilgrimage and learnt wisdom undoubtedly, the staff itself, however, telling a very different tale to those few that knew of its provenance. A gruff voice barked from behind. 'Señor Willis?' Another square-framed guard, complete with a bulky firearm, towered over Gary. 'The mayoress bids you welcome inside the church. If you please, Señor.' He stepped past and pushed his weight against one of the imposing ornate doors, a rusty creak grating to the ear, and nodded Gary inside. Willis obeyed, his eye caught instantly by the exquisite baroque features that lined both sides of the nave. The heavy door was pulled shut and sealed with the menacing thud of a bolted lock. He turned, felt for the door's handle, futilely wrenched it, stood back, and summoned his blade.

'Now, that is an impressive weapon, Señor Willis. However did you come by such a token?' came the chilling voice of Mayoress Sofia, resonating throughout the alcoves of the church. Gary held the blade at shoulder height, preparing to strike in any direction. 'I confess to being quite the fool, Señor Willis, for I should

have known of your true lineage when we first met...still, a minor detail. There is still time.'

'Time for what, exactly?' Gary replied to his elusive host.

'To *combine forces*, Señor. What else? Would you and your kin not welcome back into your ranks a fellow Knight of the Round Table, one thought lost over so many centuries?' the mayoress coaxed. 'Think what we could achieve now...with this power, the long-lost blade of Sir Percival, leader of the knights.'

'Your understanding of history and myth is imperfect, Sofia.' Gary held his ground, turning towards the high altar. 'Perhaps you forget, the Round Table had no leader; all were equal.'

'Spare a king,' the mayoress hissed. 'There is always a leader, Señor Willis, for people require it in order to survive, and aspire to be something better, of course. Why, who doesn't look upon a crown or throne with envious eyes, believing one day it could be theirs.'

'An ideal of absolute power, you mean?' Gary sneered. The soft sound of heels on stone came from behind. He spun and met the lithe figure of the mayoress, dressed smartly in a blood-red suit, jet-black hair pulled back and knotted in a bun. Gary scanned down to her feet, following the shadowy blade of Sir Percival, which

shimmered from midnight black to softer indigo. ‘Your “*Un Secreto*,” I see.’

‘Ah, sí. Not simply a myth or fairy tale, as you say, more than enough of those for the niños at night, as we once discussed.’ Sofia took a few confident steps forward down the nave.

‘And clearly, a relic to help shape a destiny,’ Willis noted, his guard maintained.

‘Oh, yes. But what might have cursed those that wielded it before will only benefit my people. For we have learnt.’ Sofia’s voice deepened to a most unnatural tone. ‘Learnt that in order to progress, you must take matters into your own hands, lead from the front, and not depend on others to support you.’

‘We, the others descended of the Round Table, knew an assumed leader like that once, and it wasn’t the King of Britons...’

‘No! Quite right, Señor Willis, a queen, the Faerie Queene, *Señorita Morgana le Fay*. Trust me, Gary, I know this legend of yours...how this sorceress supremely influenced the affairs of men over many centuries, including our King Philip II at a time most desperate.’ Sofia swept closer. ‘Wrestling with powers she could not hope to control, Ancient Greek treasures born of the Olympian Gods themselves.’

'So, you know what happens when individuals attempt to play with omnipotence.' Gary began to take several tentative steps forward himself.

'This blade of Sir Percival, unlike the Palladium and the Necklace of Harmonia, was *meant for me*, my ancestors. Bestowed upon us by a dying Sir Percival, therefore well within my command!' the mayoress growled.

'I'm sure the good Saint Ignatius of Loyola and his successors would have held a similar discussion with King Philip II, given the chance,' Gary retorted.

'King Philip II was no heir to this blade! I am its loyal subject and thus its commander, and I will bring glory to my people.' Sofia's voice gained gravitas, growing ever deeper and heating up with every word.

'Yet you've failed to grasp or comprehend its curse...Sir Percival's own self-inflicted poison. That charmed Necklace of Harmonia filled him with unwanted desire the moment he hung it around his neck. Once freed of the burden, he realised that all that had unfolded before King Arthur and the dissolution of the Round Table was arguably his doing; he had failed in his duty to his own people, not served them as he had sworn to do. That is the legacy of that blade, and why he cast it aside, hoping to be rid of it forever,' Gary parried.

‘Yet here it still is, in the hands of its rightful owners. My bloodline has paid through generation after generation through that wretched curse upon our King Anfortas, and that is why the blade calls to me, my saviour after years of persecution from all around us. It is our time now—why else would Sir Percival bless my family with his name?’

‘Perhaps he saw in the future, the Fisher King’s line a sign of hope, of *tolerance*, in spite of religious affairs and their turmoil. That is, after all, what your great King Anfortas sought. Is it not?’ Gary lifted his own blade with caution.

‘And look at what that achieved. No. This land will thrive above all others by Sir Percival’s good grace!’ the mayoress’s eyes drew darker still, midnight black weeping actual tears, streaming like rivers of ink. Now it was her blade that stood tall, ready to bear down on her guest and fellow knight. ‘You and your kin dare not stand against me,’ she bellowed.

Spoken like so many other would-be leaders, mythical or real, came the language of absolutes. Myopic, fuelled by the fabrication of countless enemies that never existed, but who all played their part in the preservation of power. A language so well honed in politics that even the most educated of society could be swayed, potent and alluring it remained. Perhaps the mayoress had always believed in such drastic doctrines; a true servant

of the people was to have them behave as if all their woes stemmed from an alternative order outside their control, and once they became masters of their own fate, all these woes would dissipate. Then, to maintain this newfound power, the aroused hatred would be channelled towards another people, a race, a gender or alternative belief perhaps. They then became the new enemy, a land whittled down smaller and smaller until all that remained was two insular individuals at each other's throats arguing over whether the sea came before the sky. Organised chaos born from delusion, forever spiralling down.

Whatever the case, all that stood before Willis now was an untamed magic that came to hold sway over its master, the wielder of Sir Percival's blade perceiving the contrary. With reluctance, Gary swung his blade to meet that of Sofia Pescador's, the sword edges not ringing like crystal on impact, more a remorseful groan, the blade of Sir Gaheris already beginning to split and dull. Willis revoked it quickly and opted to swiftly conjure knight light, the bloom of white slashed to ribbons by the ebony black of the mayoress's counter. Their swords met again, sharper in their jabs this time, Gary gaining the advantage with a twist and parry, slicing just above Pescador's hip, drawing a gasp from the mayoress. Her blade was plunged into the stone slabs below, a knight light of her own rocketing from the sword in an unrecognisable fashion, laced in sable black, shattering the nearest stained glass and blowing church pews away

like autumn leaves. Gary was hurled against the high altar, crashing into the assortment of candlesticks and crucifixes. He hurled another knight light back and was met with the same answer from the mayoress. Whatever charged this cursed blade of hers was beyond his reckoning. His mind whirred, spotted the small spiral staircase that led up to the higher alcoves, and made his dash.

The vaulted arches of the church roof closed in. Gary stumbled his way towards the oval window above the main entrance, large enough to break through and make good his escape. He fumbled for his mobile phone, a last chance to get a word out to the Allen Brothers to ready whatever reinforcements might be at their command, a solitary ring tone cut short—no signal. A volley of bullets shot through the oval window, its glass spraying out in razor shards, forcing Willis to turn back. The rigid figure of the mayoress emerged from the alcove shades, ambulating awkwardly, limbs moving jaggedly as if tied by puppet strings. 'I ask you again, knight of Sir Gaheris...join me, and we shall rebuild our Table once more,' came her ungodly chords. A final stand from Willis saw his blade thrown with full force upon Sofia's, and the familiar grinding sound of steel made way to an ear-piercing shriek. Gary's energy was spent as his blade snapped, the tip clanging over the alcove balcony down to the nave below. He fell to his

knees, winded and astonished. The quivering point of Sir Percival's sword hovered inches from his forehead. 'Final chance, Señor Willis.'

Gary held the eyes of the mayoress, both palms wide and open. Quizzically, he responded, 'During my trip here, I noticed words scribbled upon your propaganda posters, Sofia, that I could not interpret.'

'Ah, sí. Catalunya triomfant, tornarà a ser rica i plena. Endarrera aquesta gent tan ufana i tan superba.' Her recitation was fluent, yet raspy. 'Catalonia triumphant, shall again be rich and abundant. Drive away these folks, who are so proud and arrogant,' came the translation.

'Proud and arrogant,' Gary repeated as he shook his head in refusal. 'What a legacy.' His final words as the mayoress drove her blade into his chest.

Chapter 18
Plymouth – England
5th July 1589 AD

Journal of Sir Francis Drake – 5 July 1589:

When have two wrongs ever made a right? These were the very words the revered soldier and dearest friend John Norris whispered into my ear as we drew close to the Galician shores. The city walls of Coruña built high with imposing red clay stone, nigh impregnable, even from the onslaught of cold blue spears launched from the select group of Sacred Band warriors their leader had managed to coerce to support this doomed retaliation against King Philip II. Norris's shield and spear may be loyal to his Queen Elizabeth, a woman born with the heart of a king, but his heart forever belongs to David Rizzo, and that despondency lingers in his eyes to this day. When he stormed the beaches of the fort, the chant of the Lions would be cause for any of his nearly twelve thousand strong men to harden their resolve for the sake of England, a million Spanish muskets could not stand in their path. But stand the Spanish did, even when those very clay stone walls began to crack and crumble from the indefatigable assault from both gunpowder and cannonball. For whom was this leader now fighting? An England that was now inflated with pomp and ego following our rivals' failed Armada, a puffed-up arrogance that came close to the reflection of the Necklace of Harmonia itself? Without question, ill-

advised greed has gripped the advisors to the crown. John Dee and Francis Walsingham have informed me of such, but what is most chilling of all is that such ardour does not appear to be born from the presence of the Palladium or Necklace, but rather that puerile nature of mankind and obsession with conquest. Even if our foe of the ages Morgan le Fay had decided that the flimsy Spanish imperial rule was now too fragile to sustain, she, I am certain, had yet to back the future of a new Golden Age of England. Dee shares with us all of the Red Dragon a new era of empires, with the cross of Saint George hoisted high over those lands reaching far over the oceans towards the Americas, maybe further still. Having been privileged to set foot on such lands, lands bordering every ocean of this known world, it seems unfathomable to think our small island would hold sway over the many indigenous peoples I have come to meet. Only those recognised Theban relics could bind these colonies under England's thrall, and such powers I am convinced remain loyal to Iberia, our own English fleet thwarted. The men and women of Spain celebrate their zenith, at least for now.

Just as Norris and I limp into the Plymouth harbour torn and defeated, we prepare ourselves for a humiliating audience with Her Majesty. Norris will be spared immediate repercussions I am sure, a queen's favourite will always have a place awaiting him at Hampton Court. Whether Norris agrees to such an invitation in the wake of disgrace only time will tell. Perhaps far more pressing

for the leader of the Sacred Band is this riddle of progeny born into title north of our border in Scotland. The Queen of Scots and her orphaned child, this wisest fool in Christendom some are saying, as our Virgin Queen seemingly remains resolute in her chastity, there is only one favoured successor, a young Prince James, who could make the move to unite our island in a way only the blood of the Band could. A Great Britain, spared more of our soils soaked in blood from the fields of Flodden to Solway Moss. Should such a union take place, it will require delicate nurturing, for the divisions between Protestant and Catholic are rooted deep, and perhaps only those men of the Sacred Band who have seen their kind persecuted in the name of both for so many centuries have the integrity to rise above such petty squabbles. My only hope is that Norris remains close to both crowns long enough to foster such a union, that Walsingham's sage counsel will continue to be adhered to, and that the good knight of Sir Gawain, Sir Walter Raleigh, can keep his nose clean in court and temper his passion for ladies in waiting long enough to strengthen our beloved island. The tactic of the White Dragon has always been to divide, first creating enemies from fantasy, then having those who desire power only superficially *believe* they wield it in order to retain it for themselves. From such a delusion in their subordinates comes their control, Morgan le Fay's grip secured. These continue to be unstable times across Europe, and continue to be ripe and festering quagmires for the

Faerie Queene to make her play. All must be on their guard.

Doctor Dee of Sir Bedivere reassures us of his regained sanity and insists his clarity was never clouded, in fact. I remain sceptical. The curse of his lineage will plague his successors and prove judge, jury, and executioner should the King's Blade be required to overpower the Palladium and the Necklace once again. His fastidious note keeping, memoirs, and even his meandering retelling of folklore to inspire his young apprentice playwright might provide solid foundations for those hands that may be destined to lose all for the greater good. This offers poor comfort, however, as whatever relic gifted to the King of Spain by his royal bride's hand it was that triggered Dee's panic is not to be trifled with. As powerful in its path to destruction as it is to greatness, torn from our heartlands in Glastonbury, and protected to the death by its late Abbott Sir Richard Whiting. The fabled blade of the Thirteenth, Dee has shared since, unthinkable to us Red Dragon Knights. Sir Percival the Virgin, Sir Percival the Protector, the Just...the *traitor*. Whatever poisonous magic lay within his staff remains a mystery, and what should have been forever lost to the sands of time now somehow resurfaces like weeds in a forest of flowers. Can the familiar cycle of empires, their rise and fall, be interfered with by this forgotten treasure? What is its true meaning and purpose? Perhaps most pertinently, can Excalibur break both this cycle and whatever venom

the cursed Thirteenth pours so liberally into the minds of men? These are questions that will nag and unsettle me to my deathbed, I am sure.

I sent word to my brother, Thomas, to meet me at Plymouth Hoe before my trip back to London. If I am to be exonerated by my queen for this military failure, I am certain to be cast back out to sea on another skirmish into Spanish lands, a gadfly to King Philip II, a reminder that England and its rise await as his sun sets. Our treasury remains full, whereas Madrid's empties, and that will only fuel more quests, more raids, and more plunder for the purposes of patriotic propaganda. While my own blade of Sir Galahad remains noble to this cause, I remain mindful in my duty to my kin, to the blood of the Sacred Band and its heirs, alongside that of Sir Gawain. Like our gracious queen, I have no heirs, and may now be denied a chance of siring any, so plans must be made to maintain my legacy. Let my brother's safe hands carry this burden, bequeath to him my sword and family name, and as per our own family motto—*Sic Parvis Magna*—from his offspring as little acorns, let mighty oaks grow. The Knights of the Red Dragon will be secure in their leader, and while I may now appear frail and vulnerable to my enemies, I shall forever shout over the cresting waves, *El Draque! El Draque!* and remind the Spanish that while our Lions of Leuctra control the land, we too have the Dragons that shall forever command the seas.

Sir Francis Drake
Knight of the Red Dragon

Chapter

Bath – England

18th September 2022 AD

‘I remember the Babington Plot...’ Cleo’s eyes narrowed, lips pursed. ‘Two gentlemen favourably inclined towards the Jesuit movement in England, chief conspirators the Crown called them, committed treason of the highest order in their attempt to assassinate Queen Elizabeth I and pave the way for her cousin, Mary Queen of Scots.’ She tucked a loose strand of black hair back behind her ear, her brow pinched tight as she struggled to recollect. ‘Ballard! John Ballard. That was the accomplice to Anthony Babington.’ Her strain to recall the second gentleman’s name was relieved instantly with a quick snap of her fingers. ‘That’s...that’s correct, isn’t it?’ she sought reassurance from Geraint South and Adam Allen. South gave a firm nod.

‘Babington and Ballard were likely members of the White Dragon at the time—bloodlines of Sir Lamorak and our good Sir Geraint here.’ Adam patted the standing knight of Sir Geraint on the shoulder. ‘Must have been quite the noble act of contrition from the Red Dragon to return their staffs and silver rings,’ he surmised, tapping South’s hand, only to realise the familiar inscription of Albus Draco had been replaced with a simple band of gold.

‘That would be his engagement ring, Adam.’ Ana Braithwaite stepped between them. ‘People, of course, change.’ She gave a judging smile as she interlocked her arm with Geraint’s.

‘Still...old habits die hard,’ Geraint winked as he pulled free the top button of his tartan shirt to reveal his token of fealty to his once-mistress Morgan le Fay, the silver ring gleaming proudly as ever, looped on a coarse twine string. ‘Let us not completely erase history; just learn from it.’ He prompted Cleo to continue.

‘Damas was most upset by the whole trial, that much I do remember. He knew that the Palladium was at the heart of the Iberian Empire simply due to the phenomenal growth of Spain and its influence. Each time the relic flared, he spotted an opportunity to correct the course of humanity towards...well, you know how his mind worked.’ Cleo’s words became solemn. ‘But this thirteenth blade you speak of, that of Sir Percival, you say? I don’t recall seeing it, or anyone mentioning its presence during the Tudor reign.’ She puzzled, chin pressed deep into her hands. ‘A meeting with the then Prince of Spain, the future King Philip II...’ She squeezed her faculties as if trying to wring the last remaining drops of juice from a lemon. ‘...Damas spoke of an altercation at court when the prince was presented with a gift from his fiancée Mary I of England, the Bloody Queen many would say. I think my brother liked her,’ she said with a brief smirk. ‘The gift looked

similar to one of your wooden staffs, the swords the knights carry, and one individual took great offence at her parting with such an important treasure. I was not there to witness it, but it seemed as though a knight had unwillingly bequeathed a sword to the prince and traded their loyalty as a result. Another knight was not happy at such an exchange, he told me.' Cleo shook her head clear, her memory exhausted.

'John Dee, mystic advisor to the English Crown. It appears our assumptions were correct,' Geraint concluded. 'The knight of Sir Bedivere, with a warped mind, acts in a way that suggests the very King's Blade has passed across to our enemies, thus making the works of the Palladium and the Necklace unstoppable. Potentially the first known union of the Trinity, with Morgan le Fay the inaugural benefactor.'

'Only it was *Sir Percival's* blade that was gifted, still allowing Dee to fulfil the duty of the Sir Bedivere line, summon Excalibur, and halt that particular cycle of destruction triggered by the White Dragon.' Adam paced in tight circles, his attention broken by bolts of newsflashes highlighting the plights of provinces around Catalonia, seemingly spreading with every switch in channel Violet made. 'Can you remember what was happening in Spain at that time, Cleo? Not just territorial expansion, I mean...' he gestured towards the television.

‘Nothing on this scale.’ Cleo cocked her head to one side. ‘It was, however, well known that King Philip II owed substantial debts across Spain and the wider continent, an instrument in his own downfall, as so often is the case with absolute power. The demands of the Armada and its construction, rapid and unrelenting, put the king at odds with his own already fractured country...as if drawing the very spirit and soul from his own subjects. Still, it was not as if England stole the show immediately afterwards...wasn’t there a counter-move shortly after the Armada? One that didn’t exactly capitalise on Queen Elizabeth’s unexpected victory upon the seas?’

‘Morgan, maybe taking her time to find a suitable successor for the Palladium,’ Geraint proposed. ‘Spain retained some modicum of strength in the aftermath of their defeat, but a queen with an iron will was perhaps more appealing than a failing king tarnished with hubris.’

‘A new Golden Age for England.’ Adam crossed his arms and slumped against the table as a new message popped up on his mobile courtesy of the Crown Court. The Right Honourable Lady Whitstanley, notifying him and Violet of a revised Committee Inquiry hearing date in a fortnight. He quickly popped the phone back in his pocket before Violet had the chance to question him. It wasn’t the appropriate time to shift focus, despite his own thoughts now disturbed. He could not escape the

stinging fact that the Sacred Band was still on trial, the public eye no doubt drawing correlations between the calamitous events of late and the horrors of the recent period of pestilence, and judging them. Every near-supernatural disaster would be blamed on his three hundred warriors, the latest scapegoats, the very contrast to what the Band stood for and had loyally sought to defend for over a century, undone by the actions of one. This was a burden for which he suddenly felt ill-prepared, his chest tightening when Violet landed on a breaking news story live from Manresa reporting that migrants were now at the mercy of armed Catalan guards preparing to fire live rounds on any that sought to breach their containment walls.

Distressing, grainy images captured on phone cameras brought to life the dread that now flooded the southern Spanish shores. Men, women, and children, stranded on rickety liferafts bobbing like corks in the Mediterranean waters while warning salvos spat in savage splashes mere inches away. *¡Volvense atrás! ¡Volvense atrás!* several of the guards shouted, warning the people to turn back. Another volley from the rifles saw an inflatable raft punctured, the hiss of air drowned by the scream from a young woman as she cradled her husband in her arms, blood oozing from between his ribs. *¡Volvense atrás!* the warning came coldly again.

Cleo brought her hand to her mouth. ‘Whatever this thirteenth blade is capable of, this is not something I have seen before...not Imperial Spain or your Golden

Age of England. This is the work of a radical, an individual with the most brutal of methods. Dare I say...' she croaked.

'Like your brother.' Aisha stormed into the room, Luke in tow. 'And no, before anyone says it, the Followers of Palamedes will not act as mere peacekeepers this time. My men are on the ground heading towards Barcelona. The Mayoress Sofia Pescuador will not go unchallenged. There's still time.' She transformed her staff into steel. Adam remained silent, studying the facial expressions of his older brother, concerns for his own wife and child etched deep into every wrinkle. 'I have two dozen, armed and ready for action. They will stand ready to defend the helpless and exchange fire if necessary,' the knight of Sir Palamedes growled, steadfast. Luke's head sank deeper into his shoulders with every word Aisha spoke.

'And little Richard?' Adam found the words his brother could not.

Aisha was struck dumb for an instant, a hint of maternal instinct resurfacing, quickly buried. 'Beth can take care of him. We knights have a duty. We stand together, united. If we cannot move against powers born from our own kin, what is our purpose? Or our children's?' she composed herself.

‘He’ll know we fought, Bro.’ Luke stepped to his wife’s side. ‘What more can we do? What more can the Sacred Band do?’

Adam turned to the still cautious faces of Geraint and Ana, then to Violet and Cleo, the knight of Sir Bors and her partner expressing slightly more optimism. He felt his mobile buzz from within his pocket, his own pesky little gnat acting as a constant reminder of how fragile his situation was. Should he bring Jonathan into this? Risk his own lover too soon? Milo and Tommy? The full arsenal of men who still held hope that they could live their lives at peace and be considered irreproachable for deeds past? His silence was no doubt becoming a roar of conflict towards his dearest friends. ‘Excalibur,’ he finally broke. ‘We should at least entertain bringing Excalibur to the fore.’

‘Not sure Min’s on my side this time, Bro,’ Luke replied. ‘There’s a first, in line with that claim now that Mr Benson has returned.’ He paused for a moment to scan the room, looking for Jacob. ‘Bolted already, has he?’

‘Cleo?’ Adam sought to substantiate.

‘He’s not ready, Adam...whatever Cassidy said at the Roman Baths has clearly struck a chord. Jacob mourns his father’s passing, while equally seeking both purpose and revenge. The time to wield the King’s Blade has not come just yet. Let him grieve alone a little longer.’ Cleo

welcomed the soothing embrace from Violet, fearing that letting the young Benson boy forge his own path would have triggered rebuke from the Sacred Band leader.

‘Not sure we have that luxury,’ Adam rebuffed.

‘We didn’t when Luke brought my mother Niobe back from her petrified prison, but here we all still stand,’ Cleo reminded.

‘Perhaps Gary was right. This is not a battle where the powers of Excalibur hold sway; a knight’s blade can be undone by a knight’s blade...any of yours,’ Braithwaite chirped. ‘XENO-20 and Damasichthon’s troubling works, you admit, were beyond your familiar Trinity’ scope. Any chance this time, the Mayoress Pescador is merely a lone figure equal to your own kind?’ Her analysis garnered support from Aisha and Violet.

‘Something’s telling me otherwise,’ Adam gave a hard gulp, not having heard from Gary Willis since his departure. Most uncharacteristic. He succumbed to the unwanted vibrations from his mobile, drew it from his pocket. Two missed calls, both Gary, both without message and in quick succession, suggesting urgency. ‘Anyone been in touch with Gary since he left this morning?’ he blurted. Their blank expressions weighed heavy on his conscience. A knight’s blade against a knight’s blade might not be sufficient. ‘A different shape

of curse,' he spoke out loud, perplexing the faces before him. 'Geraint, Ana—find Jacob. Try to assist him in any way you can with the most specific of the demands of the Lady of the Lake.'

'I'm no counsellor, Adam,' Geraint snapped. 'Cleo just said he needs time.'

'Then find him and *guide* him, rather than instruct. He cannot leave Bath,' Adam shot back. Cleo suggested the pair return to the Roman Baths to assist Cassidy if all else failed...a suspicion that Jacob might have unfinished business with the water spirit. 'Aisha, Luke—do what you can to protect the refugees fleeing for Catalonia. I'll make for Manresa and try to find Gary.'

'Not alone you won't,' Violet butted in.

'I can't take Jonathan, Violet. He's no more ready for his responsibilities than Jacob. You've studied his progress just as I have. I won't risk him...I...' A surge of emotion struck Adam in the gut, the muscles in his neck shuddering with choked words. His heart felt momentarily fractured, the notion that another loved one could perish before his eyes, perhaps even at his own hand, intended or not. 'Please, Vi, stay here and train him. Only you can, since you are Band and Knight combined, just like him,' he stuttered, pleading. 'Cleo can accompany me, if you insist.'

Violet scowled. 'My pleasure.' Cleo vigorously shook her arm free from Butcher's. 'You know, despite my living for several millennia, my dearest lady here feels I am unable to protect myself. One would even think I wasn't also a demi-goddess like her.' She shot a quirky expression towards her partner. Violet remained unimpressed. 'When do we leave?' her question drowned by the chopping sound of helicopter blades outside.

Aisha spoke swiftly in Arabic and switched to messaging Beth to secure nanny duties for a day or two. 'Told you she should have been little Richard's godmother. Never did ask. We'll be back at The Bear before he knows it,' she announced. 'Everyone outside to the park grounds. There should just be enough space beside that precious bridge of yours to land.'

Chapter 19

Manresa, Catalonia – Spain

19th September 2022 AD

A dull ache throbbed behind Adam's eyes as dawn broke, the churn of the copter blades rattling him to his core and waking him from his snatched sleep. By travelling at night the chopper had managed to slip through the continental patrols, which as expected were focused elsewhere. Landing inconspicuously, however, was another matter as the mountain range of Monserrat punctured the skyline, flanked either side by fierce terrain. To cross this hacksaw ridge would undoubtedly alert the Catalan forces, but to land on its opposing side would delay the group by hours...hours they couldn't afford to lose. Luke snored in the corner seat, mouth open and drooling, one palm for a pillow—still not quite accustomed to the lack of shut-eye despite the wail of little Richard at inconvenient late hours. To his elder brother, this whole expedition might well feel like a holiday, Adam smirked to himself. Aisha remained bright, liaising with the pilot since takeoff, checking the radar, and proposing suitable landing spots. So unerring was the knight of Sir Palamedes that Adam dare not interject, opting to sit quietly in the back next to a pensive Cleo. 'Thank you, for...well, convincing Violet to stay.' He spoke uninhibitedly, arms squeezed tight to his chest to allow room for Luke's sprawling

slumber. 'She's never been good at taking advice, especially not from me.'

'Oh, believe me, I know,' Cleo smiled. 'You wouldn't think I was the one with the lessons of time, would you? Still, so goes the manner of a Daughter of Ares, I suppose.' She neatly crossed her legs, providing Adam more space. 'Are you well?' she enquired bluntly.

'How so?'

'Jonathan. We're both without our partners.'

'Rather keep him safe,' Adam replied stoically.

'*Safe?* For how long, Mr Allen?' Cleo remained focused on the jagged horizon, mind seemingly in two places at once.

'What do you mean?'

'For as long as I can remember, which is naturally quite some time, I have never once known the Sacred Band to be *safe*. There is always something—always an enemy, be it one that takes umbrage at your own kind or creates a threat that your warriors cannot ignore. There are and always will be so few of you—three hundred—but an elite three hundred. To hide is not an option. Ever,' Cleo bristled.

'I've never told Jonathan, or in fact, any of the Sacred Band to hide, Cleo. Quite the opposite. Trust me, the gripes I've raised with Jon recently over his reluctance to be himself on the rugby field, same as Milo Conti and Tommy Brooks in football...I'm tired of them being afraid and vulnerable when they, we are anything but,' Adam defied.

'And yet, here you are, alone. Forgive me, but I cannot help but feel your motives are more inclined to those feelings you harbour deep down inside where you won't let anyone venture...a scar you believe to still be an open wound. But Iain Donnelly is just that—a scar. Indelible, yes. Repeatable, no, not in the same way,' came a sage response.

'History always repeats itself. You of all people should know that,' Adam blocked.

'Rarely in the same way. Surely, the Red and White Dragon factions throughout all their wars have proven that to you? My father Amphion taught my brother and me a single lesson when young, that to obtain absolute power one simply needs to make others *believe* they wield it, the illusion of satisfying their thirst for control when all the while reserving such a right purely for oneself. Was this not Morgan le Fay's own approach? A sorceress so powerful, but choosing to rely on her puppet men? Should her plans fail—as they did when Excalibur was brought forth—precious few save the

knights around her knew of her hidden intent for humanity. Her evil moved in the shadows, not in the spotlight. The same sadly rings true today, with or without her interventions.’ Cleo turned and faced Adam for the first time, with steely intent. ‘These illusions will always change; they must, as they fear being caught out.’

‘Even if the objective remains the same,’ Adam politely concurred. ‘Divine politics.’ He managed a weak smile, his heart skipping as it always did at the sound of Iain Donnelly’s name.

‘Poisonous politics. Self-centred in nature. I’ve certainly seen enough false enemies created over the centuries to see how this one will likely play out. Nations and lands forever told them they were looking outward, but in truth, only inward. The question is, what is this newfound power and what is driving it? Is the sword’s wielder in control, or is it the sword itself? And how does one bring it to an end?’ Cleo’s attention returned to the window, squinting at the shimmer of a shadow in the distance. Her question washed over Adam, whose mind was now processing his decision to leave Jonathan behind. Exactly whom was he sparing? His partner, or his heart? He was forever a protector, yes, but had his and his brother’s own father adopted such an approach for most of their lives, what would have become of the Sacred Band and the line of Sir Galahad? At what point does fear hinder progress? His fingers slid over his

phone, preparing to message Jon with a few words of contrition, a confession, anything. He began to type, flustering at the autocorrect, just when Aisha piped up loudly from the cockpit.

'Two Migs. Coming in hot!' She twisted back from her front seat, reaching for her staff.

'Two...wait, what?' Adam lurched over Cleo for an angle on the window.

'Fighter jets. Spanish. Just showed up on the radar, and no, we don't have...Luke! Wake the Hell up, will you!' she punched her spouse hard in the arm. 'Weapons! Other than the four of us.'

The helicopter pilot barked in Arabic just as the pair of fighter jets zipped overhead, a metallic-sounding voice screeching from the cockpit radio, ordering them to land immediately. 'Sound pretty mad.' Aisha fumbled for the sliding doors.

'Err...what are you doing, Aisha?' A still sleep-ridden Luke rubbed sand from his eyes.

'Come the second pass, they won't be so compliant. Either they're going down, or we are,' Aisha growled, staff transformed into blade. 'Adam can try to bring them down with his spears. You and I can blind them with knight light. Best chance.' The helicopter slowed to

a hover. The tinny, ear-splitting screech continued as the two jets circled back in the distance, orders firmer. 'Keep us steady!' Aisha instructed her pilot, his face breaking out in a sweat but attentive nonetheless. 'Adam, Luke, and I will summon the light. You summon the spear.' She parted with Luke to enable Adam to position himself between the two knights, the roar of the jets rumbling louder. 'Any second...' One jet broke free of the other, the crackling of guns just audible, a few warning shots flashing above the copter blades.

'Mrs...Mrs Hussin.' The pilot's composure began to crack.

'Just hold...a second longer,' Aisha confirmed. A bullet cracked the glass of the cockpit, the copter jolting with the pilot's fraying nerves. 'Ready...'

'Hell, yes, I am bloody ready, Aisha!' Luke bellowed in panic, a salvo of bullets coming too close for comfort alongside the plate of the doors.

'Now!' Aisha cried. Her and Luke's combined sword-summoned knight lights pulsed out in a wave of white. The momentary flash caused the approaching jet to kilter off its target, the following bloom of a shockwave unbalancing its wings, leaving the underbelly exposed. The copter filled with cobalt blue as Adam charged and slung his flaming spear at its mark, clipping the left wing of their predator and instantly causing a tailspin. The

radio ceased screeching, the jet in freefall for a moment before seemingly recovering its flight pattern, but judged too frail to continue by its pilot. The cockpit blew open and an orange parachute puffed open. 'Solid strike, Mr Allen,' Aisha sighed, relieved.

'Solid strike, as in my brother almost shot down a fighter jet of the Spanish Airforce!' Luke blurted.

'I knew what I was doing, Luke,' Adam rebuffed.

'Sure, the pilot who's dangling their way down to the ground thought that way too when half their plane went up in flames!' Luke snarled.

'Like you wouldn't have acted the same way.'

'Seriously, we need to land right now and press reset on all this and...' The brothers' bickering was interrupted by Cleo's timely reminder of the second jet, turning hard one hundred and eighty and heading straight back for them. A lone siren blared all around, bulbs across the cockpit dashboard flickering in every colour. 'Is that...a missile?' Luke's voice was strangled.

'Mrs Hussin!' the pilot snapped, panic-stricken. Aisha shot to Cleo's side, swinging the opposite side door open. The crisp jet trail of the projectile became bolder and bolder, the siren morphing into a myriad of

disturbing sounds. 'Mrs Hussin...we must land!' the pilot insisted.

'I can try to counter, knock it off course.' Adam rose confidently. His brother turned with an expression somewhere between derision and astonishment.

'Your partnering powers would have been useful here, huh?' Cleo snipped.

'Trust the immortal one to get snarky! We don't all have your luxury.' Luke was already surveying the ground below. 'Just switch off the engine. We'll nose dive but survive.'

'Immortal doesn't mean I don't...' Cleo began to engage as Adam brought forth a second blue fire spear, controlling it in his right hand, eyes clenched tight, breathing simmering. All vibrant and intrusive noises shut out, only the rush of the missile edging closer and closer permitted through his senses. A snapshot glance before hurling his own projectile with all his might, the spear a pinprick in a flawless gold sky for a split second, its course meeting head-on with its target, then slightly dipping below the missile's nose. Adam's throat tensed, sweaty hands gripping the rails, preparing for the near-inevitable explosive impact. The momentum of his counterattack held just enough sway to nick the rocket's tail and deflect it from its target. An incendiary cloud of

heat burst metres from them, its force blunted, but weighty all the same.

‘Hang on!’ Aisha’s words reverberated around the copter, now in a dizzying spin of its own. Adam’s heavy torso flew into Cleo’s, his grip on the support bar slipping. The pair were thrown from their haven like two young chicks fleeing the nest for the first time, air whooshing past their ears. They clung to one another, Adam seeing only the foreboding grey of the earth hurtling towards him, watching helplessly over Cleo’s shoulder. *Jonathan*, he thought, wrapping both his arms and legs constrictor-like around her, burying his face into her oil-black hair as they tumbled. He felt Cleo’s arm slide itself free from their embrace, the pointy tips of tree canopies now distinguishable. He felt a sharp and sudden jolt and then blacked out.

A golden dawn had given way to silken twilight, as Adam came to. He blinked several times, his brain rebooting. He went to sit up, triggering a searing pain radiating from his neck to his shins. He settled down again, tingling all over. ‘Don’t try to move, not just yet,’ Cleo insisted, crouching by his side.

‘What...what happened?’ Adam muttered through his pain. He squinted to make out the raw gash that oozed

fresh blood from Cleo's arm, sharp pine needles and bark puncturing her skin. 'Your...arm?'

'Will heal, just like you do,' Cleo reassured. 'Wonders of the Theban lineage. Will take a few more hours, mind...at least.'

'My brother? Aisha?'

'No sign of them...but no sign of any helicopter wreckage, either. I'm praying to the Pantheon that they managed to land somewhere safely,' Cleo replied, tracking the skies with a bruised and bloodied finger. 'Best guess is they crossed the mountain range, meaning they've come down closer to Manresa itself.'

'Any mobile signal?' Adam asked optimistically.

'None. All jammed. Besides...' Cleo plucked from Adam's pocket the remnants of his smartphone, the screen shattered into spider webs. 'Body will heal, modern technology, less so,' she tried to soothe. 'Hopefully, Aisha will make contact with some of her Followers of Palamedes, find them before the mayoress comes to know of our actions.'

Adam braved another attempt at sitting up, gritting his teeth as he levered his upper body to a right angle. 'Gary missing in action. Now jet fighters shooting at

us...my fears, Cleo, are that Mayoress Sofia Pescador is well aware of our actions.'

Chapter 20

Manresa, Catalonia – Spain

19th September 2022 AD

The wail of the infant broke through the cacophony of the crowd, pudgy little arms and legs flailing, a pitiful mixture of tears and drool dripping down his cheeks. His mother tried to steady herself as bodies rammed into her from all directions, her frame skeletal, savaged by hunger and thirst. Aisha had managed to scramble her way to the edge of the cliff, freezing the instant a stone became dislodged and bounced its way down the mountainside. The judging beams of helicopter searchlights scanned the entire group of migrants, ever vigilant to any attempts to cross the Cardener River and enter Manresa City. A spotlight from one of the hastily constructed watchtowers flanking the West Bridge pulled its attention away from the ink-blot-shaped crowd, and up towards Hussin's location. She held her breath, buried her head, and waited for what felt like an eternity for the soft light to return its focus on the swarm. As she gasped for air, Luke's arm grasped hers. 'We can't stay here, Aisha. The Catalan guards will have clocked the crash. That smoke might as well have well been a homing beacon.'

'My pilot? How is Farah?' The groan of their chauffeur could be heard from behind the shade of a rock.

‘Dressed his wounds as best I could, but his leg is broken. The best plan is to get to your followers quickly as possible, and bring help,’ Luke proposed.

‘Help is needed more down there,’ Aisha frowned. A rattle of machine guns echoed over the heads of the migrants as they tried to use brute force against the imposing steel doors, forced back like a timid wave against stern coastal rocks. Some dared to climb the flimsy lattice fences flanking each side of the bridge down into the river ravine, only to be met with coils of barbed wire puncturing their hands, forcing them to drop unceremoniously back down to their harsh reality without a single bullet fired. ‘They don’t stand a chance. There’s only so much restraint the mayoress will show before Manresa makes a bolder statement.’

‘Move to the South Bridge. Isn’t that where you said the Followers of Palamedes were gathering?’ Luke suggested while stabbing his fingers wildly at the cracked screen of his phone. ‘No signal. Everything around here is down,’ he muttered impatiently.

‘And Adam and Cleo?’ Aisha replied despondently. Luke’s brow twitched, eyes dulled and pensive, one hand swollen into a fist, the other choking his wooden staff. The expected outpouring of emotion was subdued.

‘My brother...my brother can handle himself. I know Cleo certainly can. Wherever they are or their fate, they want us to continue our cause.’ Each word was strained with inner conflict. ‘Now come, quickly, let’s help those we can,’ Luke urged once more. The boom of an amplifier bolstered the now familiar words *¡Volvense atrás!* falling upon the refugees’ deaf ears, punctuated with *¡Ultima advertencia!*—final warning. A fragment of time was granted to the masses, as the skies around erupted with a boom of smoke, brick, and fire. Targeted and most precise, the Pont del Congost bridge reduced to a pile of rubble draped with limp and lifeless bodies unable to heed the blip of a warning. The cityside watchtower’s lights were blotted out for a second, then hummed back into life, illuminating the horror-struck faces of the crowds cut off. *¡Volvense atrás!* the announcements came robotically once more.

‘They’ll seal off the entire city,’ Luke shuddered. ‘These guys should have stayed on the coast.’ His bubbling rage was enough to bring forth his blade. Aisha calmed him, pointing to the far Mediterranean horizon layered with viciously dark clouds full to the brim with an impending storm and bursting with bolts of lightning.

‘That’s no *ordinary* storm cloud.’ Aisha studied the spreading tempest as it poisoned all afternoon sunlight from the sky, appearing oddly to encircle the city rather than sweep over it. ‘I doubt the mayoress will have a

need for walls or bridges if that's the level of power she commands.'

'All the more reason to leave now,' Luke snapped.

The Pont Vell bridge remained firm, the events a mirror to those in the south of the city, same walls, same sentries, same panic. During their prompt manoeuvre along the Cardener River, Aisha intermittently paused to inspect the waters. What should have been crystal clear and as fresh as its mountain source had become black as tar, ebbing as freely as it should, but far more pronounced. A small tributary had become a roaring torrent in the space of a few minutes. She swore it carried a voice, a ghostly veil of tongues with each churn, but Luke too eager to reach their destination to pay it any such attention. The pair found themselves at the back of the crowd, weaving their way through desolate souls and haggard faces towards the very front at the foot of the city-facing side of the bridge, only to be greeted with the same sinister barbed wire wall and blockades. No watchtowers this time, the terrain so close to the Old City that it was ill-suited for such construction, but protected by Catalan guards several lines thick.

'knight of Sir Palamedes, as salaam 'alaikum.' A heavy-set, brutish-looking Follower of Palamedes caught the

shoulder of Aisha, immediately bowing with hand over the heart. 'I'm afraid to report that the situation across Catalonia is worsening. We followers had to retreat from the coastline when the storms hit. Many refugees saw their hopes extinguished by the vile seas, if not from the gunfire of these guards. Even the Mayoress Pescador's own forces now retreat inside the Old City, still determined to keep out anyone seeking shelter.' His deep wrinkles sagged with sorrow. 'Is this...*sahar*?' 'Magic? I fear so, *sayid*...sir,' Aisha said, nimbly switching from Arabic to English for her husband's benefit. 'Still, not the first time my good followers have tussled with such enemies, eh?' she patted his barrel chest heartily and gave orders to have a selection of his company retreat to the mountain range to aid the pilot, Farah, and search for Adam and Cleo.

'Your safety, Sir Palamedes?' the follower grew concerned. 'Let me stay with you, Mrs Hussin. These are ugly scenes,' he insisted.

'Allen-Hussin,' Luke corrected sharply, offering a courteous handshake. 'And my wife and I can take care of ourselves,' came a forced yet unconvincing declaration from the knight of Sir Galahad. The follower cocked his head to the side and shot a glance at Aisha.

'He speaks the truth, good sir. Please, you and the remaining followers, protect the refugees, but use counterforce only if necessary.' Aisha tapped the

follower's rifle lightly with her staff. 'We're not to be seen as the aggressors, understood?' The follower gruffed his approval. She turned her attention to the stone façade of the Santa Cova perched high on its mount, the brash colours of the Catalan flag draped from its balconies. 'But...we could use your assistance in getting across this bridge.'

The follower turned, narrowing his eyes at the impassive expressions of the Catalan Guard lining the far side of Pont Vell. 'Come too close, Sir Palamedes, and they will blow up the bridge,' he warned. 'They made their intent for isolation clear only moments earlier, so I've learnt—we all heard the explosion from the other side of the city and...'

'Which is why we must try to use reason and diplomacy. Let just Luke and me pass through and draw out the mayoress under our terms. I get the feeling somehow she'll want to listen to us,' Aisha interjected. The hulking frame of the follower hunched for a moment, unconvinced, then straightened with rifle clutched close, nodding respectfully, then forging a path through for the knights. 'Allen-Hussin?' Aisha whispered through the remorseful moans of the crowd. 'Agreed on that as a surname for little Richard, did we?'

'Think it works, yes,' Luke quipped, summoning his sword. 'We're always stronger together, are we not? You ready, my love?'

Aisha brought forth her own blade. 'Not in the slightest, darling. Which is exactly how I like it.'

The opposing guards sprang to attention during their first intrepid steps upon the bridge, rifles angled straight, fingers firmly hovering over their triggers. '*¡Detiense! ¡Alto!*' the shortest in their line-up growled with a coarse tone. '*Stop!*' he reaffirmed, palms spread wide. Aisha and Luke spearheaded their phalanx of six followers, armed equally, Hussin drawing them to a standstill mere metres from Manresa's defensive line.

'We have business with the Mayoress Sofia Pescador, of the blood of King Anfortas, the Fisher King and wielder of the Thirteenth Blade,' Aisha bellowed, her sword held high. 'Let her convene with us, the Knights of the Round Table, and be judged.'

Luke's face screwed up in puzzlement, he leant across to the ear of his wife. 'Did you just make that up? Very grand.'

'Pretty much. Might as well at least sound the part...see if it gets her attention.' Aisha flicked a grin just as a solitary storm cloud plumed over the Santa Cova, casting an unpropitious shadow over their position. The lone figure of the mayoress appeared on the Santa Cova balcony, hard to distinguish were it not for the

shimmering of a blackened blade by her side and her near-translucent skin that was in stark contrast to the ever-dimming skies. 'Looks like it worked.' she said, lowering her blade.

'Strange, for I have no business with you, knight of Sir Palamedes.' A chilling voice carried over the building storm winds, an unharmoniously string of chords as if spoken by a stranger, the mayoress's own tone heard fleetingly. 'Nor, with any of those that once sat around the Round Table of King Arthur, bitter fools I decree! Severed, disloyal, selfish, each and every one of us! Unfit for the vows we took, and now, paying the consequences.'

Luke leant in once more. 'Fair to say this mayoress has lost it, entirely,' he quipped as the tarry waters of the river below raced faster, matched in their ferocity only by the growing tumultuous skies above. 'Seems reluctant to face us in person. Coward.' The elder Allen barely had time to complete his judgement when a swirl of dark smoke appeared directly in front of them, shifting its form into that of the mayoress herself, the same glowing ebony-black blade of Sir Percival sucking the stray strands of mist back within. Luke and Aisha readied their swords, the Followers of Palamedes lifting their rifles in unison.

'You call me a *coward*, Sir Galahad? When you were the one that ran from the King of Britons that most

infamous of days!’ the mayoress shrieked, bleeding eyes bathed in accursed oil, teeth a sickly yellow. ‘I may not have chosen a side, but I held my honour. I renounced my sword for the sake of my indiscretions. Whereas you two...and the others loyal to Red or White, continued the bloodshed. The suffering. The torture. Now, this is what has become of humanity—nothing but greed, turning a blind eye to the pains of many, like an unwelcomed guest,’ she seethed.

Aisha made a bold step forward. ‘And yet, look at you now, Mayoress Sofia. I do not see a knight of justice standing before me. I see only revenge and retribution. How does this honour King Arthur? Or the fabled line of Sir Percival?’ she challenged, her guard up.

‘Failed by so many has my beloved land been...Spanish, British, French, and German. From wars to plagues to religions, my people have been stricken. No more. The line of Anfortas was maimed and deliberately weakened for doing what many knew to be right, by tyrants who thought they knew better. Over the centuries, this cycle has continued, and now I wield the strength to stand against my enemies—a power that will ensure our survival,’ the mayoress countered.

‘Survival? You mean *superiority*.’ Luke drew to Aisha’s side. ‘Look around you, Pescador. Your ambitions are to the detriment of all...including, soon, your *own* people. No land is a true island.’ He tried to reason, but his

words only seemed to strike at the hearts of the mayoress's guards, each turning to one another and processing their own predicament as bolts of lightning snapped on either side of the Pont Vell.

'Spoken like a true...*Englishman*, Mr Allen,' the mayoress teased.

'American, actually.' Luke played to his accent. 'Lay down the blade of Sir Percival, spare your people. We won't ask again.' His sword pulsed a glimmer of white.

'Ah, of course. That is near exactly how your fellow knight, Sir Gaheris, made his proposal. A sublime trick towards subjugation,' the mayoress chided. 'I am assuming you can deduce the response I gave to Mr Gary Willis?' Luke's mellow manner turned fractious. 'If you wish for this blade, my blade, you'll need to prise it from my hands!'

'An eye for an eye,' Luke sneered to himself, and before Aisha could intervene, her husband had launched himself at Sofia with a blood-curdling strike, a sharp clang of blades causing both Followers of Palamedes and Catalan guards to jump in shock. The mayoress swung low, looking to clip Luke in the knees, missing by inches as Aisha made her move—a full-shouldered lunge plunging down hard and meeting the black blade square on. A dull vibration reverberated across the bridge like a poorly tuned bell. Luke struck again with a

summoned knight light, forcing the mayoress to scramble back before regaining her footing. 'Together, knight light—ready?' Luke commanded. Aisha nodded and readied her sword. 'Now!' Both blades sank into the stone at the same time, and dual orbs of winter white radiated out. The Catalan guards were catapulted backwards several metres, left dazed and dumbfounded as they clambered for their rifles. The mayoress, while forced to her knees, held her opposing darkened knight light firm, streaks of her rivals' conjured brilliance fizzling out. 'What the Hell *is* that blade?' Luke panted, readying for a second encounter.

'*Superior*, knight of Sir Galahad,' Pescador smirked, staggering to her feet. 'It would appear you and Sir Palamedes, like Sir Gaheris before you, have come ill-prepared.' Her words stung Luke like barbs, spurring him to rash and miscalculated aggression once more. The mayoress turned her back, retreated only a few metres, and clocked the detonator for the explosives beneath the bridge. Her own guards were still confused, about as useful in this clash of knights as insects under a boot. A swift but controlled conjuration of lightning brewed from the sinister skies above was brought downward at her command. Sparks cascaded from the detonation box. Aisha's warning cries towards Luke were drowned out as the jet of flame and heat propelled them skyward, blocks of the Old Bridge stone flung high like shotputs, thundering down on both sides of the river.

The Followers of Palamedes opened fire, randomly and without thought, into the acrid and dense smog, the heavy-set commander wrapping his weighty arm around Hussin's waist, while she squirmed frantically, shouting her husband's name through agonised breath. The smoke slowly lifted. The mayoress had vanished, leaving only her reorganised Catalan guards with their guns locked and loaded. Aisha wriggled free of the commander, ran to the crooked edge of the collapsed bridge, and cried Luke's name. No answer. Bobbing gently in a now more tranquil, inky river was a wooden staff—the staff of Sir Galahad—but that alone. She watched through welling tears as it slipped from view beneath the waters. The once-vocal crowds of refugees had fled the moment the explosion came, making way for Catalan reinforcements to outflank Aisha's followers from their side. Dutifully, the burly commander held his rifle resolutely towards his aggressors, awaiting orders from Hussin that never came. The remains of the mayoress's tempest made way for a light drizzle of rain, washing away the tears from Aisha's cheeks and leaving her hollering to the heavens.

Chapter 21

Bath – England

19th September 2022 AD

Rain fell colder and heavier here in England than it ever did in Kingston. Jacob Benson held his hand out to catch the drops that formed a thick hazy sheet between him and the main entrance to the Roman Baths. The chill of the first few splashes was enough to make him whip his palm back and tuck it deep into his pockets, rubbing it vigorously against the denim lining for warmth. He stepped further back beneath the Georgian stone canopy on the opposing side of the street, huddled behind one of the columns. Jamaican sun. The thought replayed over and over in his head. Hot summer sands. Crystal blue seas. His friends playing cricket on a mauve spring evening, spicy pepper pot soup, and coffee with a drop of rum for afters. That was home. That was where he belonged.

His father used to believe this once too, or at least, that is how he would present it to his son. Nothing for them here in Britain—only pain and struggle. Yet Jacob would hear him cry out sometimes in his sleep, when the storm winds were fierce and the oceans churned. *‘My Lady! My Lady!’* came the words, tinged with remorse and surrender. The plea for forgiveness to the first son, Mack Benson, would accompany the jerk of limbs and spasms so strong sometimes his mother would need all

her strength to wrestle Lucian out of his slumber and return him to the world of the living. Through a veil of sweat, he would pant, reach for the very same wooden staff Jacob now held, cling to it as if it were a newborn, and weep until the memory settled back into the recesses of his mind, his mother by his side the entire time. The episode served to cement his father's belief. There was *nothing* for the Benson family in Britain. Nothing worth returning to. Yet, here he was, tossed into a new world of supernatural beguilement, a world of knights, fairies, enchanted swords, and cursed legacies. Even the most relatable of affairs, from studied wars of history to modern pandemics, seemed caught in his mythical web. His mother lost to an illness, perhaps perishing at the hands of something far greater, his brother standing until the end to prevent a fate far worse for all mankind. Now, his own father gone into the afterlife at the mere sight of this siren, those accursed dreams suddenly materialised, a toll too great for his ailing body to bear. Now, Jacob alone felt both cheated and teased, effectively sworn into a duty he didn't want, yet twisted by riddles and rhymes that did little to explain his born powers and potential. If he were to abandon his post like his father did, shun responsibility, he would at least come to understand his place in this folklore—demand it, even. Any child of his would not be subjected to ignorance, no matter how blissful it might appear. They would then get to choose what life *they* wanted, not have it thrust upon them without induction.

As the final visitors to the famous Roman Baths meandered their way out into the rain, umbrellas springing open, Jacob found himself gripping the wooden staff more intently. A tingling ran down his arm and through his fingers into the bark itself. He tried to shake free of it as one would from a bout of pins and needles, and slivers of steel shot down the staff for the first time. He flapped in alarm, as slender beams of light split through the drizzle, a few tourists squinting in his direction as they passed. Jacob quickly turned his back and attempted to silence the blade by wrapping it beneath his duffle coat. 'What the Hell is wrong with you?' he found himself muttering to himself, worse in fact, muttering to a twig! The disgruntled staff appeared to calm itself, the gates of the Baths closed and locked.

'Great. Knew I'd left it too long. Damn idiot!' he berated himself. A smaller side gate opened, and a few of the gift shop staff readied their coats and hoods for the torrents. Last chance. Jacob curved his frame around the stone column, preparing to sprint and splash his way through the puddles before his window of opportunity closed. Wait, no. This was daft. He'd never make it. The staff would stop him; it was hopeless. Morning, maybe? Before the rush. But how would he attempt to communicate with a spirit or water witch without being carted off to a mental health facility or the police, and...*thud!* A firm hand slapped down on his shoulder. Jacob without hesitation swung his staff, startled. The unintentionally summoned blade of Sir Bedivere

collided with that of Sir Geraint's, the dour expression of Mr South greeting him.

'So...you've at least learnt something of merit these past few days, young Mr Benson.' Geraint slowly lowered his blade. 'Clearly more of a knight in you than many of us first thought. My guess is you've no idea how you just managed that, correct?' came a judgemental rise of South's eyebrow. Jacob could only cast his gaze to his feet. 'We knights often mistake ourselves as being masters of our own blades; however, in many an instance, the blade is the master of us. Sworn to protect its owner, even when the owner themselves is, well, naïve shall we say?' He offered a warm smile. 'There is a reason why your father found his way back here, just as you have now done. You cannot keep running from your destiny.'

Jacob's glare snapped back to Geraint. 'Destiny? What destiny? This Lady in there...this Lady of the Lake, said I was not ready...ready for any of this. So what exactly is it that I am accused of running from?' he spat.

'Your grief,' Geraint said sternly.

'My...' Jacob was ready with a defence, but his tongue failed him. All he could see was the lingering memory of his father breathing his last on a hospital bed. The young knight's face crumpled, a tear pooling in the

corner of his eye. His staff cooled from hot metal back into mellow wood as he heaved a repentant sigh.

‘You need not feel ashamed, young Mr Benson...no more so than all your predecessors who found themselves torn between their grief, rage, and honour. We of the Round Table always believed it to be a curse upon your bloodline, a trial of valour and courage. Why else would the most powerful of relics be trusted to you alone? Not all of us knights are ready for such a burden—especially those that found themselves once on my side,’ Geraint soothed.

‘Did that include the Thirteenth? The knight this Lady of the Lake spoke of?’ Jacob queried with renewed interest. ‘What side was he on?’

‘A law unto himself, so we’re led to believe. Recent events would suggest otherwise.’ Geraint moved past Benson, peering through the rains for a glimpse of his fiancée, spotting Ana Braithwaite marching confidently up to the two Roman Bath staff members still faffing with the zippers on their coats. He watched as she flashed a brief shot of her permit from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, gestured wildly, and made threats with a shake of her mobile phone. The staff, flummoxed, immediately opened the main gates once more, a cue to Geraint to step out from the shadows. ‘But you were right to return here, Jacob, for our good Lady of the Lake—Miss Mary Cassidy—is

our best bet at uncovering more information about the goings-on from Manresa and whatever sinister magic is behind it. Follow me, please.’ He stepped confidently at first, only to curse at the hidden depth of the first puddle that poured over the tops of his boots.

‘This Water Witch of yours doesn’t appear to be the most supportive of kinds.’ Jacob neatly sidestepped the pool. ‘*A lifetime of regret. Loss is a part of life.* Hardly inspirational words,’ he snipped as he shuffled in behind South. What exactly was he supposed to relinquish in order to wield this saviour of humanity—this King’s Blade? Perhaps more sobering, was it worth it?

‘Turns out Aisha’s little stunt earlier did us a favour,’ Ana beamed as the Bath gates closed behind. ‘That security detail from her followers has the operators of this site more than a little rattled. Only took a spurious claim that toxic fumes were being emitted and now a risk to public health, and this whole place is closed for a good few hours. Last thing the City Council wants, following the XENO-20 lockdown, is another reason to shut up shop.’

‘And the CCTV?’ Geraint asked.

‘All down. Made it a requirement so that my people can run biological testing without scrutiny—no public

relations misfire. Staff appeared to buy it...at least until they get on the phone to the school,' Ana retorted. 'So...where to now?' Her words tapered off as Jacob turned sharply towards the main Bath, zoning in on something. 'Jacob? Where are you...'

'Just let him go, Ana. We'll follow.' Geraint reassured with his hand on her shoulder, blade summoned for an orb of softly glowing light to pierce the darkness.

'Can you not hear that? The crying?' Jacob echoed through the dank halls on approaching the main pool, rippled by the ceaseless rain. Geraint and Ana picked up their pace, straining to hear anything that resembled so much as a wail. 'It's here, somewhere around this hall.' Jacob swerved between the crusty Roman columns, stumbling intermittently on loose paving.

'Can you hear anything?' Ana whispered to Geraint. 'I mean, it might not be audible to me, but then I'm just a nobody in all this theatre.' She gave a casual shrug.

'Nope. Not a thing,' Geraint replied, looking increasingly dismissive as the rain began to fall harder. 'Let it never be said that the minds of Sir Bedivere don't act in their own nature.' He watched the young knight scramble behind each rock and wall like a child engaged in a game of hide and seek. 'At least we did find the young man...feared another case of the Benson-born habit of disappearing into obscurity, right when we need them

the most.’ He rolled his eyes as Jacob began shouting Mary’s name. ‘My old White Dragon knights used to say it was difficult to find a man who does not wish to be found. Can you imagine how hard it is to find the most mysterious Lady of the Lake? Doubt she’ll respond to just her name being called.’ He couldn’t help but chuckle at what was swiftly becoming a farce of an exploration by the newly crowned custodian of Excalibur.

‘Get out. *Get out!*’ a thunderous voice broke across the vaulted bath, the mosaics and carvings shuddering with fright, its waters crashing over the edges in a single surge, Geraint and Ana backing away just in time to avoid the wave. The voice, though guttural, was unmistakable. Mary Cassidy announced herself to her guests. ‘Leave me *be,*’ came a more timid request, reverberating through each hall and cavern.

‘Told you,’ Jacob snipped, head popping up from behind a stone plinth. ‘She’s here. And she’s most upset.’

‘Well, we knew she was here, Mr Benson.’ Geraint attempted to pat dry his trousers. ‘Question is, why is she mad at *us?*’

‘I don’t think she is, Mr South. It’s something else...’ Jacob paused to reflect upon the piercing blue pulse of light emerging from the far corner of the pool. He darted towards it, Geraint and Ana struggling to keep

up. 'Mary! Miss Cassidy! Lady of the...of the Water and everything!' Benson shouted clumsily. 'I'm here, here to help and fulfil my purpose and restore pride to my family and...' A second crash of water collided with the trio, throwing them back soaking wet, sliding harshly into the walls.

'You...are...not...ready!' Mary's voice intensified once more. '*Spare the King's Blade, by whose hand all is lost!*' she screeched.

'But...I have. Haven't I?' Jacob regained his footing, wiping brackish water from his face. 'I stand alone now: no father, no mother, no half-brother. I have nothing but what you have gifted me.' He raised his wooden staff in capitulation. 'Let me assist. Whatever ills are now upon this world, let me assist,' he pleaded.

The air temperature dropped, and an icy chill spread around the pool, with its once turbulent waters frosting over before Jacob's very eyes. A frozen surface serenely lit the moonlight above, the square bath shielding them from the pouring heavens for an instant. Mary stood, shimmering in silver, at its centre, hair strands suspended as if held beneath water, skin sparkling like diamonds, lips drained to palest lilac. 'You believe you are ready, Jacob Benson, son of Lucian. But I fear you do not know real sacrifice, true loss. Only with that knowledge burnt into your heart will Excalibur come to answer your request. Your witnessed losses have been

no more than accidental, unjudged, and without true cause. Hence, your grief, your anger at what you believe to be unfair. The King's Blade cannot be yours to command,' she hissed with each tentative step Jacob took towards her. 'I have seen men and women die for this blade. Memories from over a thousand years passed to me as an incarnation, the line of Sir Bedivere often failing their duties...and *fleeing*. I see only fear in you, Jacob. Not *focus*.' The ice beneath Jacob's feet began to crack, stopping him in mid-stride. 'Which will you be?' Shards of broken ice spread out from Mary's position like cracks on glass. Ana leapt into Geraint's arms, with her face buried into his chest.

Jacob paused and took in a lungful of air. 'M'lady, this is not the tranquil sight my father and I met only days ago. You...you are not yourself.' He trembled as Mary's pupils flashed rich amber. He stretched out an arm, pleading for mercy. 'What, pray, have *you* lost?' Cassidy's eyes burnt bright for a second, then petered out with a slow blink, giving way to a stream of fresh tears.

'Everything,' the Lady of the Lake sobbed. 'My closest friend, my own life, now...*Luke*.' Geraint and Ana broke apart in alarm on hearing Luke's name. Luke Allen has perished? How? The couple frantically exchanged glances. 'Aisha and his son now walk this life alone, while he passes on to the next life. I, however, still stand in this form, but cannot see him, watch over him, or

guide him after all these years. It was to be expected, still...' She choked on her remaining words.

'Loss is a part of life,' Jacob concluded for her, edging closer. 'Luke said you were his former lover, a girlfriend, an *ex*? You never stopped loving him, even after death and his forging of a new life with the knight of Sir Palamedes, the birth of young Richard, and the new line of knights,' his voice croaked with dared presumption.

A vulnerability spread across Mary's face, her heart uncomfortably exposed. She clenched her fists and dashed her tears away with a tight scrunch of her face. 'I cared so much for Aisha Hussin, I truly did, but I cannot deny your words. They were happy, and that was all that mattered. Now there is only sadness.'

'Aisha and little Richard Allen have their futures, m'lady. There will always be those who watch over them.' Jacob gestured back to the knight of Sir Geraint and Braithwaite, standing proudly by his side. 'All is not lost in this fight. Let me prove it to you.' He raised his wooden staff once more, taken aback by its immediate transformation into its steel form.

'Very well, young knight of Sir Bedivere. Please fulfil your sworn oath of witnessing and understanding true sacrifice. Believe in the reason and rationale of one's desired passing. Take your blade, and drive it through

my heart,' Mary commanded, her tone dry and emotionless.

'What?' Jacob's mouth lay open. 'I...I can't.'

'It is my wish, young Mr Benson. My only request and thus your trial. What are you prepared to sacrifice for Excalibur?' Mary remained unfazed. Jacob's blade trembled wildly. 'Do it. Show me no fear. Spare me, *save me,*' Mary jarred again.

'There has to be another way.'

'There is no other instruction, knight of Sir Bedivere!' The ice began to give way, water welling through the cracks, Jacob feeling his weight sink lower. 'Sacrifice. True sacrifice,' her voice ordered in a chorus of a thousand, and in a dizzying moment, Jacob cried out and thrust his sword forward blindly, feeling first the soft resistance of flesh, then only the weak pressure of fluid as he opened his eyes. Mary's once corporeal form was a perfectly preserved mannequin of water, breaking apart like the seams of a burst dam and splashing spectacularly down by Benson's feet. He stood motionless, gasping. In the pool forming upon the fractured ice now lay a small sprig of thorn, almost too delicate to touch. He crouched down to inspect it, prodding it with his blade, tumbling onto his backside when it morphed into the brilliance of Excalibur. 'The bringer of death and rebirth lies in your hands, Jacob

Benson, knight of Sir Bedivere.’ Mary’s familiar voice drifted across the gentle breeze. ‘But the storm of the Thirteenth has now risen, the right hand of King Arthur himself, the dutiful knight of Sir Percival. To vanquish the right hand is to take to arms and *stand as one*.’ Her voice faded away in the breeze.

Jacob found his feet, slid across the now melting ice, and seized Excalibur, its sapling form returning. He turned to an astonished Geraint and Ana, locked once more in a tight embrace. ‘How soon can we get to Manresa?’

Chapter 20

Manresa, Catalonia – Spain

19th September 2022 AD

It was Aisha. Adam was certain of it. Barely a shred of evening sun had managed to break through the brutal storm clouds swirling above. The occasional shudder of thunder and pooling flashes of lightning shook Manresa, enveloped in its own unnatural microclimate. The knight of Sir Palamedes had hung her head low, sombrelly marching with the Catalan guards up to the Santa Cova, no staff, no hint of resistance. Allen crawled closer to the rushing riverbank, parted some reeds for a better look, to see Aisha's green hijab disappearing behind the Santa Cova's formidable doors, flanked by yet more guards standing obediently to attention. Four, maybe five or six, Adam quickly counted—not insurmountable odds, the glow of his blue flame shield beginning to coil around his wrist in anticipation.

'They're taking her to the mayoress.' Cleo slid to Adam's side. 'Do you see Luke?' Adam shook his head, still scouting the terrain. 'Maybe he escaped? Is he back at Pont Vell with whatever remains of the Followers of Palamedes and the refugees? We should go back and regroup,' she urged. Adam remained steadfast; the fleeting look of sorrow on Aisha's face as she passed through the Santa Cova walls filled his heart with pain, an ache that drove deep into his stomach, sending his

mind into a desperate, nearly untameable frenzy. Cleo's reassuring hand on his shoulder was the only anchor that held back a torrent of tears. 'Adam. She'll be fine, Aisha will be fine. But we can't risk charging the main entrance to the Santa Cova. It'll bring every armed guard in Manresa down upon us. Come on, let's....' She was mid-turn when she noticed Adam crawl closer to the fierce waters of the Cardener River, stretching out his hand with a fierce grimace just as a loose branch swept by. Once it was in his hand, however, the colour drained from Cleo's face, recognising the unmistakable form of a knight's staff, the blade of Sir Galahad, now cold and alone in the grip of its owner's younger brother. The frenzied thoughts continued, but Adam didn't yield to any outburst. He merely screwed his eyes tightly shut and clamped his jaw with a deep, visceral rage. Once the moment passed, a flash of Sacred Band blue lit up his pupils.

'How do you propose we get inside, Cleo?' Adam looked menacingly at the high stone walls of the Santa Cova, face flushed with a controlled fury. Cleo studied the thrashing river waters and noted a calmer section several metres downstream, studded with broken brickwork from the destroyed bridges.

'Follow me.' She tugged on Adam's sleeve. 'And when I say *hold on tight*, I mean it.'

The moment Mayoress Sofia Pescador stepped out from the shadows of the main vestibule. Aisha wanted to lunge at her shivering, ghostly frame—claw, bite, kick—anything and everything her body had to give, spurred by vengeance. Not even the slick black blade of the Thirteenth knight, its cursed properties coursing through the mayoress's body in bruised blotches, was enough to deter her. She jolted forward, barely restrained by the two brutish armed guards holding her. *'Murderer!'* she wailed.

'Come, come now, my fellow knight. While it was never my intention to incur the wrath of those remaining of the Round Table, here we stand, together. Perhaps with a little penance, you will come to learn the error of your ways...the ways of all the former Knights of King Arthur.' Sofia drifted gently back. 'Here in Manresa, Saint Ignatius of Loyola spent a year of his life in full service to the Lord, quietly reflecting on the sins he had committed and, indeed, those imposed on others by vicious and cruel rules. In the face of our beloved and celebrated King Philip II, he sought a different vision for Spain, for Catalonia. He came across the people known here as the *Alumbrados*, those not too dissimilar to my own family born of King Anfortas, and believers of a faith far broader and more accepting than the myopic Inquisition. Persecuted, of course...but not forgotten.' She spoke with chilling clarity, the clip of her heels echoing on the vestibule's marble floors. Aisha's vexation settled for a moment, as she was hauled past

fresco after fresco, seemingly a Catholic celebration and reverence, but on closer inspection, more profound. The rule of three kept appearing again and again, cumulating in the emblem of three crosses. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one could consider...had it not been for the sharpened tail of a serpent peeking from the foot of the cave door right before them. 'Behind this door lies the Cave of Saint Ignatius, our city's saviour, *my saviour*.' The mayoress pressed a hand against the sunflower intricately chiselled in the marble before it. She beckoned a haggard old man dressed in monastic sackcloth to come forward from the back of the group. 'Padre General of the Jesuit Order. If you please.' She prompted towards the imposing door lock. The monk hurried, fumbling the iron keys and finally clunking the correct one into place.

'Saint Ignatius. He was a knight?' Aisha composed herself.

'A knight? *Cielos!* No. No, my dear. He was an ordinary, pious, and loyal man, that is what made him special. No member of the Round Table or its blood, nor was my own line of Anfortas...for Sir Percival sired no children. A true martyr to the faith right until the end. But he bequeathed the legacy to our Fisher King on his deathbed, thus to me. Only, without this marvellous blade you see before you now. At least, for most of my ancestors, that is true. I so often prayed in silence to this altar, wondering how much sooner my people's

misfortunes could have been lifted if only Saint Ignatius's teachings had been taken, well, a little more literally.' The mayoress gave a crooked smile, ushering Aisha inside the dimly lit cave. 'You'll notice, all around you, tributes to your King Arthur's reign. See, the dragon adorning the floor, the three crosses symbolic of three precious relics never dared spoken of—a statue of immense power, a necklace laced with greed, and indeed, the mighty Sword of Swords itself, Excalibur. The saint prayed to these relics...this *trinity*. A potential saviour to us all, but alas, it was never realised.'

'You think that this unholy trinity was a saviour?' Aisha curdled. 'Untold death and destruction at the hands of Morgan le Fay and her White Dragon knights? How do you think Spain's empire flourished? It was undoubtedly one of the finest examples of the Sorceress's supreme influence on the world, and so many paid the price.'

'Sí, sí, you are correct, Señora Hussin...' the mayoress chuckled.

'*Hussin-Allen*,' Aisha spat back.

'Ah, *perdón*. Sí. Hussin-Allen, but no longer, I hear. So ... *tragico*. But, as I was saying, the trinity was indeed not to be our saviour, nor King Philip II's, perhaps no one's. So, what are Manresa and Catalonia left with?' Sofia swept her hand across several loose sheets of parchment lying neatly across the altar. 'Through

Ignatius's wider teachings, it came to me that there was a greater power, even greater than that of the King's Blade, one that could secure our future no matter what the adversary. And it lay here, dormant for centuries.' The same poisonous smile crept across her face. 'No longer.'

'Impossible. Excalibur lives! With or without my husband, it will find its new owner and be your undoing!' came Aisha's throaty, rasping response. She pulled free from her restraints and charged several steps towards the mayoress, only to be stopped in her tracks by the tip of the Sir Percival blade.

'Now, now, Señora *Hussin-Allen*. A defenceless knight should know better than to challenge another without their sword,' the mayoress teased with a quick glance towards her guards, one holding the confiscated staff of Sir Palamedes, the other the staff of Sir Gaheris. 'I do hope to return yours to you one day. But let us see if you can cleanse yourself of your own guilt here in this most devout of places before I draw such a conclusion.' She pushed her way past Aisha, both guards in tow. 'A year is a heartbeat, Sir Palamedes. I'm sure you will come to educate your soul far quicker than Saint Ignatius,' came her parting shot, as the pair of guards closed the heavy-set door, the Order General bolting the lock shut.

‘This is absurd!’ Adam yelled over the turbulent winds howling in his ears. He dared a look down at the stark concrete and cliff stone, now a good hundred metres below, and tightened his grip around Cleo’s shoulders.

‘Ouch! Not so tight, Adam. We are almost there.’ Cleo bit her bottom lip, reaching high for the stone window mantle. The instant her rough fingers grasped its edge, it crumbled, causing Adam to shriek, blue spear summoned and struck hard into the bricks in support. ‘Sorry. Thanks,’ Cleo panted.

‘Don’t mention it,’ Adam jostled back. ‘Care to try again before we plummet to our deaths?’ Cleo stretched high once more, achieved a firmer grip on the mantle ledge, hauled herself up, and found strong footing. Adam shimmied further along and crouched in the far corner, catching his breath. ‘Still reckon taking on the full Catalan Guard would have been preferable,’ he wheezed.

‘Quite a view, mind.’ Cleo gestured to the shady horizon and the rust-red peaks of Monserrat, spared briefly from the tempest still whirling above. She twisted back cautiously to the stained glass window and squinted for a glimpse inside. ‘Two guards, I think. Both, erm...’

‘What?’ Adam pressed his nose against the colour panes. ‘Armed? Because honestly, I don’t care whether there’s a dozen all with MK-47s at this point, we’ll engage!’ His feet slipped on some fresh bird muck, causing him to recoil back into his corner like a frightened spider. ‘Just break the window and...’

‘They appear to have knight’s staffs, blades?’ Cleo puzzled, making out the boisterous Catalan pair playfully jousting with the staffs. One mocked as he pretended to be impaled by the other, melodramatically falling to the ground in anguish. ‘If only they knew,’ Cleo tutted.

Adam pulled from his belt his brother’s rescued staff, shut his eyes, and tried to imagine Violet was by his side, instructing him on the magical matters of Sacred Band and Round Table knights. He prayed both for the summoning of Sir Galahad’s blade, and that Jonathan had made far more progress on the subject than he had when the wood remained wood. He gruffed a sigh. ‘Perhaps we could educate them?’ came a wry grin. Cleo responded, and with a muscular punch, shattered the glass. The pair swooped inside. Before either guard could react, Allen had hurled a blue spear through the shoulder of one of them, following through with a square punch to his jaw. Cleo tossed the second guard effortlessly onto the bronze statue of an angel perched by the cave door, the guard’s impact leaving a slight dent in the seraphic kneecaps. ‘I’ll take those, thank you,’ Adam gloated, seizing the reclaimed staffs.

'That statue looks old and revered. Apologies.' Cleo knelt by the angel's side.

'So was the window,' Adam chirped, adrenaline still in full flow. 'Now, where's...'. His sentence was cut short by the thumping from behind the thick pine door. 'Aisha! Through there.' No further instruction was needed as Cleo slammed her full body weight hard into the frame. A single attempt and the iron lock buckled, along with the hinges. 'Subtle.' Adam rolled his eyes. Cleo was immediately greeted with a warm embrace from Aisha.

'Luke, Aisha. Where's Luke?' Cleo tried to calm her, brushing back Aisha's dark brown strands of hair, which had sprung loose from the hijab. Adam needed no answer from his brother's spouse. Her sorrowful expression was a symphony of mourning. The only word she could utter was little Richard's name, before burying her face back into Cleo's chest. 'The mayoress? Where is Sofia Pescador?'

'We'll find her,' Adam promised soberly. 'Aisha, get clear of Manresa. Find your followers outside of the city and leave immediately, understand?' Before the knight of Sir Palamedes could counter, he pressed the three wooden staffs into her hands. 'These are your responsibility now, Aisha...from Luke to young Richard, the line of Sir Galahad must live on. For Gary Willis, knight of Sir Gaheris, and...'

'For Sir Palamedes.' Aisha wiped her grief off her smudged cheeks and nodded. 'Wait, the mayoress, she mentioned something...something about the blade of Sir Percival and Excalibur.' She rushed back inside the cave towards the altar. 'These parchments, written by Saint Ignatius, contain his spiritual teachings, passed down through his own order of Jesuit priests.' She scattered the pages. 'The mayoress spoke of a power greater than the King's Blade itself...above the trinity of the Blade combined with the Palladium and the Necklace of Harmonia. I can't decipher it, though, for it is in an older Spanish tongue.' She ran a finger along a single line of text.

Adam picked up a sheet, frowned. *Stronger than Excalibur?* He furrowed his brow. Cleo leant over his shoulder, eyes narrowing, muttering a loose translation in English.

'Let me try,' she offered.

Chapter 21

Manresa, Catalonia – Spain

20th September 1524 AD

From the writings of Saint Ignatius: spiritual teachings

I shall never question my faith and duty to our Holy God. Our Lord. From the rising of the sun each morning, to its highest point in the sky, to its setting, I swear I shall devote my life to him. This is the way of Christ, his only son, who recognised during his time as a mortal upon this earth that life was a cycle of sin and of learning. I ask all those who choose to follow these teachings to listen to the three primary thoughts offered each day, one of the self, one of the good, and one of the evil, for only with this trinity can one truly understand what it is to be human and to have a choice.

Choice. Such a potent word carries with it the essence of humanity and its future. I find myself reciting here in my solitude an old memory from when I was a child, long before my pilgrimage to the Holy City of Rome, for this memory came not from a follower of God, but a crippled man. A king, the once-fabled Fisher King to his people of Castle Corbenic, was a bringer of plenty. The seas were awash with bounty, the soils richer. In his dying days, I came across his daughter, the beautiful Princess Isabella, whose eyes had witnessed the atrocities of our own Spanish Inquisition, and brought upon herself the title of *Alumbrada*...one of those who

believe in more than one single holy doctrine, but whose faith has never wavered. She welcomed my family into the castle, now a crumbling shell of its former glory, its lands cursed by the legendary Spear of Destiny, the lance that pierced Christ himself. This torture that befell Princess Isabella's home had undoubtedly skewed her own perception of God's mercy, and as her once proud King Anfortas came to fear the day he would meet his maker, the princess encouraged him to speak of another tale of penance. A tale of knights from the Isles of Britannia, a mystic language entwined within our own Catholic teachings.

One knight, by the name of Sir Percival the Just, would travel from his home shores to our Spanish lands on a pilgrimage much like my own, many centuries earlier. He had renounced his native faith, a faith of magic and paganism, and come to learn of sanctuary through our Lord. His once mighty sword was plunged into a stone in token of his sins, for he had let down his own king, his people thrown into a bitter war of power—good versus evil, right versus wrong. He had chosen no side in this war, and felt isolated because of it. Duties abandoned, he found peace here in Manresa, passing this newfound faith and thus his title to the Anfortas bloodline. But alas, they were to be Knights of the Round Table with no sword, for that sword was his sin, and should anyone come to carry this blade, they would come to carry that same heavy burden for which Sir Percival himself had been admonished—selfish, insular, wallowing in self-

pity. This honour remained a secret within the Anfortas line for many a year after the knight's passing, remembered only in a reoccurring dream that each King of Corbenic held as true...one of struggle, temptation, and duty between a kind, open heart and one that is closed and diseased. A parallel with Jesus himself, some came to call it, and the path you choose reveals not only your true self but also your destiny. For Princess Isabella's father, this became a passion in his later years, as vivid visions of a princess, a perpetual virgin like Sir Percival himself, would pull the sword from the stone and unleash its incorrigible spirits. Whether this would be a queen of Corbenic or of his native England, one could never determine, but it shone as bright as the holy sun. Once the Inquisition came, and the lens of cruel judgement focused on those who chose to vary their choice in faith. Princess Isabella feared the worst, that Spain had fallen to the Sir Percival blade, that somehow it had been retrieved. Our nation would come to face the same bitter infighting as King Arthur's Britain. Our own King Ferdinand II, as glorious as his rein may appear in its apparent unification of Spain, has not been without turbulence and bloodshed. Such a mania might pass from king to king, just as a Knight of the Round Table would pass their blade from child to child. The princess would come to accept the trials of her lands and avoid power at all costs, her choice to follow a righteous path, aiding others that who persecuted, free from obsession.

My stay here in Manresa has allowed me the time to further explore these Arthurian mythologies. The dying Anfortas would speak of legends shared by Sir Percival himself as to the rise of many a great empire, from Greece to Rome. A statue born of purest love from the Grecian Goddess of Wisdom, Athena, and its ability to forge limitless protection as the cradle of an empire, its seed. A charmed necklace forged from the wrath of the God of War, Ares— guilt and punishment the opposites to purest love. A cycle of destruction wielded by a mysterious witch by the name of Morgan le Fay, an orchestrator in the fall of Camelot and the bane of humanity ever since. Only a third sacred relic, the Bringer of Death, Excalibur, may halt this cycle. A trinity, it was called...birth, life, and death...the foundation of our very Catholic faith today, only cast from spirits known to people far older than I. Thus, I recall asking, why should we fear the blade of Sir Percival if another blade far stronger exists? Surely nothing on holy Earth can defeat the Bringer of Death, the beauty of inevitability, and the upholder of rebirth? It was at this question that the Fisher King would tremble, cowering in fear as though his maker stood over him before his time was up, and weep melancholically. For the King's Blade needed an *opponent*, its own opposite when cast by the wisest of sages, Merlin. This blade would sit at the right-hand side of the king, the Thirteenth of his company, the most honourable, the purest, the most just. Not the unlucky number that we have come to know, but in fact the mediator, the judge of all events.

Should anyone dare to wield a weapon so powerful as Excalibur, and not see fit to walk a life of integrity and good, but bow to the evil spirit voice inside, however rare, then there would forever be another to undo such misgivings. With a heavy heart, I have come to the conclusion that despite my unshakeable faith, such indomitable forces must be watched, and my teachings and counsel will pass from one order of Jesuits to another, a message hidden in these words for each Superior General to acknowledge for the remainder of time.

Strange too that it is of late, I have found my own dreams plagued with similar notions of temptation. The mystic female draws from the stone a blade of black brilliance, while a monastery burns to ashes around her. Only in my dream, this blade was stolen from the Virgin by another queen far less pure, touted as a prize to win the affections of a suitor and mend a broken heart. The Virgin Queen remains dignified, defiant to the end, and the sun shines forever on her. She raises both her arms high and shouts to the heavens, *¡Armada! ¡Armada!*

Chapter 22

Bath – England

21st September 2022 AD

‘You’re certain that’s what Adam wants?’ Chris Wood preened his teeth in the rearview mirror, inspecting them for any traces of pesto from the salad he’d managed to wolf down during the long drive from Edinburgh. ‘I thought you said the Sacred Band was to keep a low profile? At least until the Inquiry was over?’

‘Think we’re past politics,’ Alex Allen replied, pulling his Range Rover close to the main door of Prior Park and intermittingly checking his phone for messages, muttering impatiently. He thumbed a text to Fernando, announcing their arrival.

‘I fail to see when we are ever past politics,’ Chris rebuffed. ‘Still, environmental carnage across the continent might do it.’

‘Environmental? Sure,’ Alex remarked with a raised eyebrow, continued to jab his mobile screen. ‘Damn thing!’ It buzzed with Fernando’s name, but he couldn’t fathom how to unlock the phone and answer. ‘Thought you said this model would be easy to use?’ he snipped.

‘For those of us living in the twenty-first century, it is...’ Chris snatched the phone away, unlocked it with a

simple swipe and answered. 'Hi, Fernando. *Ciao, Ciao.* Yes, we're here.' You inside the main hall?' There was a pause, Chris blocking his other ear, straining to follow the discussion. 'Where? No...no we're not at Bristol Airport. We're at Prior Park. At what point did you tell us...? Jez, never mind. Be there in, I don't know, twenty minutes?' He fought off the cold, judging gaze of his partner. 'Yes. See you in a bit. No, no, Alex is not happy, but I'll let you handle that when we get there.' He hung up before Alex could seize the phone and spit fury down the line. 'Bristol Airport. Ana Braithwaite has arranged some transport, it would appear.'

Alex folded his arms tightly with scorn. 'A UK Government chartered aircraft entering into Spanish territory in this current climate. Wonderfully subtle,' he huffed.

'Thought you said we were past politics?' Chris smirked. 'I'll drive, shall I?'

A modest-sized cargo plane was waiting for them in a hangar, neutrally painted apart from a lone World Food Programme insignia printed on the tail wing. 'Best we could do at such short notice.' Ana Braithwaite greeted Alex and Chris with a warm hug. 'Catalonia has refused aid from any specific nation, but for a smattering of positive public relations across Europe, has agreed to

allow a batch of the ASCLEPIUS vaccines and much-needed supplies to be delivered to the rest of Spain.’ She wiped a snuffle of sadness away. ‘It’ll be our only shot at getting you all across the border.’

‘Us *all*?’ Alex asked. Geraint South hurried forward from beneath the plane’s wing, glancing at his Rolex, offering a brief handshake to the pair. ‘Exactly how many of us are travelling to Manresa? Bookworm,’ he acknowledged playfully.

‘As few as possible, sadly,’ Geraint’s tone was sombre. ‘After Aisha’s Followers of Palamedes were expelled from the city and the international press began broadcasting in earnest the treatment of refugees in Manresa, the Mayoress Sofia has had her fortress in near lockdown. The sudden arrival of blue fire warriors on her doorstep risks escalating the situation.’ He checked his watch once more, and gave a wave to Fernando, busy fussing on his phone and pacing in circles. Milo Conti and Tommy Brooks seemed eager to board. ‘Fernando has worked some of his magic with some contacts abroad, mainly Sacred Band members of France and Germany...few Spanish and Italians. Understandably, after XENO-20, many are reluctant to get involved, no matter how grave the situation is. The best estimate is you’ll have twelve, maybe fifteen, pairs.’

‘Well, Alex is always saying we’re not spending enough time with each other...could do with a break,’ Chris humoured with a loose arm around Alex’s shoulders. ‘Circumstances would ideally be different, I admit.’

Alex feigned a smile and focused on Fernando. ‘Heard from my nephews? Are they safe?’ he asked.

‘Not yet. But you would have seen the news...several explosions across bridges in and out of Manresa, Catalan guards daring to open fire. Serious. Even for Sacred Band and us knights,’ Geraint confessed candidly. ‘Figured the sooner you get out there, the better.’

‘And...the *real* magic?’ Alex squinted, trying to determine the slight figure of Jacob Benson, khaki camouflage trousers and matching shirt, firm grip on the all too familiar slender thorn sprig. ‘Excalibur has chosen its new heir of Sir Bedivere?’

‘In the most dramatic of styles, yes,’ Ana interjected. ‘We’ll let the young second son of Lucian Benson share the details. Go easy on the lad, though, it’s been quite the inaugural trip here to Britain.’

‘I bet. Perhaps we can exchange some stories about the trials and tribulations we’ve all come to know about the Sir Bedivere line and their hit-and-miss accountability over the centuries,’ Alex grunted dismissively.

'I recall a younger brother once who was only too eager to abandon his duties in search of a more stable life...yet here he stands, *Mr Gulf-Grunt*.' Geraint's pithy comeback struck Alex by surprise; a pinch of the brow soon relaxed into a mild chuckle of acknowledgement. 'However, we know not what else this blade of Sir Percival may be capable of, and Mary Cassidy shared her own words of warning in her exchange with young Jacob. The storm of the Thirteenth, she said...' He paused, observing the darkening skies overhead. 'King Arthur's right-hand man, and to defeat him we must all *stand as one*.'

'Always a given,' Chris muttered. 'Anything else from our most mysterious of muses?'

'Only that she's...' Geraint's voice croaked and began to fail.

'What, Geraint?' Alex pressed. The knight bowed his head reverently and leant on his staff before slipping an arm under his fiancée's.

'I would go with you, Alex. You know I would. But my duty is here with Ana, and she cannot risk travel to Manresa, not after all her subterfuge in arranging this expedition. But please, the moment you land, find Luke,' Geraint spoke sharply, but cryptically. Alex's face turned cold. He shook the knight of Sir Geraint's hand before

marching past him towards the back of the cargo plane, stopping to catch a quick word with Conti and Brooks.

‘There’s something you’re not telling us, isn’t there?’ Chris drew in close to Geraint and Ana. Neither offered support. ‘About Luke, about Mary Cassidy.’ Still the pair remained mute. ‘Fine. What would you have the Sacred Band do in the absence of Adam Allen...should we not find him or his brother?’

Ana nodded towards the small television screen overhead, broadcasting disturbing images of Catalan soldiers now crossing the rivers of Manresa in a savage attempt to purge its lands of all foreigners, refugees or not. The Catalan Guard’s rifles were hot and trigger-ready as the inflatables bobbed across turbulent waters. Static interference in the signal followed as the aggressive hands of the guards shoved camera crews out of their path, lenses shattering, harsh bellowed orders audible. *¡Afuera! ¡Afuera!* ‘Get to the helpless, the homeless. Protect them the best you can from the Catalan forces. I fear they know not what they do, but are slaves to the orders of the corrupt mayoress. Minimise any retaliation of aggression...you and the Sacred Band might just come out of this horror as heroes,’ she offered her bleak words of comfort.

‘And who shall lead them?’ Chris queried.

'I'm sure the Lady of the Band will answer this call.'
Geraint gestured proudly towards Violet Butcher, arms wrapped around Alex, visibly nervous. 'Cleo travelled to Manresa with Aisha, Adam, and Luke, and is too out of contact. She fears for her safety, despite the good Lady of Ancient Thebes being a decent two millennia old!' he quipped. 'Stand as one,' came the sage reminder. Chris nodded, hugged Ana, and then moved to join his partner on board.

'Right-hand man of King Arthur, huh? Sir Percival. Surely no match for the weapon of the king himself?' Chris offered a parting thought.

'For my sins under the thrall of the White Dragon, never underestimate the strength of the *right-hand man*.'
Geraint smiled, and pointed through the porthole window towards the legacy of Sir Lancelot in Jonathan Worthington, who sat sternly, broad shoulders tensed, eyes closed in deep thought. 'Not always the puppets they appear to be,' the poignant reminder of Lawrence's righteous actions against Morgan le Fay atop Mount Sinai. The fate of the world is in the balance, and the former enemy proves no one is beyond redemption. 'It is strange, for all my years of research into our bloodlines, of descendants from the Round Table and the passing of staffs from generation to generation, it was always my interpretation that Sir Lancelot was set to be the cursed member. His infidelity with Queen Guinevere, his tithe to Morgan le Fay, and his ultimate role in our Round Table dysfunction. Yet, after all these

centuries, his line has stood, both through offspring and the noble adoptions of several sons and daughters. There was history educating us all that the *left* was to be vilified. *Gauche, sinister, anti-clockwise* even. We can have so many leaders, fighters, presidents...but can't even find a pair of scissors that work!' he joked.

Chris shot him a puzzled look. 'Make good dictators, too, I recall,' he chuckled. 'Take it, your assumption is that if Sir Percival took the right seat, Sir Lancelot in all his unrivalled glory sat to the left of the king?'

'Who's really to know? So much fable and fantasy. Perhaps though, in a time of fervently held pagan beliefs, what appeared to be a position of honour was in fact more...*conflicting*,' Geraint mused. 'One element is certain. Morgan le Fay in her infatuation with Sir Lancelot would have gifted the legendary chivalrous name a high placing at the king's table, albeit a round one.' His final words were drowned out somewhat by the kick of the plane engines as they roared into life.

'Presto, Mr Wood!' Fernando rushed to Geraint and Ana's side. 'We only have this one slot for takeoff, Signor,' he said with a bow. 'Those of the Sacred Band will meet you on the outskirts of Barcelona. Buona fortuna! Oh, and Signor, please have Milo and Tommy come back alive...Celtic FC's season has only just begun.' Chris rolled his eyes.

Chapter 23

Manresa, Catalonia – Spain

21st September 2022 AD

The battle was fierce. Aisha peeked through the slim cracks in the rustic stone that fortified the base of the Santa Cova, popping her head above the walls periodically, only to tuck it back down tightly next to Adam the instant a streak of lightning charged down, singeing the air with flashes so bright they starred her eyes. The Cardener River continued to churn, several of the Catalan guard boats struggling to remain stable as they ploughed forward feverishly. Warning shots were fired from their bows, nicking the paving stones inches from the bundled crowds of refugees who were trapped between the turbulent waters and the ever-growing maleficent swell of storm clouds above, the city consumed by a vicious microclimate growing colder, bleaker, louder. Straining to see through the shades, she spotted a final guard boat awaiting departure, headed up by a boyish-looking Catalan appearing less and less certain of their crossing with each lightning strike. Six, maybe seven guards attempted to untether their transport, all arguing. ‘Down there,’ Aisha had to shout above the fierce and muscly winds picking up. ‘It’s the only chance to cross the river.’ She offered a tame glow from her blade and pointed.

‘Good, then get down there,’ Adam barked back. ‘Sure you can handle a few guards?’

‘You and Cleo should come. We can regroup and figure out how...’ A volley of rounds from the guards and collective screams from the far side of the river overthrew her argument.

‘No time, Aisha. The mayoress must be stopped—and she’s still here in the city, somewhere.’ Adam shuffled forward, monitoring a familiar blue tinge from just beyond Mount Monserrat. ‘We agreed. You get out, and return to England by whatever means you can...your followers won’t be far. Seek them out, and get home!’ A heavy crack of thunder sounded from deep within the heart of Manresa, Cleo sourcing it immediately skyward from the Basilica Santa Maria, perched at the highest point of the city.

‘Touch of piety in the darkened sorceress yet, it would seem.’ Cleo tried to shield herself from the whirling, sandy blasts of the storm. A silvery grey haze settled above the holy site, forming the eye of the storm and rippling black shimmers in evenly timed waves. ‘Nowhere to run from up there.’ She turned back to her companions.

‘Nowhere for the victims down there to run, either.’ Adam remained fixed on the blue tint in the distance, growing more intense. A warmth began to spread

through him, a hint of hope that help was perhaps on the way. *Jonathan*, he said to himself. No sooner had he comforted himself than a twist of doubt cut deep inside, his partner amongst a line of Sacred Band warriors for the first time, inexperienced and, thanks to him, unpaired. He clung to his belief in Violet, that despite her shortened time to help train both the titles of warrior and knight with which Worthington had been blessed, she had forged the fearless fighter he knew his partner could be. Far more reassuring was the thought that Fernando had seen sense and called upon Milo and Tommy to lead any charge...Hell, even Uncle Alex and Chris Wood, if it meant Jonathan's protection. His father's stern words would then echo, shared when Adam was of a tender age himself and sent on far-flung missions to Libya and the Middle East. 'A Band warrior's instinct is to *protect*, not always to win. An instinct that will always prevail.' The purpose of bonding, of a loving partnership, an oath sworn. An oath sworn and shared; thus, he could no more seek absolute protection of Jonathan than he could ask him to break his own vow. Where he stood, Jonathan would stand. 'Aisha, make for the far side of the river...and head for that.' He gestured to the soft blue glow against the midnight dark. Aisha followed his sight. 'Reinforcements, I'm hoping.'

'Violet?' Cleo chimed in, turning and leaning over the wall anxiously. 'Knew she wouldn't stay away for long.' She smiled as Adam gave a discontented grunt.

Aisha tucked both Gary's and Luke's staffs under her arm, a gentle kiss against the smoothed bark of the Sir Galahad staff. 'I'll make it,' she promised.

'No! No!' the young Catalan guard flayed about on the inflatable as the rough river currents made the boat lurch from side to side, preventing several other guards from finding their footing. 'We'll capsize!' he snapped before muttering a disparaging word or two in an honest assessment of the mayoress's orders. The group failed to notice Aisha Hussin leap from behind one of their armoured vehicles, her blade clipping two guards above the knee, a firm heel into the gut of a third, then a brisk knight light pulse pushing the remainder overboard, leaving them all bobbing and sputtering in the gushing waters. She seized the engine chord string, wrenching its propeller into life, and made for the far shore. Several strong splashes breached the inflatable's low-lying edges and submerged her feet, its pace weakening metres from land. She frantically swung her arms around as makeshift paddles, the craft tilting and groaning as more water poured in. Her activity drew attention from one of the guards on the shore, who yelled orders to a wider group to create a perimeter and fire *balas de fuego*—live bullets—should unrest persist. His threatening frame took a firm step towards the waters, gun tip levelled at her, demanding Aisha identify herself. The knight of Sir Palamedes continued to fight

the current, driving her staff deep beneath the waters and summoning the blade to act as anchor. Her drift slowed, the guard following her as she floated downriver.

‘Nombre?’ the burly guard repeated louder and louder. ‘Name, Señorita?’ Aisha froze, her mind blurring for a suitable response while desperate to stabilise her vessel.

‘Ai...Aisha,’ she croaked.

‘Aisha? *Refugiada?*’ the guard began to squeeze the trigger. Just over his shoulder, what was once a mellow blue shade had become vivid and bright. ‘*Refugiada?*’ the guard bellowed again, as an ultimatum.

Aisha dared crack a grin. ‘Thankfully, *yes,*’ she quipped. The tail of a blue-flamed spear sang its way from behind her aggressor, finding its mark beautifully between the guard’s shoulders. With a grimace, he buckled to his knees and then tumbled into the torrents. The freckly face of Tommy Brooks popped up from behind a shrubby bush. He brushed off caked mud from cheeks and sleeves.

‘Bloody mess up here!’ the coarse Glaswegian accent snipped. ‘What you doin’ out there, Lady Palamedes?’ his brow screwed up.

'I'll tell you if you can get me to the blessed shore, Mr Brooks!' Aisha fired back with both spite and delight. 'Find a rope or something.' She wrestled with the grip on her sword.

'Och aye. Right!' Tommy scouted, seemingly oblivious to the volleys of gunfire behind and what had become a standoff between the Catalan Guard and a neat row of Sacred Band blue flame shields that formed a nearly impenetrable line of defence for the cowering innocents. A random ricochet flew off one circle of flame towards Brooks. Aisha shouted a prompt warning, Tommy raising his shield in time to absorb its velocity. 'Phew, a close call, that.' He proceeded to plod up and down the shore for any form of a tether. 'Wait, I'll release another one of these here guard boats. Hold on,' he fuffed.

'Hurry!' Aisha gritted her teeth as the inflatable's bow stooped lower, waves crashing around her waist. She held her breath as the waters began to flow towards her neck, desperate to cling to both the staffs of Sir Gaheris and Sir Galahad, feeling them slip from beneath her arms. 'Tommy!' she gurgled, as the lash of a rope caught her hair.

'Grab hold of it!' Tommy urged. Aisha was unsure whether to relinquish her position and risk the rapids. 'Now!' Tommy hurled again, Aisha's increasing distress forcing her to abandon ship and coil the rope around

her wrist. The inflatable flipped, and rolled over several times before being dragged away by the rushing river. Tommy's boots immediately slipped on the riverbank mud, the squat man tumbling onto his backside and wincing to fight the pull. Aisha's face was blasted with the chill of the water, leaving her gasping for air. 'Don't let go, Aisha,' Brooks encouraged through gritted teeth. A quick glance above the crest of a wave had Hussin spot Milo Conti charging from the Sacred Band front line, reaching his partner and heaving his weight to counter. She felt her body dragged slowly, inch by inch the shore came, and to her relief, her feet found their ground. She waded, all three staffs in tow, collapsing unceremoniously on the bank, heaving out lungfuls of fluid. 'See. Had it all under control, I told ya.' Tommy remained flat on his back, head in Milo's lap, voice rendered lame and breathless.

Shouts from the Catalan Guard line-up sounded in unison. *¡Fuego!* A clean volley rained down onto the formidable band of blue. Several Sacred Band pairs, those more inexperienced, shunted back a few steps but still held. The rousing *We...are...Lions*. The chant became the reply with each salvo. Aisha could just make out Alex Allen and Chris Wood in the centre. To one side, Violet Butcher, her shield in startling red contrast to her peers, and the blade of Sir Bors on full display, arrested from action only by the soothing commands of Alex. On the other side, her protégé Jonathan Worthington, looking resplendent with a blue shield and single sword

blade, a twin, two siblings of Ares, neither acting as aggressors—everything the Sacred Band was destined to represent. Adam would be proud; his brother Luke and father Richard would have been proud.

‘They won’t stop, the guards.’ Aisha crawled to her feet. ‘The mayoress has them under her control. This curse of hers has spread far further than we’d feared.’

‘This Sir Percival blade? The *Tredici? Thirteenth?*’ Milo switched tongues. ‘Si, Alex and Chris said so on the plane. But...we have *Excalibur*, no?’

‘Excalibur?’ Aisha began to canter towards the back of the line, torn between engagement and keeping promises to Adam. ‘How?’

‘The Jamaican lad, Benson. Did his homework, looks like,’ Tommy spouted.

‘Jacob? But...’ Questions raced through Aisha’s mind. What was once her husband’s duty so swiftly passing to its rightful heritage sparked mixed emotions. The tears began to well when she shuffled through the fringes of the tightly packed refugees and neared Jacob Benson himself, looking both horrified and noble, if such a combination was possible. The instant he caught her gaze, she wrapped her arms around him, kissed him on both cheeks, and sobbed hard for what felt like forever.

'The King's Blade. You've been granted it,' she whimpered.

'I have...but...' Jacob struggled to explain the juxtaposed words of warning from the late Mary Cassidy. 'The Lady of the Lake, she said...' He was promptly interrupted by Tommy and his insistence that he and Milo should return to the defensive line unless there was a chink in the phalanx, and noting the groans of a few fresh-faced Sacred Band members now taking flesh wounds. 'Stand as one, she said,' he staggered out.

'Couldn't have put it better myself.' Tommy tugged on Milo's sleeve and urged the pair back to their positions. 'Could do with your assistance, knight of Sir Palamedes.'

Aisha held the three staves before her. Milo went to ask a question but was shushed by the knight. 'Where did you land?' she demanded. The Italian striker pointed towards Mount Monserrat, then towards the small gathering of her followers who had stubbornly remained in the environs of Manresa, tending to the injured and the sick. She acknowledged him with a grateful nod, and then placed both her hands firmly on Jacob's forearms. 'Whatever you've been told by Mary, the Lady of the Lake, Excalibur will always have its purpose. You'll discover it when the time is right, just as Luke did.' Her eyes moistened again as she spoke his name. 'For now, Adam and Cleo need you. It might be

all they have against Mayoress Sofia Pescador, and if Excalibur alone is not enough, at least you can...'

'Stand as one,' Jacob finished.

Hussin forced a smile, clocked the fraying tempers of Violet and the beast of belligerence nearly bursting out from deep inside. A hostile red-splashed knight light was hurled towards the Catalan guards, tossing several back like loose leaves on an autumn breeze. Alex and Chris were quick to quell her fury, mindful of the odd independent journalist or brazen international media outlet, their attention still bubbling from the sidelines. 'Tommy, Milo. Get Violet and Jonathan out of there, and take their place in the centre wall. They'll accompany Jacob to the city,' she ordered, moving to cut the remaining tethers of the harboured boats with her blade. 'Hope you can sail. Those are choppy waters.'

'I come from a Caribbean island, Mrs Hussin. Yes, I can sail.' Jacob looked offended. He looked over at the violent tempest swirling over Manresa's heart, clutched the sprig of thorn tight to his chest, and gulped. 'I...I would welcome the company, mind.'

Chapter 23

Manresa, Catalonia – Spain

21st September 2022 AD

Would the burden of Excalibur ever be shared? Should it have ever been shared? Adam rolled the question around through his head, attempting to stamp out the sting of pain when his brother's voice broke through in a hazy memory. The duty of Sir Bedivere's line throughout the centuries, ending cycle after cruel cycle, each empire raised by the Palladium and expanded through the avariciousness of the Necklace of Harmonia, tortured the knight's bloodline as the fate of millions, even billions, depended on their fortitude. Should Luke pass on to the afterlife, whatever form that would take for a fallen knight of Red or White, would Mary Cassidy be there to join him, to welcome him? It was her choice to place this burden upon his elder brother, and whilst the perils of the Palladium and its counterpart were finally broken once and for all, the King's Blade always had a purpose. Such a toll should have been shared, between the pair of siblings, brother to brother, as blood to blood, Adam began to fluster to himself. But no. Mary chose...and Adam had to convince himself she chose wisely. For only one born to the Sir Galahad line now stood before this freshly formed carnage, cut from the same magic that sat around the Round Table, and Adam was one of the Sacred Band, not a knight. No blade had been bequeathed to him, and no blessing

from the Grecian gods had granted him powers beyond that of any Son of Ares. He stumbled on a loose paving stone, blurting out a profanity, the thunder continuing to weave its way across dense troubled skies. What took his brother, Mack, years to master, the young Benson boy had to achieve in mere moments, if Luke's assessment of Excalibur's lineage was proven true. Far from solid foundations in times of crisis, Miss Cassidy, he murmured under his breath, Cleo striding further up and remaining several steps ahead on the path to the basilica. 'What?' she turned and shouted above the rumbles of the earth beneath them.

'Nothing. Keep moving,' Adam grated in reply. Blasts of electric white lightning shot down in relentless volleys, their tempo increasing the closer the pair got to the triple-vaulted archways. 'Almost as if the mayoress knows we're coming,' Allen softened, blue shield raised and deflecting fragments of stone and clods of erupted soil. Cleo opted for a more robust defence, ripping the side door from an abandoned car and holding it aloft, a tinny ring sounding as small chunks of the basilica walls rained down.

'She'll bring down this entire building!' Cleo gritted her teeth. She leapt backwards as the paving parted underneath, a chasm half a metre wide suddenly appearing before the duo and splitting its way along the forward walls like an instant moat. 'It's jumpable still.' She inspected the gap while crawling on hands and

knees. Adam pulled her back just as a lumpy piece of masonry crashed down, shearing the edge of the chasm. 'We'll have to go for it, Adam, otherwise...' She cast her gaze back towards Manresa city, every building wobbling like jelly, some collapsing in on themselves like playing cards, each quake resulting in screams from its residents, many swarming towards the blackened river waters, as desperate to leave their homes as once the migrants were to arrive. The fierce lashes from the Cardener River whipped them back, even the remaining Catalan guards now dashing for cover. 'Adam?'

Allen held his shield, Cleo nestled safely into his chest. A plucky guard boat fought its way across the raging river. At its bow, a shimmer of crimson light ringed, similar to his own forged defence. Violet. And if Violet was there, Jonathan would not be far behind, surely. Should even the mighty Excalibur fail, then the Sacred Band partners could stand together, fight together, *die* together if they must...that final thought alone triggered the familiar burn in Adam's shoulder, the wound inflicted by Iain Donnelly never fully healed, an absolute confliction of love and duty. A confliction Adam felt he could never recover from, until now. Anguish over his loss of Luke subsided for a second, replaced with the warmth of the certainty that in whatever manner, he'd be able to pass through and join his brother and father with both honour and joy in his heart.

‘Grab the rope!’ Violet ordered from the bow, Jacob Benson rummaging under the inflatable’s canvass covering for something resembling a mooring line. ‘Quickly! We can lasso that bollard.’ She squinted through the smoky, acrid mists at the city shore. Many dwellers had piled their way onto the riverbanks, frantically jostling for secure positions and shelter from storm winds howling their way through every street—gusts littering it with debris and lacerating exposed crowds. Benson felt the coarse, knotty line from beneath a bench, fashioned a loop from the rope end, and tossed it towards Butcher.

‘Better make this a good throw, Violet!’ Jonathan barked from the stern. The boat’s engine began to cough and splutter. ‘We’re failing back here.’ He gave several firm thumps on the hood, followed by a kick. Violet urged for a steady approach, which was not in Worthington’s power to grant as an angry wave crashed over the starboard side, throwing all three on their flanks, Benson barely remaining aboard. ‘Throw it, now!’

The first attempt splashed a good distance from the bollard. ‘Damn it,’ Butcher snapped. ‘Jon, switch with me, you’ve got to be better at throwing,’ she ordered.

‘Short bloody distances!’ Worthington snorted. ‘I kick a rugby ball more than I...’ His temper was snuffed out by another wave that soaked him to the skin. ‘Give it here.’

He groaned, his own attempt further from the mark than Violet's. 'Told you,' he snapped again, damp rope reined in and grazing his forearms as it coiled. The bow swerved in their favour, aligning neatly to the shore. Jon tossed the loop again, finally finding its target. The broad-shouldered Band warrior let out a cheer, answered by a booming response from the gun-grey heavens and a piercing bolt of lightning that blew the bollard clean from its roots. 'Ah, come on!' he sighed as the boat jeered sharply backwards. Its crew tipped over onto their backsides once again. 'We'll end up in the Mediterranean Sea at this rate!'

Jacob hauled himself to the side, spat out the acidic river water, and nearly vomited up the remains of whatever sat in his stomach. A fragment of a song, melodic, carried through the turbulent waters, a siren sweet enough to chance a forearm into its depths. As his cocoa skin slid down into the chilly waters, the voice became louder, but not familiar. '*Help us,*' he whispered softly but without fathomable reason. The river soothed, allowing Violet and Jonathan to find their footing and scramble for the mooring line in a final attempt at anchoring, then a friendly bump from the stern end propelled the vessel from the surf directly onto the muddy riverbank, the bow crunching down on shallow pebbles. The three flew forwards, Jonathan's weighty frame crushing Violet and Jacob.

‘Get off, you lug!’ Violet levered herself up with her staff, Worthington rolling flat on his back, heaving for breath, and moaning at the jab of his own staffs in his ribs. ‘How...how did we...?’ she puzzled. ‘Jacob?’

Benson patted around his coat for the slender thorn sprig, letting out a breath of relief upon finding it safe. ‘No idea.’ He shook his fuzzy hair free from dampness and muck. ‘Perhaps that Lady of the Lake still has a trick or two up her sleeve,’ he replied. Violet shot an incredulous look back. ‘Where to now?’ Jacob scouted the jagged remains of Manresa, blocking out the cries and wails from both sides of the river, flinching at every crack of thunder and surge of lightning that illuminated the clouds.

‘There.’ Jonathan pointed to the solo blue fire circle in front of the Santa Maria Basilica. ‘It’s Adam! With any luck, Cleo too.’ He nudged a relieved Violet. The twin blades began to vibrate in his hand, possessing a mind of their own as they clambered their way up the crooked and crumbling paths. Jonathan tightened his grip with every gingerly step, the staffs wrestling with their owner, magnetised. As unpleasant and unnerving as the experience was, it provided some comfort in knowing that at least the blade of Sir Lancelot marched forward towards an adversary without fear, even if their wielder, should the time come, was to be found wanting.

Chapter 24

Manresa, Catalonia – Spain

21st September 2022 AD

The Sacred Band was holding, in spite of increasingly erratic behaviour from the now-stranded Catalan guards, many of whom were beginning to flee in various directions as Manresa slowly became consumed by storm and shadow. Adam allowed his heart to swell with pride for an instant, stoically holding back tears, at least until Jonathan arrived looking suitably dishevelled but beaming. A tight embrace allowed him to weep softly into Worthington's shoulder without his partner noticing. 'The Band? Are they safe?'

'Humph. Define safe.' Jonathan cast a look back across the mounds of rubble and waste, the very foundations of the city itself tectonically tilting and swaying. 'But yes, still strong, Alex and Chris holding up. Refugees and any civilians who miraculously made that river crossing will at least have some defence, you can stand easy...'
Another block from the crumbling basilica fell down and crashed along the chasm edge, Jonathan and Adam both jumping back several paces. '...sorry, poor choice of words.'

'Uncle Alex and Chris Wood came?' Adam tried to settle his nerves.

‘Of course.’

‘And what of Jacob Benson?’ Adam’s query was answered as Jacob panted his way up the cobbled walkway, moments behind Jonathan and Violet in tow. Cleo dashed to Violet and flung her arms around her, Butcher shooting a sharp glance Jonathan’s way, reminding him that not all are as fit as a professional rugby player. ‘Excalibur?’ Adam dared ask. Benson opened his coat to reveal both the young sprig and his own staff of Sir Bedivere. Cleo caught Adam’s eye, still weary from the words of Saint Ignatius, that was clear, but accepting the team’s now limited options.

‘I take it that this Mistress of Evil is inside the church?’ Violet asked, scanning across the ledge. She fixed on the abandoned car after connecting Cleo’s makeshift shield. ‘Wait here,’ she commanded, dodging bricks and boulders.

‘Violet? What...where are you going?’ Cleo erupted. ‘There’s no other route across to the basilica, either driving or on foot.’ Her voice was choked by the rev of the car engine, Violet working her mechanic’s fingers with the hotwiring, ushering Adam, Jonathan, Jacob, and her partner inside. ‘Are you...?’

‘Crazy? Of course, that’s why you love me,’ Violet said confidently. ‘Get in.’ Adam squeezed in beside

Jonathan, arm locked around Jacob's waist, the Jamaican looking increasingly pallid with fright.

'How did you learn how to hotwire a...?' Adam stuttered.

'Karen Milligan. Taught me years ago,' Violet smarted. 'And no, no letting you behind the wheel, Adam. We'll arrive sometime next week. Now, hold on!' She slammed her heel onto the accelerator, the car bolting into life, aided by the lip of a slope that had formed from the chasm's collapse. The ramp provided just enough lift to see the car and its crew sail across—Benson screaming the entire way—hammering down on the basilica's side and sliding sideways through the main doorway into the church nave. 'See. No problem.' Violet's trembling hands remained glued to the wheel.

'You're all completely mad!' Jacob spouted with a wheeze.

The ornate rose window of the basilica remained shrouded by the ominous plumes of shadows that blanketed the entire nave in malice. Adam braved several steps forward towards the barely recognisable figure of Mayoress Sofia Pescador, her frame now skeletal, skin translucent, two wells of black for eyes. The obsidian gleam of the Sir Percival blade became his

only beacon, slabs of stone shuddering underfoot and growing more intense with every inch he got closer. 'How...*maravilloso*,' the mayoress cackled. 'So many knights paying homage to this site, my city, my *people*. My ancestors of the most noble lands of Castle Corbenic would have been so proud.'

'You won't have any city left, or people, if you continue to wield that blade, Pescador,' Adam bit back, shield summoned, Jonathan standing readily by his side. 'It's destroying you, and all around it.'

'*Catalunya triomfant!*' the mayoress bellowed in a thousand deepened tongues, the silhouettes surrounding her suddenly snapping into order. 'My bloodline commands this blade, Señor Allen! Not the Kings of Spain of centuries past. That is why they failed. No, Señor—I can bring prosperity to my people, and the riches they deserve.' A firm tap of the blade against the altar stone resonated through the nave, the silhouettes melding and conjoining into near-solid form. '*Los Trece Espíritus*. The Thirteen Spirits. I shall not be silenced anymore!' her shrill voice sounded, and the shades shot into action. True to her summons, thirteen billowing black bodies rushed the group, swerving between the Gothic vault columns, striking from all sides.

'Violet! Shields!' Adam instructed tardily, as Violet's ring of red fire was already deflecting two clusters of shadow spirits from the rear. Jonathan's shield protected his

partner's left flank, Cleo resorting simply to crossed arms and innate strength to secure the right. The attack came from above their wall, four shades whirling high and smashing the stained glass as they congregated. Shards whistled downwards, Violet's swiftly summoned knight light doming the group in riposte.

'What should I do?' Jacob cowered in the centre, the thorn of Excalibur in one hand, Sir Bedivere's blade in the other.

'Get Excalibur to reveal itself!' Adam strained to block the force of four spirits, the worn soles of his boots struggling for traction. 'Mary Cassidy must have believed you were ready. Witness and understand sacrifice...' A bludgeoning blow from a fifth shadow toppled Adam, Jonathan whisking a blue flame spear into its heart to force its retreat.

Jacob curled his fingers tightly around the sprig, thought of the Lady of the Lake, and fixed her sacrifice in his mind with closed eyes. Flickers of failure interrupted, his father crushed by such responsibilities—was he destined for the same fate? Adam's voice became desperate. Cleo's stance weakened as she fell to her side, Violet slicing viciously through the shadows with her formidable bright red flame blade of Sir Bors to alleviate the assault. 'I am ready...I am ready,' he repeated out loud. 'Just as my brother was ready.' An image of Mack Benson formed like crystal; he could

have been standing right beside him, a supportive stranger galvanising whatever courage he clung to. The thorn was transformed, unrivalled in its brilliance, illuminating the entire nave. Without thought, he drove it down into the ground, radiating the purest white shine, all the shadows serving darkness repulsed. The group stood down in cautious silence, shields and staffs still at the ready. 'Did...did it work?' Benson croaked. The laughter from the mayoress provided the verdict.

'¡La Espada del Rey! The King's Blade! It will always have its equal, even its slayer,' Sofia's cruel howl brought despondency. 'Come forth, young knight of Sir Bedivere. Let us put it to the test.' The wisps of tarred smoke covertly transported her from her position at the altar to directly in front of Benson, her army of thirteen shadows rippling patiently above. 'Strike me, young knight. With all that King Arthur could muster!' She held Sir Percival's blade in an offering. Jacob needed no guidance this time, and with a mighty cry, he threw his weight behind a single mighty swing of Excalibur, a boom filling the basilica as it met the sword of the Thirteen, and splitting in two as the swing followed through. Adam drew a quick breath, Jonathan and Violet brought their swords to the fore, and Cleo caught Jacob as the energy expelled from the broken King's Blade knocked the knight harshly backwards.

'¡El fin!' The mayoress grinned maliciously, the ebony blade struck before her once more, and her shadow spirits answered.

The onslaught was relentless, splinters of glass and stone married with the energised gusts from the returning thirteen shadows raging down. Fierce rumbles grew underground, the vault columns cracking at both their base and height, one groaning as it gave way and toppled towards the group. 'Cleo!' Adam shouted.

'Got it!' the demi-goddess replied, rushing to secure the weight of the pillar and grinding her teeth as its weight set in. Adam and Jonathan linked hands, their Sacred Band strength at maximum, still only just holding the buffer between Jacob and Violet. A pride-wounded Benson was aided to his feet by Butcher, encouraged to bring forth his sword of Sir Bedivere and join her in a dual knight light, the protective dome lit in a circle around them once more, creaking under the flood of shadows enveloping them from above. The mayoress teleported again to the safety of the altar, eager to watch her fellow knight's final stand and demise.

'¡Rindanse! Surrender!' her cold condition came. 'Do not waste yourselves for this cause. Join me at this site of Castle Corbenic, and we can reform our great dynasty of

knights and warriors. Think of what we could all achieve as one, together, on the right side of history.'

'*Right side,*' Jonathan pondered...remembering conversations on the plane with Chris Wood and Alex Allen. Something about the right-hand man of King Arthur, never to be underestimated. But then something further: the beliefs of a pagan Britain, the worship of the *left*, and where his own lineage might well have been seated. Ramblings from a history lesson courtesy of Adam on a lazy Sunday afternoon after a thrashing at the Bath Rec against the Saracens, a casual suggestion to engage the opposition's left flank, just as the Sacred Band did in the Battle of Leuctra against the imposing Spartan Army. 'Can...can you get me closer? Closer to the mayoress?' he puffed into Adam's ear.

'What? Now?' Adam kept a firm grip on his partner's hand, the empowering bond starting to weaken in the face of the shadows' ruthless bombardment. 'Why?'

'Attack from the left. New tactic,' Jonathan replied cryptically. Adam scoffed but had run out of ideas. The pair pushed forward, a grind of attrition as Violet and Jacob plunged their blades down hard for one final flourish of knight light for cover, Cleo holding up her end of the action—literally. The bold black light of the Sir Percival blade cast darkness over the quivering blue flame ring of blue on its approach. Jonathan fixed on

Pescador, Adam becoming breathless and falling to his knees.

‘What is this? A plea for mercy?’ the mayoress asked glibly. ‘The splendid leader of the Sacred Band swearing fealty to me? And his...*amante*? Sworn lover? Or have you both come to die together, as your own kind reverently do?’ She lifted the blade. ‘No, *Señores*, no need to answer. For I already know.’ The tip of the blade was aimed neatly at Worthington, sensing his trepidation. The knight of Sir Lancelot’s own twin blade struck first, blocking the only blow the mayoress could muster. This time, it was the Sir Percival blade that shattered. Three clean pieces fell to her feet, severed by the two shimmering blades. No effort was required by Jonathan, but his eyes remained closed the entire time.

¡Imposible! Sofia exclaimed, her legion of shadows evaporating into powdery soot, the rocking of the basilica stabilising. She collapsed before the partners, hollering in protest for an instant, before jerking and spasming violently, the colour slowly returning to her complexion only to have her once olive skin flake and crumble away along with the broken Sir Percival blade itself. *¡Catalunya...trionfant!* she whispered as her face slowly disintegrated, a lone ray of freshly emerging sunshine breaking through the scattered storm clouds outside, warming the basilica in a vibrant stained glass glow.

Chapter 24

Bath – England

22nd September 2022 AD

It was a naïve question. It had to be, Jacob mulled. He so desperately wanted to ask it though...maybe he'd be forgiven? Adam Allen remained a step ahead as the pair ascended Sion Hill, the gradient beginning to burn in Benson's quads. 'Is it...much further?' he puffed, stooping low for breath.

'You telling me there are no hills in Kingston?' Allen smirked back. He pointed to the postbox to his left. 'Really, not far now,' he encouraged.

'Yes... There are hills in Jamaica. *Mountains even...*' Benson's near-strangled voice wheezed out. '...but they are just as magnificent from the foot as at the summit. And, my island is warmer!' He tucked the locally coloured blue and black rugby scarf tighter around his neck, released a hand from his staff, and blew a little warmth back into his fingers. He glanced to each side, the sprawl of Georgian architecture offering a mellow amber tint into an unforgivingly vapid sky. Not a wisp of colour to be found on any tree or bush, gardens parched to dull brown, not a single note of evening song from a bird, or cry from a fox. Sir Percival's curse had spread to the British shores, that was all too evident upon their arrival back from Manresa and the epicentre

of environmental destruction. Now was the time, Jacob decided, to confess his incredulity. 'Is she really dead? The Mayoress Sofia Pescador? I mean...do these witches and sorcerers remain slain or do they...?' He paused, struggled for the right word, and ended up casually shrugging.

'Return?' Adam raised an eyebrow, sensing Benson's lingering discomfort following Mary Cassidy's sacrificial request was about more than the passing of the mayoress. 'Possibly. I recall my brother and me both raising the same question when Morgan le Fay fell a decade ago. We were simply reassured by Mary that she was *at peace*. That was enough, I suppose.' He let out a sigh. 'Still, peace can be disturbed, and it doesn't always take magical relics to have people turn on one another, rarely so, in fact. While the Mayoress Pescador might be vanquished, just as Sir Percival cursed his own blade for the ages for what he saw as dishonourable self-obsession, such ill motives are likely to remain. For every puppet, there are a dozen puppeteers...and when in the hearts of ordinary people, they may prove even harder to quell.'

'You speak of revenge?' Benson asked.

'Power,' Adam corrected, pointing to the right breast of Jacob's coat. 'Sadly too few know when to use it, and when to relinquish it for the good of others.'

Jacob peeled his coat open, dug around in the inside pocket, and pulled out the sorry-looking broken Glastonbury thorn twig, each piece barely the length of his forearm. 'Made a right mess of this Sir Bedivere legacy, haven't I?' He bowed his head, reassured by Adam's firm hand on his shoulder.

'Whatever was imbued in Sir Percival's blade, the great Merlin made it so...and if legends are to be believed, he wasn't one for mistakes. What was it Mary Cassidy told you? Before you...you know.' Adam remained delicate, tenderly picking up a single broken half.

'To vanquish the right hand is to take to arms and *stand as one*,' Benson replied firmly. 'Oh, and that the bringer of death and rebirth was in my hands. No pressure, huh?' He eased a playful smile.

Luke once brought an entire mountain to life with Excalibur, its petrified inhabitant inside reanimated with it. A world of tricks lies within this King's Blade.' Adam gave a pensive glance before handing the piece of sprig back to Jacob. 'Let's see if it has one more to give, shall we?' He marched on up the hill, Benson dragging his feet behind.

The Georgian city was on full display upon reaching Sion Hill's top, row upon crescent row of lime-washed stone rippling down. 'Here should be fine.' Adam stretched his back and chided himself for not being fitter. Uncle Alex would murder him if he were to learn just how difficult his nephew had found it to scale Bath's highest peaks. He quickly brushed away any guilty beads of sweat from his flushed cheeks, while Jacob remained propped up on both his knee and staff.

'Damn well better be,' Benson snapped, no longer interested in any bucolic English panoramas. 'What now?'

'Summon it. Excalibur.'

Jacob gave him a weary look, held the two pieces of the sprig close to one another, and flooded his mind with the very same thoughts and feelings he'd exposed himself to before—the bite of raw emotion. Loss, grief, life, and its precious moments passed through like rain. The King's Blade appeared, hilt and partially broken blade in one hand, shard in another, refusing to meld into one. 'Now what?' he shuddered and squinted as Excalibur's strength took hold.

'Try to...well, ask it to...' Adam took a few reverent steps back, away from the relic's bold shine. '...bring back life.'

‘Errr...what?’ Benson screwed up his face, thoughts of life and rebirth suddenly switching to horror shows of zombies and undead monsters. ‘I...I’m not sure how.’

Adam became all too aware that he was out of his depth when it came to the machinations of Excalibur, never a wielder himself, only a bystander. What would his brother have thought? What would the blade have asked for? Surrender? Acceptance? All were valued qualities required to wield the King’s Blade, to begin with, but to bring about rebirth? No, this needed more. ‘Try thinking of reuniting...with your, your father? Your mother? Mack Benson and his family?’ Adam spoke through the sting of his own pain. In a flash, Jacob had raised both burning white shards of the fabled blade high, and in a single move drove them into the earth. A blink of light pulsed out and waved its way over the cityscape, racing through the Avon Valley hills before fading like an echo. Jacob remained kneeling, two springs of thorn still buried.

‘I...I saw...’ He began to croak out a confession. ‘Did...did it work?’ he promptly retreated. Adam focused on the landscape of Bath, unchanged in its disappointing hue, and folded his arms in remorse. ‘Hey...hey! Take a look, Mr Allen!’ Jacob sprang to life, pointing down at the planted duo of sprigs, both now bearing the tiniest blooms of thorn blossom. The lone, shrill chirp of a thrush broke the silent air, and Adam let out a breath of relief.

‘Thank you, Luke. Thank you, Mary,’ the Sacred Band leader whispered lowly. Colour slowly began to return in autumnal blotches, lush oranges, and crisp yellows—the welcome site of the Roman Baths nestled in the heart of the city. ‘One more stop.’

A pleasant waft of warm breeze caught Aisha Hussin’s face. She could have sworn that her late husband’s voice was carried upon it. Little Richard had taken to his ungainly feet for a brave toddle towards a tourist pamphlet of the Roman Baths. Now dancing, he tripped, but made no protest, instead forcibly standing upright again with a giggle of determination. He made it as far as his uncle, Adam scooping him up and mimicking the wings of an aeroplane with his nephew’s chubby arms. ‘Sure, Luke knew how to do this better.’ Adam brought the youngster back into Aisha’s arms.

‘Ha. Don’t be so sure...always felt more comfortable on the ground than in the air, your brother.’ Aisha put her arm around Adam’s waist. ‘All feels...different. More settled. Dare I say, safer?’ she stretched a friendly hand out to Jacob Benson. ‘Did it work? Excalibur?’ Jacob answered by revealing the two budding sprigs. Aisha curved a half-smile and turned to the Bath House entrance. ‘No one home this time, understandable after recent events. But...’

‘Still CCTV. I know,’ Adam interjected and dismissed. ‘Let’s finish this, shall we?’ offering the first step inside to Jacob. The rich and rustic smell remained off-putting to the Jamaican, but he stoically led the way to the main pool, stopping just short of its edge. He peered over at his reflection in the turquoise water—he needed a shave—and tried to shake the eerie stillness that held the space.

‘Do I just...?’ Benson mimicked the action of throwing, waving the two sprigs like the conductor of an orchestra. A nod from Adam saw the knight of Sir Bedivere fulfil his solemn duty, the split thorn cast out into the bath waters, met by not just one, but two hands, varying in their appearance. A masculine forearm tensed and grabbed the hilt-end of the sprig, its sheered edge catching a glint of light...the other, more feminine, gripped the remaining broken blade safely, and then both arms slid beneath the mirror sheen. ‘Was...that meant to happen?’ Jacob asked aghast, shuffling back towards Aisha and Adam. ‘There were two, *two arms*.’

Adam pulled Aisha close, a hint of a tear forming in Hussin’s eye, but offset with a comforting smile. ‘He won’t be alone, Luke. Mary wouldn’t let him.’ She planted a kiss on little Richard’s forehead.

‘And nor will you be, *Hussin-Allen*,’ Adam quelled any break in his voice, his embrace reaffirmed by an honourable tap of staffs between the knight of Sir

Palamedes and the fresh-cut blade of Sir Bedivere. The new heir of Sir Lancelot flapped a hand towards the Baths in an endearing wave of goodbye as they departed.

Chapter 25

Bath – England

5th November 2022 AD

Adam squeezed his way through the tightly packed crowds of the Bath Rec, making all the polite and obligatory apologies as toes were trampled and kneecaps clipped. He spotted Violet and Cleo waving in the centre of the aisle, Butcher playfully tapping an imaginary wristwatch and pouting. He managed to settle beside the pair with a shrug of his shoulders, the Bath Rugby scarf feeling like overkill on such a humid evening. ‘Almost missed kickoff,’ Violet tutted.

‘I know, I know. Here now, though.’ Adam continued to fidget. ‘Uncle Alex and I were tidying up some final threads with the Inquiry.’ The stout lady to his left began to cast her shade towards him as the referee’s whistle sounded the kickoff just as he stood up to remove the itchy garment. ‘Who are they playing again?’

Violet threw her eyes high. ‘Newcastle Falcons. The ones in white and black.’ A haughty point in the opponent’s direction followed. ‘In case you were wondering, Jonathan is in blue and is on the wing and...’

‘Yes, thank you, Violet. I can see him,’ Adam fired back with a flare of his nostrils. His partner was already

barking orders at his front line, a possible flash of blue in his irises as the Falcons made an early advance. 'Please keep your temper under control,' he whispered to himself, fearing all his and Alex's work from the morning's virtual meeting with Lady Whitstanley, and the dilution of the Sacred Band review, could be undone if one member set a rugby pitch on fire. The ball found its way safely into Worthington's hands in an overturn. A dash from the newly crowned Bath captain took the home side comfortably into their opponent's territory before three large Falcons pounced. A cheer sounded throughout the stands, vibrantly coloured, the blue and black of Bath Rugby more a spectrum of hues than ever since Jonathan's public announcement to players and fans alike. Adam broke into spontaneous applause, a fraction of the pride he felt, of course, but the most he could manage.

'And you were worried,' Violet gave a smile.

'No, I wasn't. Not for an instant,' Adam corrected. Violet gave an incredulous glare. 'It's not like it's football, is it?' he defended, presenting the more welcoming nature of the game's crowd.

'Milo Conti and Tommy Brooks will get there. Celtic FC supports all sorts of LGBT campaigns now, rainbow laces, and so on,' Violet reassured. 'Besides, after what the world saw in Manresa this year, any Sacred Band member must now be seen as an asset rather than a

threat, surely?’ She and Cleo squeaked out a cheer as Bath edged closer to the try line.

‘It did help with the Inquiry, for sure.’ Adam found himself clapping along once again. ‘No better public relations campaign for us than selflessly defending those in need, I suppose.’

‘And continuing to do so,’ Cleo added. ‘It was, is, and always will be your duty to defend.’ Her words were timely as Jonathan threw himself at a Falcon player who had countered, legs swept away cleanly, both their chins grinding through the mud. Adam winced, knowing that in a few hours, the two would be expected to look their best for Geraint South and Ana Braithwaite’s wedding reception. His partner turning up with a broken jaw and covered in bruises would not exactly be photogenic. ‘How has Jacob Benson been these past few weeks?’ She switched subjects.

‘Still processing many things, but good, I believe,’ Adam replied.

‘He’ll stay here in the UK?’

‘Hopefully. Visa pending.’ Adam cocked his head to one side, brow raised. ‘Enough family ties from Mack should accelerate the process a little.’

‘That and being the most important Knight of the Round Table,’ Violet interjected with a hint of jealousy. ‘We appear to be a bit of a dying breed.’ Adam and Cleo both turned to her, puzzled. ‘Well, think about it. Geraint, Knight of his namesake, now married and undoubtedly wanting to scale back duties. Aisha Hussin-Allen, dutiful Sir Palamedes, but also the dotting mother of the next generation of Sir Galahad, still far too young to wield his blade, so kind of hands full. We’ve got a new Sir Lancelot...’ brief pause as the double-sword bearing Worthington went on a crowd-rousing attack once more, tackled again ‘...and me of course with my freakish part goddess Harmonia, part knight of Sir Bors, part Sacred Band something...’ she shrugged. A comforting arm from Cleo warmed her. ‘That leaves no Sir Gawain or the second Sacred Band bloodline, no Sir Kay, no Sir Gaheris...’ Her eyes moistened at the thought of William Wood, Karen Milligan and Gary Willis, loved ones passed on together with her own father Nick ‘...and on the opposing side, the White Dragon, even tougher without any apparent heirs or connections to Sir Gareth, Sir Lamorak, or Sir Tristan,’ she rallied through the croak in her voice.

A rowdy cheer rippled through the spectators as Bath threw themselves over the try line to draw first blood, an assist from Jonathan rewarded with a masculine huddle and hair ruffle. Adam broke into a full grin. But through the cacophony, Violet’s comment struck hard. The once near-infallible Round Table, severed but

standing, found itself with a problem with heirs. In its union after the fall of Morgan le Fay, the once desperate search to recruit had trailed off, despite threats remaining. As Worthington gave a triumphant two-fist punch into the air, Allen comforted himself in the knowledge that Lawrence Worthington, despite his many, many flaws, had seen fit to nominate a successor—one that broke the stranglehold le Fay had held for so many centuries. A clandestine adoption, a tactic perhaps learnt first by Sir Percival the Virgin himself. Blades of knights could be bestowed, it was only the choice of the successor that required careful contemplation...perhaps all the original thirteen loyal to King Arthur were doomed to slip up on occasion throughout the generations, whether they inherited by blood or not—the king’s own son, Mordred, a disappointing example. A Knight of the Round Table needed only a true heart, and the courage to do what was seen to be right by and for the good of all—something any person could have within them. Deep in contemplation, Cleo’s hand reached behind a raucous Violet and caught Adam’s hand.

‘It came to me only recently...’ Cleo winked, noting Jonathan’s double-handed salute to a swath of rainbow supporters. ‘...the literal translation of *Armada* from the latin *Armare*...’ She gestured with two fingers. ‘Or...’

‘*Two arms!*’ Adam spoke more literally. Mary Cassidy’s parting words of wisdom to Jacob Benson as she gifted

him Excalibur were a caution. The thirteenth blade and the right-hand man were only to be vanquished by taking to arms and standing as one. *Two* arms, and stand as *one*.

‘So, it was destined to be me this entire time?’ Jonathan Worthington rubbed some antiseptic cream onto the graze along his neck, its sting bringing a wince. ‘Left-sided attack or not?’ he winced again as the collar of his white shirt was buttoned by Adam.

‘Quite possibly. Mary Cassidy and the Lady of the Lake, speaking in riddles as always.’ Adam caught a whiff of his partner’s breath. ‘Mouthwash in the bathroom. Your breath smells like a cheap energy drink.’ He gave a shake of his head while fiddling with the black tie in front of the mirror.

‘Sorry, I was flagging towards the end of that match. Still, great win, though, right?’ Jonathan replied giddily. ‘Saw the crowds too...meant a lot.’ Adam shot a tender glance his way, laced with a told-you-so expression. ‘The Inquiry? You and Alex have...?’

‘All sorted for now. Just need to stay out of trouble.’

‘Why do I get the sense that’s easier said than done with us lot?’ Jonathan spoke through a gargle. Spat

loudly, patted his lips dry on a napkin. ‘Geraint and Ana didn’t want us at their actual wedding?’

‘Kept it low key up in Oxford, just the two of them at Geraint’s local church. You know how it is, invite one of us, and then the whole Band turns up. Literally, in our case.’ Adam laughed. ‘Probably best we don’t look like we’re all partying so soon after Manresa and its horrors, or the appeasement of the Inquiry.’

‘Fair enough. Milo and Tommy set to be at the reception?’

‘Playing this weekend, too. So no, you can’t gloat.’ Adam straightened his partner’s sleeves, inspecting the shirt’s fit before approving.

‘Wouldn’t dream of it. Their sports will catch up.’

‘Indeed. Besides, I hear Fernando has gotten friendly with another player up there in Glasgow, one of the rising stars in the Celtic FC Academy. Before you know it, they could have strength in numbers. Might even make an appearance at Prior Park tonight.’ Adam checked his watch, mobile buzzing simultaneously. Seriously, Violet? he thought. You and Cleo are only downstairs and The Bear had no need for two additional pairs of hands tonight. “Beth kindly taking the reins for the celebratory local punters” he quickly tapped. “Just coming” in reply before tugging on Jon’s arm.

The lighting in Prior Park was subdued, gentle vanilla with only a splash of colour from bouquets of red and white roses arched across its main entrance, Beth's handiwork. Adam and Jonathan immediately felt overdressed in their tuxedos once they stood next to a track-suited Fernando and his Plus One, a top-knotted, carefully trimmed early-twenty-something chap with Hollywood teeth and a flawless complexion. A well-earned bruise across Jonathan's cheek was just ripening; he wore it like a badge of honour while being introduced by a gushing Fernando, the young pup nearly having his hand crushed by the bigger man as they shook. Adam jabbed an elbow into his partner's side, suppressing a laugh at the jovial but duelling exchange between footballer and rugby player. Violet interrupted with hearty hugs for all, dragging both pairs towards the makeshift dancefloor in the gymnasium. 'Cleo and I were just chatting...I was right, wasn't I?' Butcher looped her arm under Adam's.

'Right? About what?'

'Elizabeth the First. The Virgin Queen of England. The text that Cleo interpreted from Saint Ignoramus or whatever...' She slurred a little, one too many pre-party shots at The Bear the price for Adam and Jon's tardiness earlier.

'*Saint Ignatius,*' Adam corrected. 'And...?'

‘Well, Cleo said that the saint had visions of the Sir Percival blade being drawn from the stone here in England somewhere. And that a virgin, just like the knight himself, would be the only one capable of such a feat. But it was taken from her by Queen Mary the First, her big bully of a sister. That’s how King Philip the Second came to own it when they married.’ Violet pulled Cleo to her side as an alibi. ‘Makes sense, right?’

‘Suppose,’ Adam admitted, his focus still fixed on exactly how the blade of Sir Lancelot came to be a dominant force over the Round Table, above that of Sir Percival, and thus perhaps Excalibur itself. He followed the logical train of thought from Jonathan’s left-handed stance, proposing a theory that their valorous ancestors were led to believe by Merlin that no blade could possibly match that of King Arthur, their defacto leader. However, what great sorcerer would not put in place a safety net? A backup plan, should either the King of Britons or his offspring develop a hateful or vengeful streak? Someone venerable, a man or woman of honour would need a blade just as mighty to hold Excalibur to account, that honour falling to the right-hand man, Sir Percival. A blade for a blade. Then, enter a spurned Morgan le Fay, the temptress and manipulator, sworn to the pagan beliefs and thus demanding reverence towards the left and the spiritual feminine. Henceforth her beloved Sir Lancelot becomes the true saviour, their two blades undoing the challenge of Sir Percival’s one. A safety net *for* a safety net if you will...not one the late

sorceress would have ever wished to execute given the potential power of the trinity, perhaps only destined to overpower the blade of Sir Percival, not the King's Blade itself. A moral victory, perhaps? They would never know.

He spotted Aisha, the knight of Sir Palamedes, cradling young Richard Hussin-Allen in her arms while conversing with Jacob Benson, a weak but determined spark of joy radiating from the pair—a sign of hope to come, forever moving forward and shaking free from the chains of grief and loss. Making each day count, as those that have passed would have wanted. Fernando and his newfound love barged through and began an admirable attempt at the Sacred Band dance against the background sound of Bryan Adams's "Can't stop this thing we've started". It jarred, much to the amusement of all. Violet seized Cleo's hand, not to be upstaged, the pair sparring off with footwork landing somewhere between a slow waltz and a rave. Geraint South slid away from his wife to formally greet Adam and Jonathan, with an embrace for both.

'Violet's been boasting about her newly forged skills in history and aligned fantasy, I take it?' South looked a little bleary-eyed. Never one for holding his drink, bound to be an interesting evening as the hours ticked on. 'Probably worth mentioning also, that for all the mess and mistaken identity that likely happened during the Spanish Armada...the potential proposition that

Mary had gifted King Philip of Spain Excalibur itself, Morgan le Fay thinking the trinity was finally hers, John Dee of Sir Bedivere seemingly losing his faculties only to become one of the regular, doll-carving heroes to end the cycle of empires once more...it was the Sacred Band that inadvertently forged one of the strongest alliances known to the world.'

'How so?' Jonathan quizzed, already getting jittery at the thought of having to dance with Adam and putting his two left feet to work.

'King James of Scotland, of course. The seventh with his name to the Scots, first to England, and uniting the crowns. A child of Mary, Queen of Scots, and, again if rumours are to be believed, born courtesy of her faithful secretary David Rizzo. A suspected Sacred Band member, possibly a leader, brutally slaughtered by Mary's then-husband Lord Stuart Darnley in Fifteen sixty six...I, I think.' South tried to rub his eyes sober.

'Anyway, John Norris, a soldier and favourite of Queen Elizabeth's, was known to have fought against the Spanish Armada, and the frequent quoting of fire ships to break the fleet apart suggests only one thing...' his words came in a dribble, Ana hauling him back to the dance floor as Bryan Adams gave way to Donna Lewis's 'I love you', forever a personal favourite of Mrs South née Braithwaite.

‘Reassuring,’ Jonathan scoffed. ‘Clearly, I’ve got a lot of history to catch up on. Never the best when it comes to learning new things.’ He stared at his brightly buffed shoes.

‘Nonsense,’ Adam spouted, suddenly swelled with confidence as he watched the three couples swirling around amorously. ‘You’ve mastered the Sir Lancelot blades, and your blue fire, and even...’ he dared offer his hand. Jon’s eyes flew open in objection. ‘Come on, can’t be worse than Fernando’s attempt.’ The partners took to the floor, both awkwardly at first, but soon finding some resemblance of rhythm come the second chorus. ‘We’ll get there.’

Slumped in a chair, room spinning, Adam chewed on the crusty remains of a sandwich. Geraint at this point was being levered out of the gymnasium by Ana and Jonathan, feet struggling for traction and stammering the rhyme ‘Remember, remember, the fifth of November...’ Beth honked the car horn outside to whisk the newlyweds back to The Bear and a comfortable bed for the night. A remarkably coherent Jacob took the seat next to Allen, and apologised for not chatting with him and Jonathan more over the course of the reception, confessing to being somewhat distracted by Aisha. Adam’s mind was far from sharp, but from the tone of Benson’s voice, he sensed *distracted* held a deeper

meaning. Not the proper time for an inquisition; he let the matter lie. 'There used to be thirteen of us, right?' Jacob asked, with a shake of his wooden staff.

'Twelve really, let's not count the debacle that's been Sir Percival,' Adam corrected, nursing his fuzzy mind with a tonic water.

'So, I inherited this sword from my half-brother, Mack. Jonathan took his from his late father, knight of Sir Lancelot, despite not really ever knowing him or even being...well, related,' Jacob proposed delicately. Adam tried to think ahead, the train of thought resonating with those earlier as to the fragile predicament that the contemporary Round Table now found itself in. 'Just wondered if...and I stress, Aisha is all in favour of this...whether other kids, or youngsters, might make suitable candidates for new knights? Swords left without a home?' he concluded.

Adam heard Jonathan's voice from outside, a little rowdy as Fernando and his guest bundled into a taxi headed towards Bath Spa station for the final train back up to Glasgow. Worthington's orphanage, a home for the lost and abandoned. Perhaps the only good thing to come from Morgan le Fay's relentless search for the Athena reincarnation and long-lost Palladium. The charity still functioned; it might hold suitable candidates, possibly. A conscientious move on behalf of Mary Cassidy and his late brother Luke, absolutely. As

Jonathan jogged back inside, his wits a touch blunted from the night's festivities, Adam questioned him. 'The charity that supported you, Jon. When you were an orphan, and before Lawrence Worthington adopted you. Tell me more about it.'

Chapter 26
Glastonbury, England
1st January 2023 AD

‘It’s been years since I’ve been here.’ Violet Butcher rubbed a small viewing hole through the condensation of the rear window, studying The George and Pilgrims Inn. Adam stood hunched in a waxed raincoat, shivering a little and attempting to shield himself from the sudden downpour. ‘Splendid day for it. Bet the landlord loves being interrupted on New Year’s Day.’

‘Just as cold in here as it is outside. Where’s the heating in this pile of junk?’ Jacob Benson, complete with two wool layers and a hoodie, puffed out visible breath clouds and leant towards the dials on the dashboard. ‘You said we’re to be going underground?’ he sneered.

‘If we can, yes. Depending on what’s left of the Chalice Well tomb,’ Violet replied, encouraging Cleo to join her in an impromptu game of noughts and crosses before the warmth evaporated the damp canvas from the glass. ‘From what my dad told me, Mary Cassidy didn’t leave much of it after she exploded.’

‘Eh?’ Jacob chirped.

‘Her innate powers. Couldn’t quite control the spirit of Athena back then. Was a tad unpredictable at best, at

least before she found the Palladium on that battleship.’ Violet stuck a quick victory over Cleo with a clean diagonal.

‘So...she *exploded*?’

‘Well, not quite exploded, obviously. Quite fortunate no one was killed, though.’ Jacob bit his lip at Violet’s response, too late to voice any disapproval at the expedition underground now. ‘Cleo, what was Glastonbury like last time you were here?’ Violet asked.

‘There wasn’t a Starbucks, that’s for sure,’ Cleo chuckled. ‘In all seriousness, it’s the sort of place where very little has changed, this inn right here the solid proof.’

‘Did you and your brother ever see Red or White Dragon followers prowling around the streets? Odd fellows with wooden staffs looking shifty?’ Violet followed.

‘Damas had his suspicions...the great mythological legacy of King Arthur and the Glastonbury Thorn. Castle Cadbury down the road was a likely site for the infamous Camelot, although we were both settled in Saxony at the height of his reign. My brother was insistent that we travel here to Britain the instant the Normans made their invasion in....’

‘1066. Knew that one,’ Jacob interrupted aloofly.

'Uh-huh. A shift in power away from England could only have meant one thing: the Palladium and the Necklace of Harmonia had found a fresh cause. At least, that is what he believed. King William certainly left his mark here with his conquest, us two as always hoping for more than just a territory grab. Not Morgan le Fay's style at the time, however, it would seem.' Cleo said. 'Remember this place during the Dissolution of the Monasteries, though, and King Henry VIII. Bet that would have been the time sibling rivalries came to a head with Elizabeth perchance finding Sir Percival's legacy and the sword within the stone, her elder sister playing dominant. Always reassuring it wasn't just my brother and I squabbling over alternate visions of the world,' she concluded, just as a soaked Adam shook himself down in the driver seat, keys to the Chalice Well gardens in hand.

'Who's been squabbling?' he queried.

'Just talking about Glastonbury's history. Cleo knows a little.' Violet offered a tissue. 'Never saw people with wooden staffs, so our ancestors must have kept a low profile.'

'Probably lots of folk walking around with wooden staffs back then...part of the great illusion from Merlin. Knights and soldiers far more likely to be obvious with their weapons and deterrents, us lot quiet and subtle.'

Adam gave a hard blow of his nose. 'Hope the glorious wizard still keeps an ear to the ground; otherwise, this plan will never work.' The car engine growled stubbornly a few times before purring into life.

'Perhaps, just pray to him to get the heating on in here. That'll be an achievement,' Jacob frowned. 'Seriously, we're going *underground*?'

Geraint South was punctual as expected, floral umbrella perched preciously above, Jonathan Worthington and Aisha Hussin stoically preferring to brave the rain. 'You got the keys?' South asked, as he offered a firm handshake to Adam.

'Right here.' Allen patted his coat pocket and pecked Jonathan on the cheek. 'Little Richard?' he turned to Aisha, then spotted his nephew's chubby, beaming face in their Range Rover passenger window, and gave a cheery wave back. 'He doesn't have to come down with us.'

'Yes. Yes, he does,' Aisha affirmed, clicking open the door and scooping the toddler up, accepting Geraint's shelter this time with a smile. 'Jonathan has the staffs...Gary's and Luke's.' She nearly choked on the lump that formed in her throat. Adam coiled an arm

around her as Violet twisted the gate lock. 'Jon says there are several candidates for all this?'

'Hopefully. Quite the responsibility.' Adam shot a judging look towards his partner. 'Good talent scout, though,' he joked. The group reached the rickety and weathered wooden door at the back of the Chalice Well gardens, clad with ivy and clearly untouched since the events of a decade ago. Violet paused a few paces back from the pack, the flash of a memory hitting her deep in her heart, her father recounting the exact events when Mary and Luke were both brought here for unforeseen judgement by Richard Allen, and the confrontation he made to the knight of Sir Galahad to spare Cassidy's life. Always breaking ranks, the Knights of Sir Bors, renegades to the end, he used to say.

'I can stay up top,' Cleo offered. Violet replied with a concerned expression, as the door was wrenched free from its foliage. 'It is not a domain for me, my love. It is for Knights of the Round Table and their kin. I'll be here when you get back.' She caressed Violet's forehead.

'Could do with moving some boulders,' Jonathan replied, blue-flamed blade lighting the way down the stone steps. Jacob looked increasingly uneasy as he scanned the tunnel ceiling and its tightly bound thorn roots. 'Wait, I think we can squeeze through here,' his voice echoed.

'I really don't want to be squeezing through anything!' Jacob muttered to Aisha, answered by the blow of a raspberry by little Richard. 'Fine, you and your mother are going first, little one.'

The cavern was remarkably well preserved; if anything, slightly larger than Adam remembered. The wide circle of six stone slabs laid out as a clockface was beneath the core stump of the thorn tree woven through the soil above. Gentle trickles of aquifer waters were running down like tears through the walls and pooling in its centre. Jonathan offered more light with his second blade, filling the hollow with soothing blue and bringing to Allen's attention the placement of several stones not noticed before. Defaced. He counted each, a total of seven; the maths quickly followed.

'Thirteen, correct?' Geraint crouched down by Adam's side. 'Makes sense. This was once the primary site of all of King Arthur's knights, including Sir Percival. While the Round Table stood at Camelot, it was largely ceremonial. The true magic came from the earth and waters, the flow of the Red and the White together and converging here. Hence the two wells that still exist today.' He paused to take in the crisp fresh air. 'Never thought I'd ever get to be here, not in my lifetime, not throughout our own civil war.'

‘A chance to make the Table whole again,’ Aisha prompted, the first to take to one of the slabs. ‘No idea how this works by the way, but maybe something like...’

‘...pieces on a chess board!’ Violet animated, moving Jonathan and Geraint onto a stone of their own, Jacob obeying a similar order. ‘Adam, you’re clearly in the way...don’t spoil it.’ She smirked with a gleeful wave of her staff. ‘Make yourself useful and put Gary’s and Luke’s staffs on another stone.’

Adam snorted, rarely feeling inferior with the blessing of the Sacred Band, but Butcher’s logic prevailed. He respectfully positioned the blade of Sir Gaheris on a free slab before gingerly, almost regretfully, placing his brother’s on the vacant space beside Aisha’s, the slot of Sir Galahad, twelve o’clock, where his father proudly stood. His lip quivered. ‘There. All we have to offer.’ He retreated to the middle, noting the vacancies of Sir Gareth, Sir Lamorak, Sir Tristan, Sir Kay, Sir Gawain and ominously, Sir Percival the Thirteenth. Stillness descended.

‘Now what?’ Benson continued to shiver. ‘We all chant something?’ Adam looked over at Jonathan blankly, back to Geraint, eyebrow raised. ‘OK, well, this has been great guys, but I suggest that before we all get hypothermia we should leave and just function as the unit we are,’ Jacob quipped, turning his back on the circle and making for the entrance.

‘Maybe he’s right,’ Violet resigned. ‘Perhaps those bloodlines that finally come to an end should remain that way if there is no beneficiary chosen by the living incumbent. We can’t choose one for Gary Willis, or for the others of the former White Dragon.’ Her admission tailed off as little Richard began squawking, fussing to be let down by his mother. As Adam and Violet exchanged glances, he waddled over to his father’s staff, stumbled just before it, but managed a pudgy palm to its smooth bark. In an instant, all held staffs became metal, brighter than ever before, blinding all, as if each had conjured knight light simultaneously. In seconds, the flash had subsided.

‘Ok, what in the Hell...?’ Jacob bolted back to his stone, the blade of Sir Bedivere still burning hot white. ‘If this place is about to collapse, I’m out of here right now!’

A stern finger to Adam’s lips silenced Benson. Adam pointed to the empty place stones, each now adorned with freshly sprung staffs, glistening in the damp like dew on morning grass. He looked at Aisha, who in turn stared down at her son, giggling with his newfound wooden toy, Hussin’s face crumpled with emotion. ‘We weren’t complete, not quite,’ Adam chortled through a soft sob of his own.

Jonathan took to his side, arm wrapped firmly across his shoulders and bearing both the relief and the pain of his

Sacred Band partner, a playful nuzzle of his neck. 'So, work and recruitment to do, after all?' he asked. 'Together.'

'Together,' Adam repeated. He heaved a single, heavy sigh of relief. The stone of the Thirteenth knight, Sir Percival, had remained empty.

Epilogue

The truth is, I have never fitted in or followed the herd. The truth is, if it weren't for my blood-born powers from Ancient Thebes, I still wouldn't have. I turn forty tomorrow, what my father used to call the *halfway point*, and preparations should begin for any imminent mid-life crisis, elegiac reflection and questioning of purpose...with a new appreciation for the music of the Stone Roses and The Smiths. Mercifully, I feel only gratitude. Have I experienced loss, heartache, or frustration? Of course. Am I stronger for it? Unquestionably. Have I been blessed with the love of family, the loyalty of friends, and for the first time, an honest and faithful partner? I can with certainty answer yes.

Oddly, Edinburgh has become a favourite city of mine. This spontaneous trip to witness a Pride Event through the Royal Mile at Fernando's request would in the past have been an RSVP with a polite decline. Why? Yes, I had places to be, events to monitor, and duties to perform, underlined with firm persistence from those closest to me. That wasn't the real reason, given my father would have always welcomed my presence alongside his Sacred Band comrade Graham McCready as he celebrated our progress, I'm certain. My thoughts always turned to the future. Once all the parades and the parties had finished, what really remained? A splash

of vibrant colour acts as a flare to the world, but flares get extinguished and burn out. Then darkness can return, and it falls to everyday acts of courage and determination to keep hope alive. I always saw the formidable blue fire as this light, a light that can burn forever, and not to be feared or judged. Perhaps more importantly, a beacon of strength to those that feel inferior, a reminder that our people, while small in number, can excel and need bow to no one. Flags can be torn down, burnt, removed, and replaced...but results are harder to erase. My immediate fear after Damasichthon Zethus's arrival was that the Sacred Band would never be seen as allies to the world—more as an uncontrollable minority whose arcane ways pose a risk to all. I wouldn't blame anyone who thought this way. We are mighty, we are lions. But we also have a voice the same as any other, and the role is never to shout or demand attention, but to speak softly and with logic, even if emotions are surging. We protect; that is our purpose, and protection covers the many, not just the few.

This can make me sound robotic, I know. Jonathan reminds me of such at times. It's clearly hard to remain still and serene when seeking to batter down your opponents on a rugby pitch. My response is always the same—honour in victory and dignity in defeat. Each game he wins can rightfully be celebrated, each loss a platform for change, not revenge. I always take the time to march to the summit of Arthur's Seat with him

whenever we are in the Scottish capital, and regale him with stories about my brief but influential time with Iain Donnelly, buried somewhere beneath the mound along with my father, William Wood, and Mack Benson, the original tomb of King Arthur and Excalibur's once haven, destroyed. If we'd only had more time together, Iain and I, my hope would have been that of *change*. A dilution of the bitterness and resentment that ensnared him, that poisoned his fragile but giving heart into that lingering pain that maybe no one could soothe, but that's the nature of hope—much like my feelings towards him, it never perishes. Mary Cassidy and my brother Luke are forever sobering memories each time we all walk past the Roman Baths back home, Aisha never failing to stop and take the time to have my nephew respectfully nod towards its gates. One day, the little one will brave a trip inside, perhaps alongside Jacob Benson, for a quest of his own and an urgent request for the remains of the King's Blade. Or, hopefully, just to talk and share stories.

I'll let the vivid confetti flow for today, safe in the knowledge that both Band and Round Table, their veterans and new recruits, now have a secure future, and are united in a way we never thought possible. That said, my only little lesson for today, as Jonathan holds my hand high and shares the bracelet of blue fire between us, is to learn to live in the moment. Life, after all, very much begins at forty.

Adam Allen
Leader of the Sacred Band

**THE SACRED BAND: ARMADA
THE END**

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